

International Homes

Narrow structures can mean more chances for connection

A space that's slim but that feels open

Slender buildings house creatively designed homes in cities all over the world

BY JOANN PLOCKOVA

In Rotterdam, Gwendolyn Huisman and Marijn Boterman live with their 13-month old daughter Emika in a brick home that is just 11 feet wide.

To make the best use of the limited space, they have tucked appliances, storage and their bathroom into the walls like built-ins.

"I think if we still live here with teenagers we might have to do something about privacy," said Ms. Huisman, who is an architect. "Now the bathroom is open, so it works, but if she might be 10 or 15 or something, she might not want to be nude in front of us, or we might not want to be nude in front of her." (The toilet sticks out slightly, so they are unable to fit a door.)

Narrow homes aren't an anomaly in the Netherlands, though the residence of Ms. Huisman and Mr. Boterman is unusually slim. It's a style that is called SkinnySCAR, from SCARchitecture, a term created by Jager Janssen, the architecture firm for which Mr. Boterman previously worked. (The term referred to the firm's plan to develop neglected plots it discovered around the city.)

Such properties, referred to variously as narrow homes, skinny houses or — in



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GWEN HUISMAN AND MARIJN BOTERMAN

The skinny
This SkinnySCAR house in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is just 11 feet wide but three stories high. From every vantage point, the home offers views into other parts of the house.

Japan, where they are plentiful — eels nests, are being squeezed into empty gaps and repurposed wedges in dense urban areas from São Paulo, Brazil, to Osaka, Japan.

"It's not per se a new discovery," Mr. Boterman said. "It happens everywhere."

For architects, these narrow dimensions can present an interesting challenge. For homeowners, they can offer an opportunity to make a smaller foot-

print, reduce property taxes in some cases or gain access to urban amenities.

But is it really possible to live comfortably in such a tight space?

"For us, this house works really well; I think the only thing we adjusted now is adding our first door, for her bedroom, in order to get some more privacy. And probably in the future we will build a roof extension," said Ms. Huisman, who designed the home with her husband. "But I think that's mainly because of the

growing family and deciding that having a little bit more closed-off space," she said. "Also, the sound. Kids make sounds."

Like many narrow homes, the SkinnySCAR residence takes advantage of its more generous dimensions: 65.6 feet deep and three stories high, with the home's interior circulating around two vertical, load-bearing concrete slabs clad in plywood. With the kitchen on the ground floor, a library for books and the

couple's vintage record album collection on the middle floor and the open bathroom on the third, this floor-to-ceiling centerpiece keeps the living spaces clear and provides a feeling of openness.

"It's basically a stacked loft, so everything is open on three floors, so it's all connected," Ms. Huisman said. From every vantage point, the home, which cost around \$270,000 to build and was completed in 2017, offers vertical and hori-

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Downsides to supertall

Residents report creaks and water leaks in a towering symbol of luxury

BY STEFANOS CHEN

The nearly 1,400-foot tower at 432 Park Avenue, briefly the tallest residential building in the world, was the pinnacle of New York's luxury condo boom half a decade ago, fueled largely by foreign buyers seeking discretion and big returns.

Six years later, residents of the exclusive tower are now at odds with the developers, and each other, making clear that even multimillion-dollar price tags do not guarantee problem-free living. The claims include millions of dollars' worth of water damage from plumbing and mechanical issues; frequent elevator malfunctions; and walls that creak like the galley of a ship — all of which may be connected to the building's main selling point: its immense height, according to homeowners, engineers and documents obtained by The New York Times.

Less than a decade after a spate of record-breaking condo towers reached new heights in New York, the first reports of defects and complaints are beginning to emerge, raising concerns that some of the construction methods and materials used have not lived up to the engineering breakthroughs that only recently enabled 1,000-foot-high trophy apartments. Engineers privy to some of the disputes say many of the same issues are occurring quietly in other new towers.

The disputes at 432 Park also highlight a rarely seen view of New York's so-called Billionaire's Row, a stretch of supertall towers near Central Park that

redefined the city skyline and where the identities of virtually all the buyers were concealed by shell companies.

The building, a slender tower that critics have likened to a middle finger because of its contentious height, is mostly sold out, with a projected value of \$3.1 billion. The 96th floor penthouse at the top of the building sold in 2016 for nearly \$88 million to a company representing the Saudi retail magnate Fawaz Alhokair. Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez bought a 4,000-square-foot apartment there for \$15.3 million in 2018 and sold it about a year later.

Now, correspondence between residents, some of the richest and most influential people in the world, reveal thorny arguments over how to remedy the problems without tanking property values.

"I was convinced it would be the best building in New York," said Sarina Abramovich, one of the earliest residents of 432 Park. "They're still billing it as God's gift to the world, and it's not."

CIM Group, one of the developers, said in a statement that the building "is a successfully designed, constructed and virtually sold-out project," and that developers were "working collaboratively" with the condo board, which they ran until January, when residents were elected and took control. (Developers typically control condo boards in the first few years of operation.) "Like all new construction, there were maintenance and close-out items during that period," they said. Macklowe Properties, the other developer, declined to comment.

The construction manager, Lendlease, said in a statement that it had "been in contact" with the developers, "regarding some comments from tenants, which we are currently evaluating."

Ms. Abramovich and her husband, Mikhail, retired business owners who worked in the oil and gas business, bought a high-floor, 3,500-square-foot apartment at the tower for nearly \$17 million in 2016, to have a secondary home near their adult children.

She was disappointed with her purchase on Day 1, she said, when she left her home in London in early 2016 to move into what she expected to be a completed apartment and found that both her unit and the building were still under construction.

"They put me in a freight elevator surrounded by steel plates and plywood, with a hard-hat operator," she said. "That's how I went up to my hoity-toity apartment before closing."

Problems grew from there, she said. There have been a number of floods in the building, including two leaks in November 2018 that the general manager of the building, Len Czarniecki, acknowledged.

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Exclusive aerie
Built in the last luxury condo boom, 432 Park in New York has residents at odds with the developers and with each other. The claims include millions of dollars' worth of water damage.



KARSTEN MORAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES