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FEATURE

Interview with Charlie Kaplan of GLUCK+, Developer, Architect and Builder of 150 Rivington Street, Lower East Side

VITALI OGORODNIKOV JUNE 22, 2017



150 Rivington Street. Renderings by GLUCK+. Images via Relevance NY unless noted otherwise.

Construction has begun on seven stories of condominiums at 150 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side. The 45 units will sit atop approximately 13,000 square feet of ground level retail space. A façade of sheer glass and gently undulating panels artistically interprets both the diverse built environment and the activity within Streit’s Matzo Factory, which previously stood at the site. YIMBY sat down with Charlie Kaplan, principal at GLUCK+, to discuss the project’s inspiration and creative process, as well as the firm’s complex role as co-developer, architect and contractor.

“GLUCK+ is a very specific model,” Kaplan says. “At some point, architecture became ‘divorced’ from development and contracting, creating separate professions. This division is not natural. When an artist creates a painting, they do not design it first and then hire someone else to make the brushstrokes.”

“We have separate entities, but there are no divisions in terms of the creative process. The same team members work as developers, architects and construction managers,” he says.



Pile driving at the site.

Kaplan describes construction as an unpredictable process, and notes that the designer is best suited to address unforeseen issues. “When the subcontractor is installing the façade, whose expertise is more valuable than that of the person that devised the system, created the drawings, worked out the details, and understands them better than anyone else?”

The initiative behind 150 Rivington Street comes from co-developer Cogswell Lee Development, which previously collaborated with GLUCK+ at 345 Carroll Street in Brooklyn. Kaplan describes a collaborative process where Cogswell Lee scouts projects, allocates financing, oversees marketing and manages properties, while GLUCK+ provides site analysis, program studies, architectural services and construction management.

“The company cultures are very aligned, as we both are very hands on. Principals in both offices are intimately involved in their projects,” the GLUCK+ principal says of Arthur Stern, his counterpart at Cogswell Lee.

“The iterative process involves analysis, research, and allows for competing ideas,” Kaplan states, as he compares the GLUCK+ design method to the brainstorming sessions in academic architecture studios. He calls this approach their “software,” which channels a wide set of aesthetic, programmatic, and engineering parameters.



150 Rivington Street, schematic massing. Looking north. Photo and graphic by the author.

The context of 150 Rivington Street provided these parameters. “The fabric of the Lower East Side is unlike the Upper West Side or brownstone Brooklyn, where beauty stems from repetition of similar components along the street. Lower East Side buildings go up and down, in and out, are designed in diverse styles, and serve diverse uses,” Kaplan states as he describes the nearby turn-of-the-century tenements and neighbors such as the neo-Gothic 107 Suffolk Street (a public school built in 1897 and re-purposed as the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural and Educational Center) and the full-block facility of the Malta Valle High School across the street to the west, built in the 1970s in the Modernist style. “We wanted to embrace the mix by producing a building that expressed this vitality in a very direct way.”

Kaplan sees the retail space proposed at the ground level as crucial for animating the building's street presence and engaging the community.

The principal compares the diverse environment to the frenzied activity that took place within the former factory. In 1925, Jack Streit combined four tenements into Streit's Matzo Factory, which the Streit family owned and operated for five generations. "A lot of the people have worked there for 30, 40 years," Kaplan says. The factory was the subject of last year's award-winning documentary "Streit's: Matzo and the American Dream."



Streit's Matzo Factory prior to demolition. Photo by Richard Sylvares.

The resurgent neighborhood created mounting operational and logistical challenges. The Streit family opted to relocate well before a third party acquaintance approached Cogswell Lee to explore redevelopment options.

After the property sale, the factory ran for several months in order to prepare for the Passover season, allowing the design team to observe matzo production. "We became enthralled with the operation," Kaplan says, comparing the facility to a "giant Rube Goldberg contraption."

"I think that many architects are equipment junkies," the architect says, as he describes massive mixing bins and conveyor belts that ran through party walls separating former tenements.

Kaplan understands the insoluble challenges of preservation where the underlying use can no longer be maintained. "Keeping unused machinery in place would be both unfeasible and inauthentic," Kaplan says. Streit's plans to memorialize the original site in a new museum near its new Rockland County factory.

