

Going from Gold - to Platinum:

The Solaire to The Visionaire


Assuming the green building I was about to visit was near a subway stop, I took my time meeting my friend for lunch and finishing my vegetarian sandwich. Little did I know that the Visionaire was located at just about the southwestern most corner of Manhattan, as I walked past the crowds at the World Trade Center site and the long pedestrian bridge over the West Side highway. I thought it a good sign when I passed Albany Street, as the developer of this particular building's name is Albanese; but I ended up at the destination on Little West Street over a half hour late.



The group from the New York chapter of the Green Building Council filled up the otherwise spacious lobby, and they were just at the tail end of the introduction. The rep from USGBC-NY had me sneak behind the speaker in front of the front desk and sign a waiver as the building was near finish but still under construction.

Our first stop was to the penthouse which we found out later was purchased already by one party for 12 million. The buyer, not looking at the building for the green features, in the end was convinced by the green which “sealed the deal.”¹ Besides the obviously fantastic views of the Hudson and beyond, we got a close up look at the photovoltaic panels which are integrated into the façade all around the top of the building. Battery Park City requires that 40 percent of the façade has to be masonry work. So they utilized terra cotta, and made it look like masonry, and integrated with the solar workings. The PV panels also include vents to keep them a bit cooler and more efficient. However, they did decide on blue color panels as opposed to black – which would have attracted even more sunlight – but for aesthetic reasons they wanted blue. At full capacity

¹ Gomes, John B.. quoted in *Downtown Express*. “Condo buyers find greener pastures in B.P.C.” by Patrick Hedlund. Vol. 20., No.26. November 2007.



they can still bring in up to 48 kw/year, and this was one of many examples where the developer needs to “pick his battles.”² The solar power does not do as much - environmental-wise, as their innovative ‘curtain wall’, for instance, or the mechanical system that controls their highly-touted indoor air quality. Curtain walls are common in office buildings, but not residential developments.³ Part of the penthouse’s expansive rooftop terrace was also green, using American Hydratech for its draining and cooling capabilities – the same used in the Visionaire’s sister buildings: Solaire and Verdesian.

The famous Solaire was an international triumph, when after September 11th the fate of the Financial District was uncertain, but the Solaire went up soon after without a hitch. And it leased fully in six months. The Battery Park City Authority had decided the year before to ‘go green’, and dedicated large swaths to parks, and committed developments only to sustainable buildings. This was even before LEED was set with all their requirements for residential buildings, and BPCA had their own, which turned out, similar set of rules. So it was the Solaire was the first green residential building to receive LEED [gold] certification, even though it did not know the rules while it was being built. This holds to Albanese’s philosophy of making the commitment and “in the end you will be able to justify that commitment”.⁴

Albanese’s next building (literally, they are one in front of the other), the Verdesian ended up being the first platinum LEED high-rise tower to surface. Battery Park City’s first green buildings were rentals; but the green market is now hot enough to spur condos.⁵ Martin Dettling, from Albanese, and project manager of the Visionaire, calls the Verdesian a “sleeper platinum” as they built it green - but once again they did not realize how far they would go - and it ended up having enough features to make it platinum. The

² Pelli, Rafael. Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects. Oct 30, 2008.

³ Ruhling, Nancy A.. *metroGreen+Business*. “Fresh Air”, <http://www.upstatehouse.com>. retrieved: Nov 2, 2008.

⁴ Dettling, Martin. V.P. Albanese Organization. Oct 30, 2008.

⁵ Hedlund, Patrick. “Condo buyers find greener pastures in B.P.C.” *Downtown Express*. Vol. 20., No.26. November 2007.

architects at Fox and Cook, the builders of the Bank of America building, figured they would have the first, but the Verdesian beat them to the punch.

I purported that with the experience Albanese had in getting platinum certification with the Verdesian that they were able to use that to facilitate the process for the Visionaire. “Not really,” according to Dettling. There are really just so many differences in every building in terms of location, necessities, and amenities that it seems every green construction experience in this early era is still a relatively new one. Though the ordeal must have gotten a *little* easier since the Solaire, with the significant increase in eco-friendly building materials available nowadays. “When we did the Solaire there was one ‘green’ paint; now it’s hard to find paint that isn’t sustainable,” says George Aridas another VP at The Albanese Organization.⁶ But as the president Russell Albanese points out, “oftentimes you’re weighing different competing objectives.”⁷ For example, they wanted to use bricks from a local (within a 500-mile radius) source, but when they looked into the matter further, they found out that the kilns of the closer factories were much older, and required a lot more energy to produce the bricks than putting them on a diesel truck from further away, made with more efficient energy. What helps the most from one LEED building to the next, according to the director of residential management for Albanese, Michael Gubbins, is just the experience with filling out all the reams of paperwork.⁸

