

# BROWN HARRIS STEVENS

Established 1873



## HOW A CENTURY-OLD ZONING LAW GAVE US MANHATTAN'S HOTTEST (AND HIGHEST) PADS

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Constructed in 1932, the old AIG offices at 70 Pine St. have been transformed into 776 rental apartments. The building's many setbacks are now used for terraces and a rooftop restaurant. Photo: Frank Zimmermann

Now commonly referred to as "the setback law," it imposed a mathematical formula for how tall a building could rise before it was forced to become progressively more narrow. Once a building's upper footprint made up just 25 percent of its lot size on the ground, remaining floors could stretch as far as developers wanted.

What followed was a boom in Financial District office construction and a golden period of skyscrapers that culminated in Jazz Age and Depression-era buildings featuring prominent setbacks, including the Verizon headquarters at 100 Barclay St., the Bank of New York's masterful 1 Wall St. and AIG's old digs at 70 Pine St.

A century later, all three of these buildings either were or are being converted to residential use, making the 1916 setback law particularly relevant for

In the early years of the 20th century, New York was facing dark times — literally.

Climbing to a record 57 stories in 1913, the Woolworth Building nabbed the title of the world's tallest building. Two years later, the hulking Equitable Tower took up an entire square block on lower Broadway, plunging everything around it into shadow.

One editorial cartoon at the time showed a residential skyscraper called "Himalaya Flats," with a ski resort perched on its stratospheric upper floors.

But for most New Yorkers, the skyscraper crisis was no laughing matter. In a city where rents and good living conditions were predicated on access to light and air, what would happen when buildings — offices and others — grew even more massive?

Enter the Zoning Act of 1916, the country's first comprehensive ordinance to curtail the effects of building heights.

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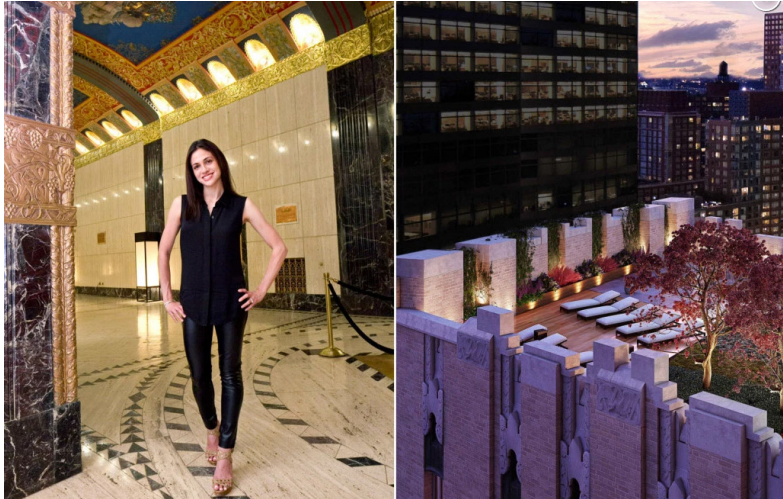
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buyers and renters searching for a home with a bit of history right now.

As companies relocated to Midtown after World War II, older downtown high-rises began to lose their cachet.

In 1995, when Donald Trump snatched up 40 Wall for a price rumored to be under \$8 million, few realized that what would ultimately restore these buildings back to their former glory wouldn't be an influx of new commercial tenants but the revival of the Financial District as a residential neighborhood.

After 9/11, a trickle of downtown conversions turned into a deluge; today, condos and rentals in "classic" skyscrapers shaped by the 1916 zoning law are among the city's hottest properties.



Rachel Glazer bought at 100 Barclay, a telephone headquarters from 1926 now undergoing a condo conversion (left). A historic setback will house a roof deck (right). Photo Annie Wermiel/NY Post; Williams New York

Rachel Glazer, a broker for Brown Harris Stevens, was so taken with the apartments she was selling at 100 Barclay — where available units out of 161 total range from a 16th-floor studio asking \$1.02 million to a four-bedroom 4½-bathroom for \$9.5 million — that she bought one herself. "The history, the finish, the amenities," she says. "It was all just really impressive."

The president of Magnum Real Estate Group and the developer of 100 Barclay, Ben Shaoul, says an Art Deco-era office-to-condo conversion like his gives New Yorkers the best of both worlds: "modern amenities and modern construction, but prewar charm."

