FRAME 122 | BROOKLYN, NEW YORK | BRENT BUCK ARCHITECTS

Holding Court

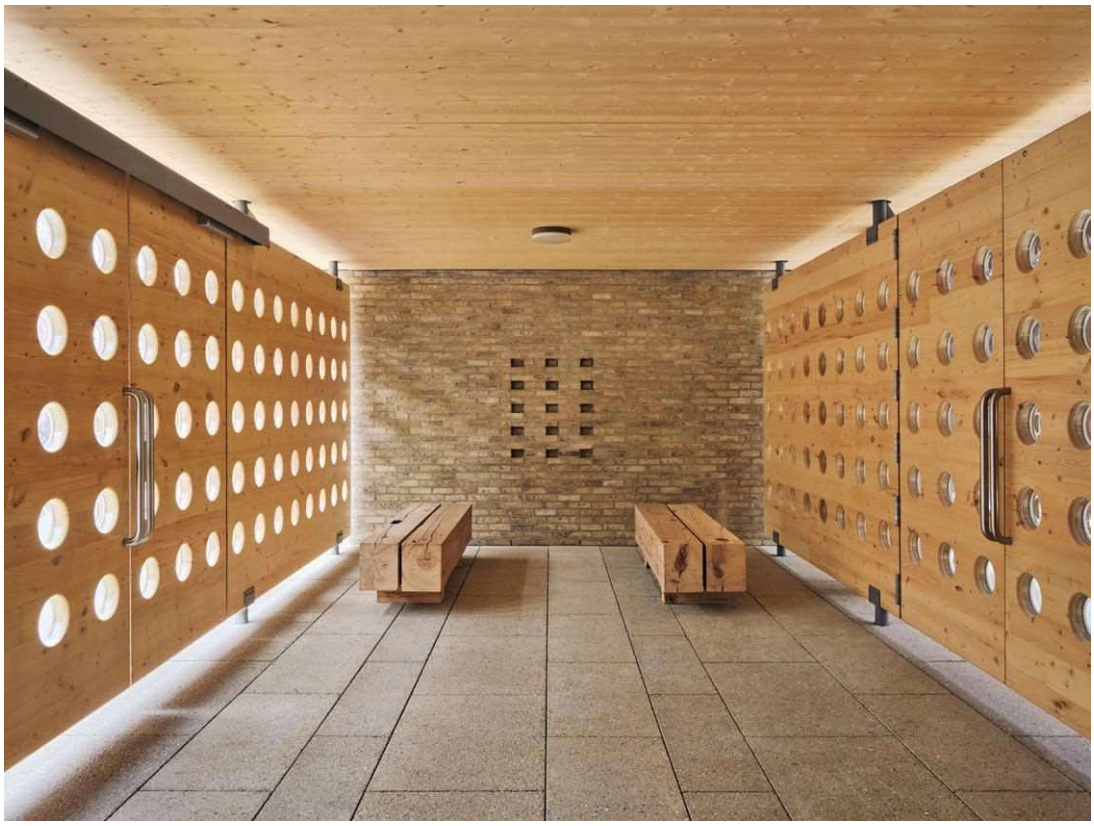
A mass-timber apartment building in Brooklyn wraps itself around a courtyard with character.

BY MATTHEW MARANI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER STURMAN

THE DOUBLE-LOADED corridor is a ubiquitous and rightly derided feature of contemporary housing. Its layout, where residential units line both sides of long hallways, deprives common spaces of daylight, natural ventilation, and, some would say, a sense of community. But adherence to this stultifying building configuration need not be the norm. Frame 122, a five-story mass-timber residential apartment house in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill neighborhood, designed by local practice Brent Buck Architects, stands in contrast to this prevailing typology, with a parklike courtyard from which residents can access their apartments.

The nearly 31,000-square-foot rental building faces east and is located on the site of a demolished brick-fronted garage. That context, and the neighborhood's abundant brownstones and nearby industrial facilities, like the Brooklyn Navy Yard, informed the project's cladding, which comprises roughly mortared and variegated brick on the ground floor that transitions to corrugated aluminum sheets and highly regimented rectangular glazing above. The entrance is at the center of the main elevation, where a pair of exposed glulam beams frame the building's cross-laminated timber (CLT) gateway, which is punctuated by a grid of playful porthole-like windows.

ENTRY DOORS are made of CLT panels (opposite). The courtyard and backyard provide daylit recreational spaces (this image).