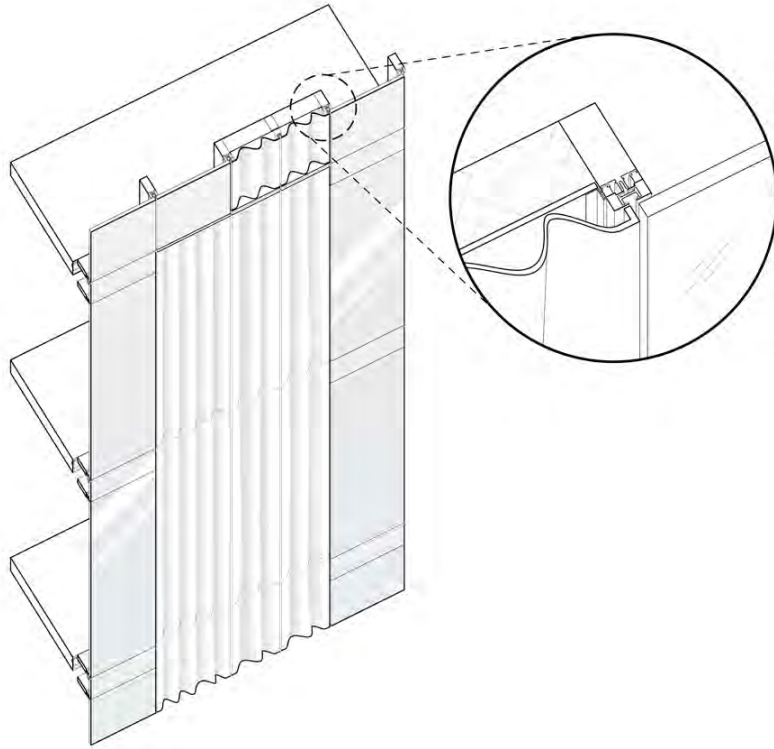
The design does not emulate the factory directly. "We are a modernist firm, and believe that buildings have to reflect their time," Kaplan says of the glass exterior. "Certain areas within an apartment, such as living and dining rooms, benefit from large, floor-to-ceiling windows. We capitalized on expansive westward views across the adjacent schoolyard."

Kaplan explains that all-glass walls are not preferable for private areas such as bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens, and adds that many contemporary buildings avoid addressing the issue. "You see transparent buildings where residents rarely experience transparency. Sometimes you see curtains down in every window."



"We recognize that glass is innately hard-edged, so we decided to make a glass building feel soft by introducing a curtain on the outside," Kaplan says in reference to the curtain-like panels embedded between sheer glass panes, which partially obscure interiors and create a staggered exterior. "We studied profiles and contours. We played with 3-D printers and laser-cutting forms. We observed how curtains move in the wind. We looked at Greek statuary, where folds of drapery look soft despite being made out of stone. As a result, we introduced subtle ripples into the profile to create solid panels that appear pliable and simulate movement across panels."

“The rhythmic system reflects both the interior program and the rhythm of the streetscape,” the principal says. The façade balances exposure and intimacy, hardness and softness, smoothness and texture. Rather than protruding outwards, the panels push inward, creating understated indentations upon the surface. “If the panels became too pronounced, it would look like a form rather than a delicate texture that shimmers in the breeze,” Kaplan says.



The panels were custom cast from a fiber-based composite material. “It was a technically challenging detail, so we brought in a façade consultant very early on. Part of the beauty of the way we work is that we talk to the tradespeople, as well,” Kaplan says in reference to the firm’s role as contractor. “They have specific knowledge that you cannot get from engineering consultants.”

Movable interior partitions create further interior flexibility and balance between common and private areas within individual apartments.



Corner unit plan.



Typical living room, with the study partition open.



Same space with the partition closed.

The panels stop below the seventh floor, where the large penthouse addresses exposure and privacy through interior planning. Living and dining spaces are clustered along the street, where they look out upon the city through an airy façade of sheer glass.



GLUCK+ places a strong emphasis on activating the rooftop, which Kaplan describes as the best part of the city. at Corner setbacks feature private terraces, and the rooftop holds common space. The principal describes a cultural shift where home buyers reject insular,

suburban-style isolation, and look for buildings that are a part of their community. “We contemplated things that make people want to hang out together, and we thought of fire and food. The ‘outdoor room’ has landscaping, a place to cook, a place to eat, and a place to sit by the fire and enjoy the view,” Kaplan says. Yoga and exercise classes would take place in an adjacent “quiet area.”



The terraces look upon a rapidly evolving neighborhood. “The story of the city is complex, and it’s hard to understand what’s happening when you’re in a certain moment,” Kaplan comments. “Neighborhoods are most interesting when they are in a period of transition. New development adds another layer to the storied environment of the Lower East Side. I recognize that this is somewhat of an oxymoron, but my hope is that the neighborhood would stay in this state indefinitely, where it maintains its messy vitality.”

Kaplan’s degree in religious studies lends him insight into the neighborhood’s spiritual and cultural dimensions. Prior to demolition, a rabbi held a ceremony at the matzo factory. A Feng Shui consultant with an architecture degree advised the team throughout the design and development process, and conducted another ceremony at the site. The rituals put closure on the preceding space and welcome the new phase. “As humans, we have a deep-seated need to manage the world around us by carving out pockets where we feel at ease, and that we can call home,” Kaplan concludes. “But, inspired architecture can bring spark and vigor to the habitual life of people and streets.”