These older buildings often feature covetable amenities from high ceilings (often 13 feet) to open floor plans that are far more expensive to build — and ultimately to buy — than with new construction. These structures also offer unrivaled period details such as gilded lobbies, ornamented facades and ultra-thick, nearly soundproof windows. Best of all, there are "no cookie-cutter layouts," Shaoul adds — 100 Barclay boasts nearly two dozen different floor plans.

Across the island, John Lari of the Claremont Group is converting a 1932 former bank building at 101 Wall St. to 52 residences. The skyscraper — with interiors conceived by Dutch designer Piet Boon — also uses the creamy white building's past commercial life to its advantage.

Its wedding cake-like shape, which winnows towards the top of its 27 stories, allows for "almost 22 different layouts," according to Lari, ranging from smaller apartments in the lower stack to full-floor units in the tower.

The many upper setbacks — which are playful as well as 1916 zoning regulation-compliant — ensure fantastic terraces are available on duplexes and penthouses on the upper floors. On-the-market units start at a \$1.18 million one-bedroom and top out at three-bedroom, three-bathroom on the 17th floor asking \$3.85 million.

Similarly, the large floor plates on lower stories and deep basements give buildings like 101 Wall and 100 Barclay ample room for amenities — in the latter, 40,000 square feet, including two pools.

There are obstacles, however, in making a 1920s office tower work as apartments. For instance, the lower floors are almost too huge. In the tiered Woolworth Building — seen by many as the model for the 1916 law even though it was built before the law passed — the lower floors are 20,000 square feet apiece.

That's why Ken Horn of Alchemy Properties, the developer of the Woolworth's under-construction residences, is only converting the upper tower, where there's "light and air on four sides" (the lower floors are remaining office space). Alchemy's 34 apartments also utilize the terra cotta-adorned setbacks for outdoor spaces; units range from \$5 to \$10 million — though the seven-story Pinnacle atop the building is going to go for much more. An official price for has not yet been set for the pad, but rumors have swirled for years that it will be well over \$100 million.



Designer Piet Boon is transforming 101 Wall St. into 52 new condos. Photo The Corcoran Group; handout

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70 PINE ST.: The huge tower is currently leasing. Rents range from a \$2,804 studio to a \$9,729 three-bed. Amenities include a gym, bowling alley, golf simulator, screening and game rooms. Contact: Rose Associates; 646-854-2637

Setbacks aren't just for buyers. Adam Rose, whose company is converting the 1932 Cities Services building at 70 Pine St. into rentals, handled the issue of square footage at the bottom of the tower by putting in a Q&A extended-stay hotel, which takes up four floors.

Rentals in the 612-unit building are already on the market, ranging from \$2,804 for a studio to \$9,729 for a three bedroom. Next year, a restaurant by famed restaurateurs April Bloomfield and Ken Friedman (Spotted Pig, The Breslin) will open on the 62nd to 66th floors of the tower, offering unparalleled views — and priority reservations for residents.

Richard Reyle, who lived at The Crest at 63 Wall St. — the former headquarters of private bank Brown Brothers Harriman — not long after it was converted to residences in 2003, loved being surrounded by history.

"It was fun to live there and think about all of the meaningful things that must have occurred under this roof," Reyle tells The Post. In the penthouse at 63 Wall, he recalls, "there was a terrace all the way round the apartment — with gargoyles staring straight at you." However, the tradeoff, according to Reyle, was living in an oddly shaped "space that does not conform to modern dimensions" in an antiquated building with "elevators that moved very slowly" — and, sometimes, not at all.

Developers of newer conversions are confident they've overcome these challenges. At One Wall Street, the elite Robert A.M. Stern Architects have taken on the task of converting the 1929 Irving Trust building — most recently home to Bank of New York Mellon — into a combination of condominiums, rentals and retail. The building's spectacular Red Room by mosaicist Hildreth Meiere (of Radio City Musical Hall and Temple Emanuel fame), which has been closed for over 15 years, will likely become a shop, reopening one of downtown's grandest spaces to the public.

After the success of Midtown buildings like Lever House and the Seagram Building that bucked the setback law, the 1916 zoning regulations were ultimately replaced in 1961 by new "tower-in-a-plaza" codes, which have been refined many times since. However, echoes of the older law still persist.

Take 200 Amsterdam Avenue, which will eventually house 112 apartments: the 666-foot tower's recently revealed design by Elkus Manfredi shows seven setbacks that will allow for terraces. They will allow more light to penetrate the upper floors while still reaching the street — the very reason the original law was developed.