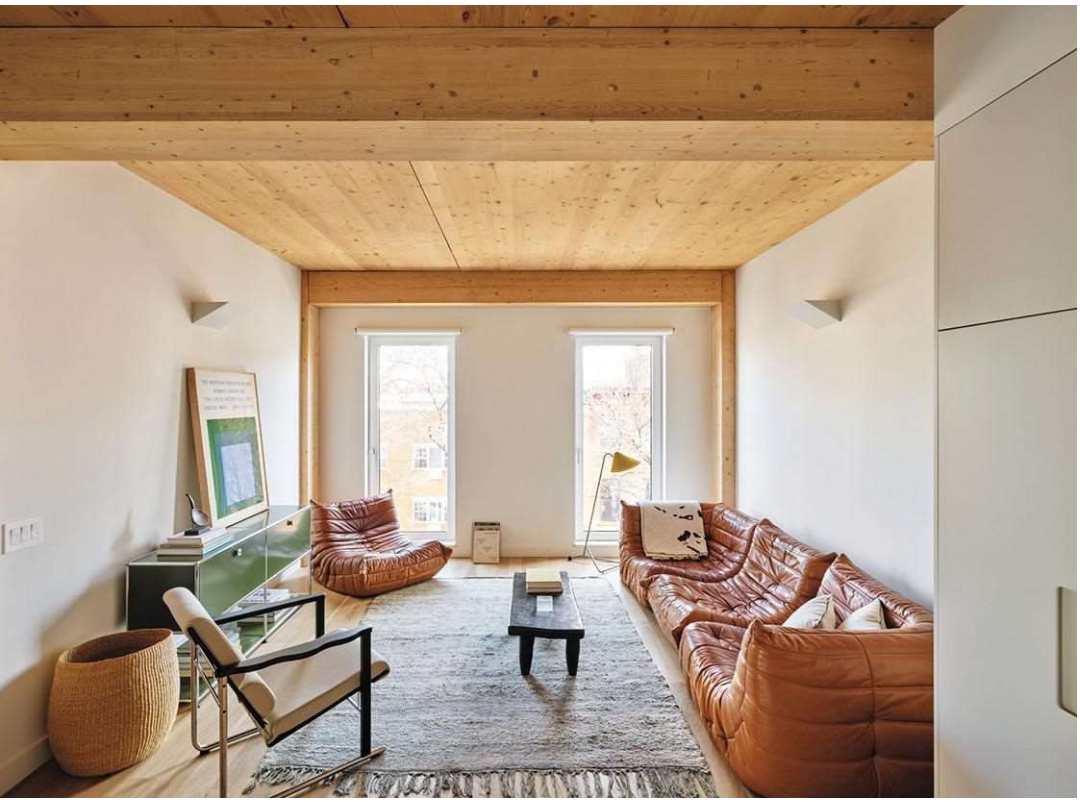
FRAME 122 is studded with rectangular window openings (above). A partially open vestibule welcomes tenants (left). The spiral stairwells deliver residents to circulatory walkways (opposite).

The gateway leads to an open-air vestibule—a zoning trick that deducted buildable area from the ground floor, freeing up valuable square footage for the residential units—which, in a few strides, opens to the building's granite-paved courtyard. It is flanked to the north and south by a pair of steel spiral staircases that lead to exterior walkways and apartments. Together, the staircases and walkways serve as Frame 122's primary circulatory route and double as means of qualified fire-safety egress; strands of bulbous lamps crisscrossing the courtyard fulfill their lighting requirements. The open space afforded by the courtyard is further supplemented by a backyard at the rear western portion of the building parcel.

"This arrangement gave us the ability to turn what would typically be an internal stairwell within a concrete core into a courtyard amenity with decorative stairs," says principal Brent Buck of Frame 122, which is the largest project his firm has undertaken and its first foray into multifamily housing (the development company's cofounders had previously hired Buck for their apartment renovation). "It is also key to providing additional sunlight through translucent windows, cross ventilation to the residential units, and a moment of calm from our hectic New York City lives."

There are four apartments per floor, excluding the ground level, where there is just one unit, with a private backyard, and the penthouse level, where there are two with rooftop terraces. Each of the rentable units measures at least 1,100 square feet and contain two to three bedrooms. According to Buck, it was important to the developer that the apartments be of sufficient size for families. The apartments between the second and fourth floors follow an L-shaped layout, and they are coupled together by elevator-accessed foyers, which provide a secondary point of entry to the units.

