



30 WARREN

The three lead partners of Post-Office Architectes, François Leininger, Line Fontana and David Fagart, are building on their experience in the New York and Paris offices of Atelier Jean Nouvel to design 30 Warren. They explain their approach to architecture and their intentions for their inaugural project in Manhattan during the conversation that follows.

How did you build your partnership at Post-Office Architectes?

François Leininger: We all met while working at Atelier Jean Nouvel some fifteen years ago. That was the starting point of our partnership. We know each other well! However, each of us has followed his or her own path. David remained at the Nouvel office for 14 years, where he became a partner. Line was there for three years before setting up her own design studio. As for me, I stayed with Nouvel for 11 years, working mainly on projects in New York, where I've been living for the last 5 years. The reason for creating our office together is precisely due to our complementary trajectories. We have worked on small to urban-scale projects, major international competitions, and project management—all from conception to delivery. When we line up these competencies, end-to-end, we want to get across to people that together we form a richly experienced team, and that it is therefore possible to challenge us with any type of subject or program. Dealing with it will be familiar to us.

Line Fontana: The projects I developed were on the interior design side, the field I was trained in. Consequently, I bring a different point of view, one very focused on use and details. It is almost another culture, and this enables us to have lively debates that might not have occurred among pure architects. It is very important that in the midst of the biggest projects, we also have smaller ones. These little commissions offer us a way to experiment with the ideas that later on we can develop on a larger scale. This process of sampling is at the heart of our strategy.



30 WARREN

Two of you live and work in Paris while the third practices in New-York. How does your office function given this context of physical distance?

François Leininger: We think that today it is possible to build a partnership across two continents from scratch. It's a real challenge, but it is very interesting. We have week-long face-to-face working sessions every two months. And in our exchanges we all make daily use of Skype, email and the telephone.

How did the 30 Warren commission come about?

François Leininger: I got to know Craig Wood, the Director of Cape Advisors, and his team when we collaborated on a project with Atelier Jean Nouvel. When Craig learned we were setting up our own office, he brought us this project. Our role is quite clear: we take care of the creative side of the project, the follow-up of its development, and advising the client regarding the architecture and design aspects. Cape Advisors clearly called upon us to create architecture. They also hired Thomas O'Hara's office of HTO Architects as executive architect, the structural engineering firm Tocci Engineering, and the MEP engineering firm Edwards & Zuck Consulting Engineers. And we proposed Front Inc., a consulting firm specialized in facades, for assistance on developing the skin.

Let's talk about the particular conditions of the project in New York, which is on a geographically rich site, but a constrained one.

David Fagart: Yes, the site of our project concentrates a great deal of complexity on a fairly small lot, which is undergirded by a subway line. The buildable space is constrained by a number of setbacks and irregularities owing to the zoning laws, air rights and infrastructure. Consequently no two levels are identical, and the built part of the site is very thin.



30 WARREN

Our project stands in the eastern part of Tribeca, a neighborhood undergoing a major transformation. So, we analyzed the site from the point of view of its built density, the architectural icons surrounding it, and its particular share of the sky and light. It functions as a sort of urban clearing in the heart of the concrete jungle of downtown. The urban landscape here is awesome. And this felt even more powerful by the fact we are in a low-rise/ mid-rise part of the city. We enjoyed the challenge of looking for a solution based on this context, and we came up with the idea of an “inverted belvedere” by asking ourselves the following question: which envelope would make it possible to create the greatest number of relations and protections within an urban environment, to offer the largest platform, and to be most open to the sky? With the greatest views?

How did you incorporate this idea of the “inverted belvedere” into the project?

Line Fontana: The site takes full advantage of the enormous potential for views: onto a magical skyline, onto the extremely dense forest of skyscrapers of the financial district, onto the little transversal canyons and the river a bit further away. To bring these views out, we absolutely had to take advantage of the setbacks required by the zoning. To do this, we developed a principle of framing large views facing the grand moments of the city.

François Leininger: This project is the opposite of aquarium architecture and of a certain generic vision of daily life. The balconies we placed on the façade function like promontories, or perches, where one can take the pulse of the urban environment and then the step back inside. The terraces protect from the sun, noise, and from buildings opposite. They reduce the sensation of a lack of privacy because each large terrace has its own landscape. This approach is fairly characteristic of our way of responding to the aspects of urban living.



30 WARREN

David Fagart: The architect has an important role to play in determining living conditions in the city and in the creation of alternatives to total openness or total withdrawal. This is how the idea arose to work on a transparent mass protected on the west side by a “leaf” —the building skin—that folds back onto its southern face. From that point onward, we were able to shift the project toward its residential status.

And what does this “residential” concept entail?

François Leininger: I think its meaning is threefold, encompassing the idea of protection, privacy, and of transparency all at once, but also the idea of identity. This requires mastery of the materials that will make it possible to create this subtle relationship with the exterior.

Line Fontana: As we all were insistent about the principle of the leaf, the thin skin, our answer was to utilize large modules in ‘Ductal’, a highly resistant fiber-reinforced concrete.

François Leininger: Ductal expresses a mineral quality as well as a certain ambivalence: the subtlety of a thickness. This material lends itself to being molded and textured. This mineral quality we wanted to introduce creates nuance, which we think is important in today’s world.

How are the apartments laid out, and what is it like to live in them?

François Leininger: The building is comprised of a base with four levels of walk-in apartments, a duplex and several larger apartments in the center, with penthouses on the upper floors. We glazed in the entire north side opening onto the grand perspectives from Church Street, enhancing the impression of the floors outward thrust. On this gable end, a planted garden creates the first screen, a filter between apartments and the city.



30 WARREN

David Fagart: Generally speaking, we amplified the common living areas and placed the living rooms in the angles, removed from the bedrooms, making them more independent, free of façades to provide an opportunity to de-compartmentalize and take advantage of the very long forms of the west side to extend the views and areas of circulation. We think it is crucial to restore walking, movement, and horizontal activity inside an apartment. And on the upper floors, we have chosen to create large surfaces telling an altogether different, non-standard story.

The idea of movement and action, prompted from within and outside the apartments, seems to be at the very heart of your project.

David Fagart: Yes, the fact that we approached the project from the point of view of its flexibility and its possibilities for transformation was essential—notably for defining the grand perspectives of the apartments onto the city and the long distances of the floors, encouraging movement, and even strolling within them. All in all, our contribution to the project enabled us to influence the ways of living in the very interior of these apartments, and in active relation with the city, thanks to these large framed views, long stretches to walk, and broad terraces and balconies. That is what mattered most to us. It was our first job in New York. Thanks to this new experience, it will be very interesting to see how we tackle the next one!