

New heights of luxury in Century City



Mark Segal / Ateliers Jean Nouvel

Artist's rendering shows a 45-story condo building, left, proposed for 10000 Santa Monica Blvd. on the edge of Century City. SunCal Cos. plans to build the 177-unit tower designed by French architect Jean Nouvel. It would cost \$400 million.

A garden-ringed condo tower is proposed for one of the Westside's most coveted parcels.

By Roger Vincent, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Plans for a 45-story, wisp-thin tower of ultra-luxury condominiums between Beverly Hills High School and the Los Angeles Country Club are set to be unveiled today. Developers say it would be one of the most expensive residential buildings in the West.

The \$400-million tower along one of the area's toniest corridors would be the first building in California designed by renowned Paris architect Jean Nouvel, known for his daring designs. He is proposing a narrow glass structure with sweeping views through the building and extensive greenery ringing each floor.



Jean Nouvel

The developer predicts the project will attract European and Asian globe-trotters as well as local empty-nesters ready to move from sprawling Westside mansions to roomy condominiums complete with concierge services, a private club, first-run movie screenings and valet parking.

Even at a time of economic uncertainty -- when Southern California employers are trimming payrolls, stock prices are falling and home values are dropping -- the demand for luxury housing continues nearly unabated in the Westside. And with it has come more traffic and growing homeowner resentment about construction and congestion.

Prices have not been set for the proposed condos at 10000 Santa Monica Blvd. But units in the ultra-luxury Century tower being built in nearby Century City are being offered at a range of \$3.2 million to \$30 million, and the Nouvel condos are expected to be even more pricey.

Two top-drawer projects are also

being planned around the intersection of Santa Monica and Wilshire boulevards in Beverly Hills. Last year, British developers paid \$500 million for the former Robinson-May department store at the site, where a 252-unit condo and retail complex designed by prominent architect Richard Meier has been proposed.

"How much high-end product can the market bear in such a close proximity?" asked real estate broker Gary Weiss of Madison Partners, who called the planned Nouvel building "extraordinarily ambitious."

Nouvel's developer, SunCal Cos., said it was undeterred by slumping home sales in Southern California and hoped to break ground in 2009. The company said it expected to start seeking formal city approvals next week.

"What we are really doing is addressing an underserved component of the market," said Frank Faye, chief operating officer of SunCal. "We are confident we would be able to sell these units today and we will be able to sell them quite rapidly once they're made available."

Considered one of the most desirable locations for development in the country, the vacant lot was the object of a high-profile bidding war in 2006 when Irvine home builder SunCal finally topped New York developer Donald Trump with a \$110.2-million offer for just 2.4 acres.

Ever since, the site has been eyed with curiosity and suspicion in an area where homeowners have already expressed alarm about the rapid pace of development. "The truth is that people are happy in their neighborhood and they don't want to see it change," said Kevin Hughes, president of the Cheviot Hills Homeowners' Assn.

Plans call for 177 units, with two to six condominiums per floor. Elevators would serve every condo directly so there would be no corridors between units. "Each residence is designed as a home in the sky surrounded by an abundance of plants and flowers but with no visual limits to the spectacular views of the city, mountains and ocean," Nouvel said.

In Los Angeles, "we have to build buildings especially for this climate," he

said. "From the boulevard, it will look like a vertical garden."

City Councilman Jack Weiss, who represents Century City, said he supported Nouvel's concept. "We have never had someone of this caliber designing something residential on the Westside," he said.

"My public-policy goal has been to make Century City a world-class residential destination," Weiss said. "That creates benefits because people can live near where they work and traffic is generated at off-peak hours."

But some neighborhood residents are skeptical about how beneficial ultra-luxury housing would be.

"To make Century City truly livable you need housing for people who work there who aren't presidents of their companies," said Barbara Broide, president of the Westwood South of Santa Monica Boulevard Homeowners Assn. "That's what we need to take car trips off the street."

The mayor of Beverly Hills echoes Broide's concern about how the building might add to congestion. "It will not be easy to digest for Beverly Hills people who are already getting a lot of traffic that is not Beverly Hills traffic."

Faye, the developer, however, said that the residential tower would generate less traffic than the office building that used to occupy the site. The previous owner demolished the building that once housed several tenants, including Jimmy's restaurant.

Faye also said he thought the Nouvel building would be set apart from rivals both in price and amenities.

But competition lurks with many other pricey units coming to market.

Westfield, the owner of Century City's shopping center, plans to build 262 upscale condos or apartments to complement its recent \$170-million makeover of the mall.

And Century City landlord JMB Realty Corp. plans to build 483 units on Constellation Boulevard.

Owners of the Beverly Hilton Hotel also plan to add upmarket condos as part of a major upgrade and expansion on the property. Other high-end condos overlooking the Los Angeles Country Club and at the Montage Hotel in

Beverly Hills are being built.

The Nouvel design of SunCal's planned tower is intentionally ambitious, Faye said. "This is an exciting opportunity," he said. "The worst thing we could do is under-deliver."