Inside, the mass-timber structural system is left exposed. Glulam columns, spaced nearly 14 feet apart, frame the minimally detailed interiors and are complemented by the exposed grain of five-ply CLT panels overhead—with standard dimensions of 26 feet by 10 feet—and white oak flooring underfoot. The kitchens and bathrooms are daylit from either street- or courtyard-facing windows; and their white backsplash and shower tiles are arranged in an eye-catching pattern of random lengths (it also happens that this forgiving arrangement simplified their installation). Notably, the apartments

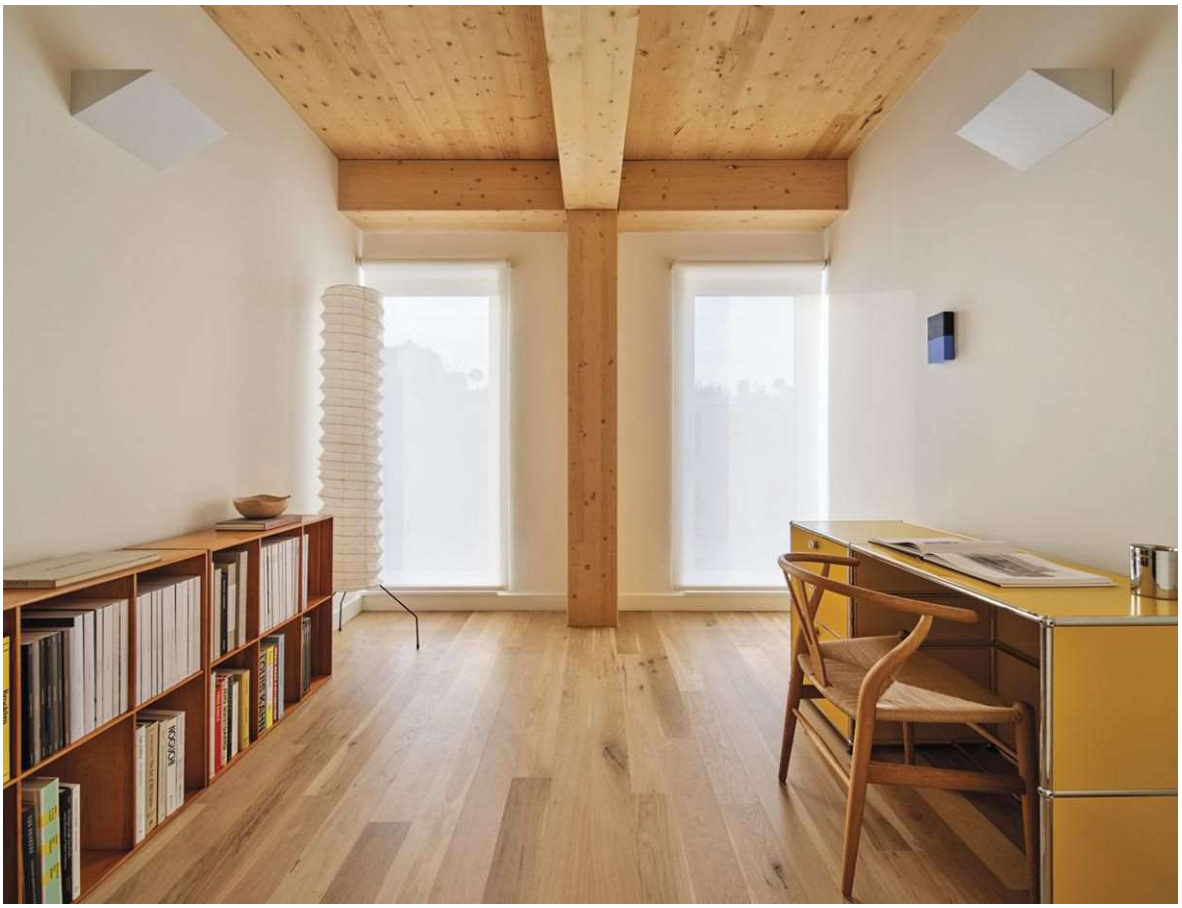


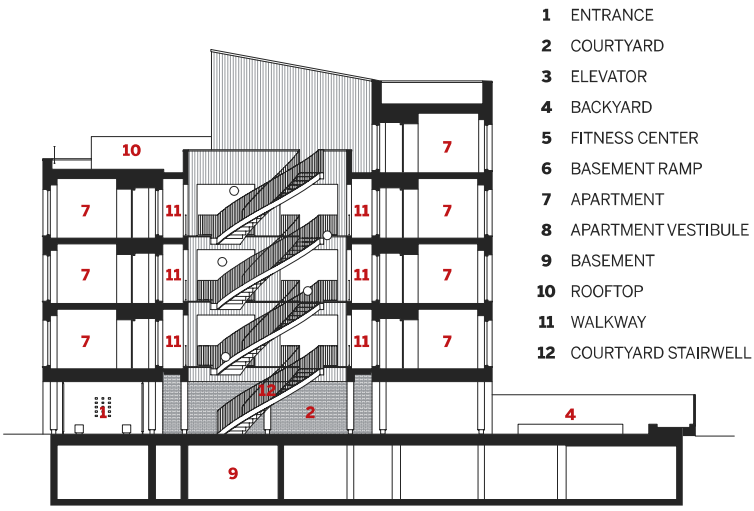
are serenely quiet, owing to the triple-glazed windows and barely audible, white noise–like energy-recovery ventilators circulating fresh air. Once the tenants start to move in this spring, the din of multifamily living will be further mitigated by acoustic insulation sandwiched between the wood flooring and the CLT panels.

