

Home Overseas



The \$25bn Hudson Yards, America's priciest property development, is transforming Manhattan. Daniel Bates finds out what the locals really think

It is the city famous for the grungy East Village, brownstones in Brooklyn and the lush greenery of Central Park, but earlier this month a different kind of New York was unveiled to the public. Hudson Yards threw open its glass and steel doors – which were slathered with Neiman Marcus advertisements – and announced itself as the most expensive property development in America, with a price tag of \$25bn (£19.2bn). The site is on the far west side of Manhattan, between 30th and 43rd Streets, and

it looks as if Canary Wharf has been flown across the Atlantic and plonked by the Hudson River. It is a city within New York City and, on completion, will have a hotel, a school for 750 students, a shopping mall and 16 skyscrapers, including one taller than the Empire State Building. On top of that will be a viewing platform at 1,100ft, called Edge, with a glass floor offering visitors a uniquely terrifying view. If that isn't enough to give you vertigo, then the hyperbole from Stephen Ross, the chairman of Related

Companies, one of the two developers behind Hudson Yards, may make you queasy. Last week, the 78-year-old billionaire said that, with Hudson Yards, they were doing nothing less than “creating a museum of architecture and a whole new way of life”. That's some claim for a development dubbed “West Side Westworld” by New York Magazine's architecture critic, Justin Davidson, after the television series in which lifelike robots kill guests at a futuristic theme park. The critics have indeed been critical. Samuel Stein, author

of Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State, has put the boot in, too: “Hudson Yards reflects the city we know and love, but in grotesque distortion.” The issue is that it is opening at a time when New York's politics have swung to the left and the city is re-evaluating the kind of state subsidies that made it possible. In February, Amazon met so much opposition from the community, it pulled out of a deal that included \$3bn in tax breaks to build its second HQ in Long Island City, Queens. Yet according to the New School

think tank, Hudson Yards has benefited from nearly \$6bn in state funding, including \$2.4bn to extend the No 7 subway line by just one stop. New York in the Noughties, when the subsidies for Hudson Yards were agreed, was radically different from today, with the then mayor, Michael Bloomberg, trying to resurrect the city after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He allowed just 10% of the 4,000 flats that will soon go on sale to be “affordable” housing. Market-rate rentals in Hudson Yards are as vertiginous as its vaunted

ambition, at \$5,000 a month for a studio and \$12,000 for a three-bedroom: out of reach for most New Yorkers. Want the trophy penthouse? You'll need \$32m to buy a home on the 88th floor, with a 270-degree panoramic view. The New York Times architecture critic Michael Kimmelman described Hudson Yards as “a supersized suburban-style office park, with a shopping mall and a quasi-gated condo community targeted at the 0.1%”. As you might expect, the chief operating officer of Related, Ken Wong, disagrees, insisting

West Side storeys Penthouses at Hudson Yards cost as much as \$32m. Top centre, you can climb the Vessel, a 150ft sculpture (but check the small print before taking a selfie)

that the site is “100% available for everyone”. “We're trying to create an open and welcoming place for all, and I think we have succeeded,” he says. “There is a significant affordable-housing commitment, and our view is that healthy cities require a diversity of housing types and price points, and Hudson Yards is an example of that.” One thing it's hard to argue with is the sheer audacity of the project. This is gentrification on a grand scale. The site covers 28 acres and about 60,000 people will live, work or visit each day when it is completed in 2025. The developers say it will create more than 55,000 jobs and contribute an estimated \$19bn to the New York City economy each year, about 2.5% of the city's GDP. The first residents have moved into the 910ft tower at 15 Hudson Yards, which was designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Rockwell Group, and where the cheapest available unit is a \$4.36m two-bedder. The entire 50th floor is dedicated to fitness, with a 75ft pool, a spa and private treatment rooms. A neighbouring 1,296ft skyscraper designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 35 Hudson Yards, opened for sales this month, with 143 residences and prices starting at \$5m a two-bedder.

So far, Hudson Yards has mostly been targeted at New Yorkers but there have been some buyers from the UK, Related says. The developers have been keen to avoid people using it as a pied-à-terre – in fact, the city is mulling a tax on such properties – and wanted residents who spend a fair amount of time in the Big Apple. Among the companies that have already moved in are L'Oréal, HBO, Warner Bros, Tapestry (whose brands include Coach and Kate Spade), Boston Consulting Group and the investment firm BlackRock. And 10 Hudson Yards, designed by the global architecture firm KPF and standing a mere 895ft tall, has already opened. Ambitious chatter abounds: 50 Hudson Yards, designed by Foster + Partners, is set to be completed in 2022; New York fashion week is in talks about moving to Hudson Yards, perhaps as soon as this autumn.

