

# The Painter and the Pink Palazzo



Michael Falco for The New York Times

**ARTISTS' HOUSING** Mr. Schnabel on the triplex terrace.

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**YOU** can see it all the way from Bleecker, now that the leaves are thinning on West 11th Street. Awkward, particular and very pink, [Julian Schnabel's](#) much-publicized and still only partly sold condo-palazzo near the West Side Highway beckons invitingly on a late Sunday afternoon. Named Palazzo Chupi after Mr. Schnabel's pet name for his wife, the actress Olatz López Garmendia (the endearment is an abbreviation of Chupa Chups, the trendy Spanish lollipops), the stepped, neo-Mediterranean development planted on the top of an old stable will never win any architectural prizes.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Palazzo Chupi, Julian Schnabel's condo building in the West Village, is infused with neo-Mediterranean touches.

Mr. Schnabel said he sketched its form in 15 minutes, but its odd pitch and height probably owe more to a zoning formula that dictates the ratio of square footage to lot size. Yet it is *sui generis* — handmade and human-looking — in a neighborhood marked by a rash of development in glass and steel that has threatened to turn the area along West Street into a mirror image of Jersey City. And the tale of its construction is, if not a heroic one, still an odyssey of sorts for which the building accrued almost as much attention as the [Richard Meier](#) beauty queens behind it.

Palazzo Chupi is a brand extension for the omnivorous Mr. Schnabel, now 57, and as such an object lesson in the power — or failure — of a famous painter to sell three-bedroom condos for seven figures. The price tags bring flourishes like 18-foot ceilings, baronial bathrooms with rough-hewn fireplaces, and handmade hinges and door handles designed by the artist.

Adopted early on by the impish real estate blog Curbed, whose editors gleefully chronicled its growing pains (Chupi in Crisis! Chupi Price Chop! Chupi Paint Peeling!), the building was conceptualized by Mr. Schnabel just as the far West Village — everything west of Washington Street — was being rezoned in 2005. Its construction was vigorously protested by his neighbors, who marched with placards like “No More Monuments to

Greed” and who later charged that work was done illegally to beat the deadline limiting the height of new buildings in the neighborhood to 75 feet. At 170 feet, Chupi towers over many of its neighbors.

Completed at the start of the city’s economic meltdown, the place remains half empty. Originally “marketed” by word of mouth as a club for Mr. Schnabel’s rock star pals — it was rumored that [Bono](#) and Madonna would buy, or at the very least [Hugh Jackman](#) and those perennial shoppers, the Olsen twins — by last spring Mr. Schnabel decided he needed some old-fashioned salespeople and listed two of the five “houses” with Brown Harris Stevens. When they didn’t sell by summer, he switched to Corcoran, where James Lansill, a heavyweight involved with the Meier buildings and other big-ticket developments, presides over marketing for the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group. Prices on the two, a duplex and a triplex, each nearly 4,000 square feet, have been reduced to \$24 million from \$32 million, and to \$23 million from \$27 million. Those prices may be negotiable. Still, at over \$6,000 per square foot, if reached they would set a record for the area, beating out the sale of a Meier penthouse three years ago for \$4,565 per square foot.

Two of the five units were sold early on, to William Brady, a managing director of Credit Suisse for \$15.5 million, and to the actor [Richard Gere](#) for \$12 million — though that apartment is back on the market and listed with Sotheby’s for \$15 million. One unit was reserved for Mr. Schnabel’s wife and their twin teenage sons. Anyone who moves in will be hovering above Mr. Schnabel’s warehouse, itself a three-story building that holds his own floor-through, his studio and a pool. There is also a garage and an exhibition space. On a recent Sunday, Mr. Schnabel, who was looking very much like a young Henry VIII (as dressed by Eddie Vedder, not Holbein, in a blue flannel shirt, white pajama bottoms and bright red socks) padded from one palazzo to another, with this reporter in tow. It took an hour and a half to wander from the swimming pool on the ground floor to the baronial living room of the vacant triplex, 170 feet above 11th Street.

At Mr. Lansill’s suggestion, Mr. Schnabel had decorated the empty palazzos with his own things, and there was a lot to see — in his own hall, Mr.

Schnabel's massive sculpture of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon (he's in a bath, she's about to sink the ax in his head), like [Philip Guston](#) channeling Homer, along with 17th-century Belgian tapestries on dark clapboard walls ("cozy," explained Mr. Schnabel); a bronze lamp Mr. Schnabel had made to look like a shark's saw tooth in his wife's quarters; a Cy Twombly on one wall; blood red Venetian damask on another; Venetian glass chandeliers; 19th-century Portuguese antiques; Mr. Schnabel's own paintings, including one [Picasso](#) copy above a fireplace ("I painted it one day just to see if I could," Mr. Schnabel said); Venetian beds dressed in Ms. Garmendia's linens from her store, Olatz, and the dark-stained reclaimed bead board that wrapped stairs and the kitchens and gave each palazzo that "Venice meets Leland, Mich.," vibe, as Mr. Schnabel put it. There were also trash compactors, washing machines and steam baths.

