In Luxury Sinking
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 29, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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An English architect and writer, Martin Pawley, has invented something called "garbage housing." This is not meant as a pejorative term, but as a literal label for houses built of old beer bottles, cans and the general detritus of industrial and consumer society. The idea, tinged with a bit of Pop symbolism, is to beat the tyranny of costs and style with a simple act of conservation and ingenuity. Its avowed purpose is to find a rational approach to housing the poor.

It took New York, however, to invert, or pervert, that idea into garbage housing for the rich. Called luxury housing here, its shoddiness is not just the result of rising costs of construction, labor, land and money—all of which have pushed rentals to over $150 a room in those neighborhoods considered chic and safe. Today, space-and-corner-cutting to hold rents at less than imperial levels is almost respectable. But the fact is that lusterless luxury housing has been with us since the post-World War II apartment boom when building was a lot cheaper and better quality could have been possible. It appeared then as if decreed from some higher source: almost on command, rooms shrank, ceilings were lowered, windowless kitchens were gouged out of eviscerated living rooms, particle board and plastic replaced wood and plaster. Creeping minimums became the rule.

In today's luxury apartments there are no real doors or walls; one knows, if one does not necessarily love, one's neighbor. Closets fall apart when touched; plumbing fails; rain comes through windows, and sound comes through walls. Cosmetic touches camouflage the basic junk: wall ovens, marble vanities, token balconies. Names suggest posh London or the south of France. But by any measure of space, quality or amenity, this is the new poverty for the affluent.

Because the demand for this housing is maintained by those who flee older, changing neighborhoods (apartments on Ocean Parkway or the Grand Concourse are far larger, sounder and handsomer) and by the young professionals that the city still attracts, builders have a seller's market. Even with other construction at a halt, three new luxury units have been announced for Manhattan's East Side. They will clearly be more, or less, of the same. The architect who has designed them, and what seems like most of the others, concedes that they have hit bottom. "It's pretty much down to the minimum . . . it would be a terrific gamble to cut any more space." Translation: Considering the huge rents, even the captive tenant could be pushed too far in the builder's pursuit of a formula for profit.

Builders and real estate developers are not known for long vision. In fact, they just see as far as the tax books. The custom has been to take advantage of accelerated depreciation for ten years and then sell at the end of the bonanza period, with the next owner doing the same. The trip is down, all the way. This doesn't help neighborhoods. It is hard to hold luxury garbage together; it deteriorates faster than the old-fashioned housing built to last. The falsely elegant becomes the obviously crummy. That is *real* accelerated depreciation, for which the city pays and pays.

At present, New Yorkers have no choice. The obvious and necessary alternative — the rehabilitation of sound older buildings with nine-foot ceilings, spacious rooms, solid hardware and vanished amenities—waits for willing capital and investors, who wait, in turn for signs of active city commitment to neighborhood conservation. So far, it is policy on paper only. And the "luxury" rip-off continues.