I don’t know if it is something about the twelfth floor, but where I used to live in New York there was a sundeck on this floor; but it was not quite like the one in the Visionaire. The deck is a good example of how they did learn from their last two buildings: not necessarily in the green sense but from consumer preference point of view. In the Solaire, they have a walkway garden – but they were always confronted with the question: “Can we have a party here?” So for the Verdesian they built more of a gathering / sunbathing area; and they would get, “Can we have a *big* party up here?” So for the Visionaire they envisioned something like a beer garden. There is a huge space including a

⁶ as quoted in: Cutler, Steve. *ABO Developments*. “Weighing the Costs of Building ‘Green’: Are Sustainable Buildings Worth the Extra Effort.” Vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 2008.

⁷ as quoted in: *New York House Magazine*. July 2008.

⁸ Gonchar, Joann. *Architectural Record*. “Owners tout operational advantages, but dual LEED certification is slow to catch on.” November/December 2007.

large rangetop for barbecues and cookouts, picnic tables, cabanas, and of course the garden for its aesthetic and green values. The floor pavers, on top of the soil/irrigation surface is made of ironwood, which is one of the densest woods out there and resistant to weathering.

Entering one of the actual (model) apartments, a member of the interior design team from Stedila Design explains how they get fresh air in every room in the apartment, and how they have to encourage people when they move in to *not* open the windows but instead adjust their controllable ventilation. Other obviously green features were the bamboo cabinetry and the engineered-recycled pine flooring, which was made to withstand expansion and last longer. The walls are mostly USG dry wall – which are one hundred percent recycled and mold resistant - and Dettling claims, “everybody should use it.” Another feature (although mandated by the Battery Park City Authority anyway), is the manual switch by the front door which can turn off all of the (LED, of course) lights in the apartment at once when you leave.

So what does LEED certification have to do with all this? Says Dettling, “LEED helps inform the decision.” According to most estimates, green residences will go for a 5-8% price premium above traditional housing⁹, but a good part of that is for the health benefits rather than the green ones. One of the lucky salespeople for these condos states that the average consumer/renter/buyer does not know what the LEED rating system really means, but people are starting to ask more about it. He says only about 1 in 50 actually ask about the LEED rating, so we need more consumer awareness; especially due to the beneficial fact that the all-important resale value is especially good. The president of the organization, Russell Albanese adds, “What green buildings do is raise the bar and level of quality on the project. They require better skilled workers, which helps the whole employment base.”¹⁰

But Dettling explains how some green features can actually work against you. The Visionaire features energy recovery wheels and a full-scale wastewater treatment plant which is stepped up from their first attempt in the Solaire. However, people have a tendency to

⁹ Remauro, Leticia. BPCA. as quoted in: Mantyk, Evan. *The Epoch Times*, “Battery Park City Leads the Green Way.” Nov 7, 2007.

¹⁰ as quoted in: Wolffe, Danielle. *Real Estate Weekly*. “Green Collar workers getting the job done.” Vol. 54, No. 17. Dec 26, 2007.

think that they will end up getting recycled toilet water coming out of their tap. He also believes there are so many different costs and benefits going around with construction in general, and especially green building, it is hard to answer questions in black and white numbers.

Some of the green upgrades from the Solaire to the Visionaire are subtle but enough to give them the additional points to go from Gold to Platinum. For instance, even though both buildings feature wood that is harvested in accordance with the Forest Stewardship Council promoting forest re-growth, the Visionaire uses bamboo cabinetry specifically, which is an even more sustainable resource¹¹. Also, the gardens surrounding the Solaire were all pesticide free, but now with the Visionaire, even the rooftop gardens are free of pesticides. Further, eco-friendly paints, adhesives, finishes and sealants which emit no or low VOC's were used in the newer building¹² significantly more than their first green structure just north of here. Also, the Visionaire has so many LEED "innovative design feature" points to choose from, they are not sure which 4 they should submit. Unfortunately, according to USGBC rules, they cannot just submit all of them and have the Council choose which four they like the most. If one of the four get rejected they will have to resubmit (an)other one(s).

After the tour and sitting around listening to Martin expound on his green building / dealing with LEED experiences, I made way back out to Little West Street and perhaps a quicker way to the subway this time. After enjoying a little walk around this quiet side of the highway, I actually found a light to cross at, and a subway stop as promised, not far at all from the Visionaire – the greenest residential building to date – and the last plot of residential development in the area¹³.

¹¹ Advertisement. In "Homes" a supplement to *The New York Times*, "Eco-smart Properties." Nov 2007, p74.

¹² Martin, Jennifer. *Unique Homes*. "On the Rise" July 2008.

¹³ Village Voice – *Places and Spaces: Best of NYC 2007*. "Green Buildings: The New Rule", Oct 17-23, 2007.