"Here's a nice bathroom," Mr. Schnabel said of one. "I know you're not supposed to use adjectives for bathrooms, but it is nice." (It would appear three palazzos were toured, though this reporter lost her bearings in palazzo No. 2 and can't be sure.) Along the way, dogs appeared and vanished, along with Mr. Schnabel's 22-year-old son, Vito, and a designer and raw food guru named Xavier Llongueras, who fetched new slippers for Mr. Schnabel when it was discovered he was tracking yellow paint everywhere.

Mr. Schnabel settled at last into a pink velvet wing-back chair in the triplex. "It's nice here, it's quiet, and you're not a prisoner to your view," he said, a dig at the Meier towers behind him. "You can have an interior life up here."

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Michael Falco for The New York Times

A triplex for sale, with a copy of a Picasso over the mantel.

### Why did he build the Chupi?

“I built it because I wanted more space, and because I thought I could sell two or three apartments to pay for that space, and I built it because I could,” said Mr. Schnabel, who said he spent “a lot” on its construction. “I’m sorry if I inconvenienced anybody, but I tried to be a good neighbor.”

He sang a line from Lennon’s “Working Class Hero”: “As soon as you’re born they make you feel small. ...”

Artists are always misunderstood, Mr. Schnabel pointed out. He said he’d always liked the work of Addison Mizner, the architect who created the resort of Boca Raton, Fla., in the 1920s (and who died, bankrupt, in 1933), and he wanted to merge that style with some elements of his own [Stanford White](#) house in Montauk, like the dark bead board paneling and green kitchen tiles. He wanted to deploy “memory chips” so that it looked old and noble, like Lord Marchmain in exile. He wanted fireplaces that recalled Stonehenge. He also wanted to make some really big rooms.

“You’re a kid in Brooklyn and you look around and the scale of everything is wrong and that’s your life and you sort of have to accept that,” Mr. Schnabel said, clearly happy to be miles away from his childhood home in Flatbush.

He took another tack, that of civic booster. “Instead of going that way,” he cocked his head in a southwesterly direction, toward the Meier towers again, “instead of building some anonymous glass towers,” Mr. Schnabel

broke off, then moved this reporter from one spot to another, so she could see one of his paintings, which had the word Zeus written in white on a bright splash of red. He began again: “It’s like, O.K., we’re going to pull the reins back this way, so somehow there’s a little bit of stability or safety. You know, a little bit of humanism. I always thought it was terrible when people would throw things away because they weren’t shiny or new or made out of Formica. My mother, God bless her, and my father, they had no idea what an object was, they had no history. They worked all their lives, they didn’t have time to reflect, which is what a middle-class person who becomes an artist can do. They have time to think about whatever, about making things.”

When this reporter left the building, she bumped into two architectural tourists who were walking backward up 11th Street, armed with tiny cameras and trying to grok the whole building in the falling light.

Cinematic and lovely inside, the condo-palazzos float like Citizen Kane’s Xanadu high above the remains of the West Village, still a cautionary tale in the merging of art and commerce, though Maria Pashby, the blue-chip Corcoran broker who has the listings of the duplex and the triplex, said two interested buyers were circling.

“Julian is an aesthetic omnivore,” said Dodie Kazanjian, who covers the art world for *Vogue* and is the director of Gallery Met at the [Metropolitan Opera](#); she toured Chupi a few weeks ago. “Everything he touches becomes a Schnabel. So I looked at it” — Chupi, that is — “like another piece of art.”

But in the neighborhood, there are lingering resentments. “It’s woefully out of context and a monument to this guy’s ego,” said Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, one of the neighborhood groups that fought to block Chupi’s construction. He has called the building “an exploded Malibu Barbie house.”

“The biggest thing we took away from all this,” he continued, “is that the system is somewhat broken. Developers have the opportunity to break the law and beat the clock on rezoning and the public has little recourse.” (In



response, Brian Kelly, a musician and old friend of Mr. Schnabel's who managed the project for the artist, said, "We played by the rules and didn't seek any favors.")

"Personally, I adore it," said [Paul Rudnick](#), the novelist and playwright, who lives across the street and watched the "landing" of Chupi with great interest. "It's in the grand tradition of Manhattan white elephants, which make you wonder, Who lives there, and why? It's already a landmark. And it's much more in the tradition of the West Village, which is supposed to be outrageous and theatrical, than all those glass towers. When the transsexuals left it seems they were reincarnated as real estate," said Mr. Rudnick mistily, referring to the professionals who used to line the streets here. "At least the Palazzo does them proud."