As far as leisure goes, the centrepiece is the 150ft Vessel, a metal structure that looks like a series of stacked glass bowls, created by the star British designer Thomas Heatherwick. Like everything at Hudson Yards, it is not for the faint-hearted. It has 2,500 steps with 80 landings, which make it a mile-high climb – thankfully, there is a lift – and has earned itself the

nickname “The Stairway to Nowhere”. Shopaholics have been drooling over the 720,000 sq ft shopping mall – or, as Related prefers to describe it, the “vertical retail space”. Some are calling it the “Dubai of New York”. They have been wowed by a new concept Zara store and a Sally Hershberger salon – she's the hairstylist who created Meg Ryan's shaggy bob, and charges \$800 for a trim. Then there's the first New York branch of the designer department store Neiman Marcus, Lululemon, for yoga fiends, a giant Sephora and a Body Shop, which is about as pedestrian as it gets. Those who want to recharge their batteries can be pampered in the Provencal-scented aromatherapy room in the Conservatory, or simply stroll through the 14 acres of public parks, filled with a forest of 200 trees and wild flowers such as monarda and echinacea, to try to balance out all that concrete. Foodies will be well served: as well as fancy Korean courtesy of a Momofuku offshoot called Kawi, there's a new restaurant from Thomas Keller, of French Laundry fame, and a Spanish food hall in the basement run by the celebrity chef Jose Andres. Culture here is centred on the Shed, a \$475m modular space with a retractable shell that can close or open in 15 minutes. Its programme is multidisciplinary: opening acts include the British film maker Steve McQueen presenting a concert series called Soundtrack of America, followed by a theatrical piece by Björk.

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Related and Oxford Properties Group, at the time a little-known Canadian investment company, bought the site in 2009 for \$1bn. In the wake of the financial crash, this was widely considered a risky gamble. It had been hoped that the site would become a stadium for the 2012 Olympics, and the Bloomberg administration dramatically re-zoned the site for development. Then, when the Games went to London, the public funding remained intact but was repurposed. The result is very different from our Olympic Park in Stratford. Joan Byron, programme director of Neighborhoods First Fund for Community-Based Planning and a longtime campaigner against gentrification, cites Hudson Yards as a textbook example of “disaster capitalism”. “There have been lots of people gasping about how it looks,” she says, “but the real story is the money and how New York City has subsidised this project.” What the city did not subsidise is the serious structural engineering underpinning the project. The whole Hudson Yards development was built on two giant platforms, costing \$1bn, that sit on top of 30 active railway and subway tracks. They are supported by a foundation of 300 caissons, each 5ft in diameter, and 80ft-long pipes that have been filled with concrete and drilled into the bedrock. The buildings are powered by natural gas and can function off the electricity grid in the event of flooding or blackout – a smart move, given that a highway and a bike path are

all that separates the site from the Hudson River. Here's the good stuff. Every drop of rainwater that falls at Hudson Yards will be collected in a 60,000-gallon tank for recycling. The plants and trees will be protected from the 65C heat rising beneath them in the trainyard by a coolant that circulates through pipes buried 4ft into the ground. Most remarkably, every residential building in the second stage of the project will have three waste chutes leading to a 1½-mile underground tubing system that will whisk rubbish to a central facility at up to 45mph, eliminating the need for garbage trucks. Since Hudson Yards opened to the public, there have been a few teething problems and issues, which have further stirred controversy. The most public was the terms and conditions for taking photos on the Vessel, which mean the developers own the rights not just to the image, but to the likeness of the person taking it. The photojournalist Gary Hershorn, who highlighted the policy, called it an “unbelievable rights grab” and the terms were revised, but it seemed to many people like the virtual equivalent of what the development was doing in the physical realm: turning public space into something private. Even the glitzy opening night failed to impress. The 10,000 guests were only able to look at the Vessel and walk around the decidedly suburban shopping mall. Replace the fashionistas with sulky teenagers – as happened once the public were allowed in – and you could just as easily have been at the Brent Cross shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon. Whether New Yorkers will warm to Hudson Yards remains to be seen, but they certainly have a sense of humour about it. After I gave my name at the door on opening night and walked up the escalator, another guest to my left leant in to his friend and said: “Welcome to gentrification!”



WHO WANTS TO BE A PART OF IT?