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FORGING AHEAD

NEW YORK METAL HEADS FALL FOR THIS UNALLOYED PLEASURE

By DANIEL PAUL SIMMONS III



September 20, 2007 -- MICHAEL Aram knows a thing or two about metal. For nearly two decades, the noted metalsmith's creations, ranging from tableware to furniture, have been top sellers in high-end stores and boutiques. "I started working in metal when I went to India in 1989," Aram says, "and it was really an Aladdin's cave of treasure opening up to me."

So when this American-born artist decided to make Manhattan his primary residence, in part to focus on developing his recently opened flagship store on West 18th Street, it's no surprise that metal figured prominently in the reconception of his 19th-century Greenwich Village brownstone.

In collaboration with the architectural firm Hariri & Hariri, Aram designed a clean, open triplex throughout which unique creations made in his New Delhi workshop abound - cast-bronze bathroom cabinet pulls, cast-aluminum kitchen tiles, rippling hand-forged stainless-steel stair treads, a low-slung steel-slab storage unit - all seemingly machined in their precision yet unmistakably handmade, a hallmark of Aram's work.

Artisans like Aram, however, aren't the only ones exploiting metal's unique qualities at home these days. According to Aimee Desrosiers, who develops annual color forecasts for her company, California Paints, the growing popularity of metal in residential applications is part of a wider trend toward incorporating natural elements.

"There's an increased use of metals, stone, wood - not only structurally but as a design element," Desrosiers says. "Over the last few years, the big trend was to extend your living space by creating an outdoor room. Well, now we're bringing those 'outside' elements in."

"Metal has a marvelous way of bridging traditional vocabularies and motifs and making them seem more contemporary," explains top interior designer Jamie Drake, of Drake Design Associates. As an example, Drake cites a recent project in which he used metal to soften the transitional space within a client's L-shaped living/dining room.

"We chose to do a pair of low cabinets, then on top of them we mounted lacy foliate screens," he says. "It separates the two spaces, yet it's still open. And the bronze makes it edgy, not just sweet."

The metal revolution isn't limited to just interiors. "We're using a lot more metal in our residential projects," says architect Randy Gerner, a principal at Gerner Kronick + Valcarcel. "From an exterior perspective, it allows us to do things - bends, curves, sculpted forms - that we can't do in glass, concrete block or other traditional cladding materials."

That flexibility is exemplified by two of the firm's current residential projects: The Gantry in Long Island City, which is partly covered with interlocking shingles made from a product called Zalmag (a zinc, aluminum and magnesium composite) and The Gramercy, on 23rd Street between First and Second avenues, whose mostly glass façade is accented with something Gerner calls "matzah metal."

"We look for ways to adapt metal so it feels less commercial," Gerner says. "And changing the scale from large to small panels makes it much more residential."

For Trevor Stahelski, a partner in the boutique real-estate firm Cardinal Investments, showcasing metal elements is a way to set apart the properties his firm develops from the competition. "The other floor-throughs out there are all the same basic shape," Stahelski says. "So how do you differentiate your product? Through the architecture."

Case in point: Cardinal's latest project, the m127 building, on Madison Avenue between 30th and 31st streets. Designed by SHoP Architects, it comprises an original seven-story building to which six new floors have been added. Though metal components figure prominently in virtually every aspect of the dramatic reconfiguration, its showpiece is the façade's vertical series of cantilevered floor-width window units.

"They're basically huge boxes built out of steel at a plant in upstate New York," says Stahelski, "and each weighs in at nearly three tons."

Large or small, inside or out, residential uses of metal continue to proliferate as consumers' perceptions of the substance shift.

"I think that the mass market has gotten over [the idea] that metal is just an industrial or commercial material," says Desrosiers. "Think about the popularity of stainless-steel appliances; part of that is functional, but it's also aesthetic. And now you're seeing metals used in nontraditional ways - not just in appliances, sinks and hard fixtures, but as backsplashes, tiles, panels on an accent wall. Even metallic paint is quite popular."

For Aram, this growing appreciation of his personal muse by both design professionals and the general public alike can be attributed first and foremost to the mysteries of the material itself.

"There's something magical, almost alchemistic about metal, the way it goes from being a liquid to a solid," Aram says. "It has a permanence, a majesty, a nobility that people just respond to."

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Once considered cold, clinical and commercial, metal is now red-hot and making residential inroads all over the city.

40 Bond: At Ian Schrager's new NoHo project, architects Herzog and de Meuron have offset the symmetry of the building's 11-story façade (composed entirely of greenish cast-glass rectangles), with a street-level fence/gate unit made of wildly undulating, graffiti-inspired squiggles - all rendered in seemingly endless ribbons of cast aluminum.

SoHo Mews: "The SoHo Mews project is a modern-day reinterpretation of the surrounding metal-and-glass façades of the SoHo Cast Iron Historic District," says Robert Siegel, principal at Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, who designed the building. Metal in various forms - recessed channels, mullions, panels - provides a striking counterpoint to the façade's fritted, frosted and clear glass.

139 Wooster: This project offers its own 21st-century take on SoHo's distinctive 19th-century architecture. "Contemporary materials such as extruded aluminum and brake metal allow a modern interpretation of a traditional cast-iron building," says partner-in-charge Richard Southwick of Beyer Blinder Belle Architects, its designer. "The cost and weight of cast iron would not only have been prohibitive but also replicative rather than interpretive. A building should refer to the time in which it's built."