Like other structures realized following New York's passage of Local Law 154, Frame 122 is fully electrified. At the rooftop, a 16.1 kW photovoltaic array will, during daytime hours, offset much of the building's energy load. Below grade, in the garage, the residents' parking spots include bidirectional EV-charging stations—meaning that, if the power goes out, electric vehicles can serve as backup generators for a limited period.

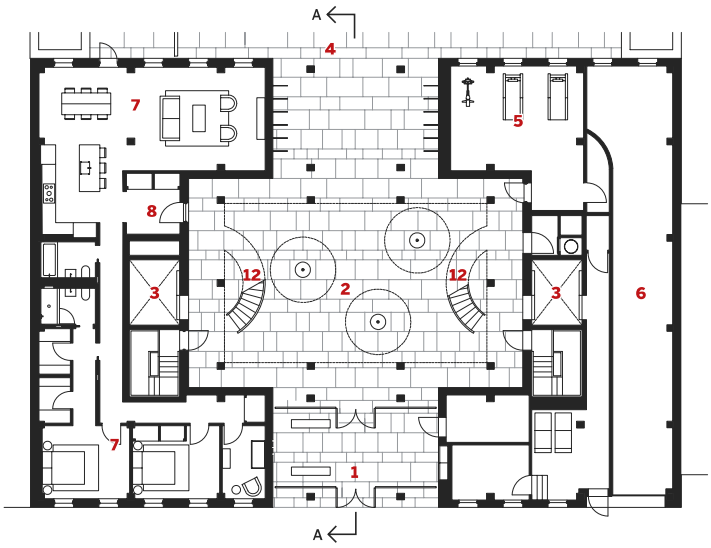
Frame 122 joins a small but growing group of mass-timber buildings in New York. The developer, Frame Home, completed another such structure, Frame 283, two years ago,

THE UNITS are minimally detailed (opposite, left). Each bathroom has window access (opposite, right). The mass-timber structure is left visible (opposite, bottom, and above). Acoustical insulation is located below the wood flooring (right).

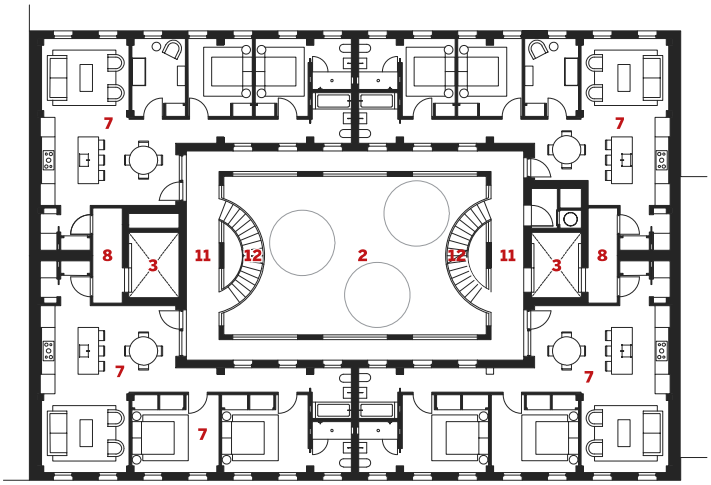




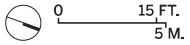
SECTION A - A

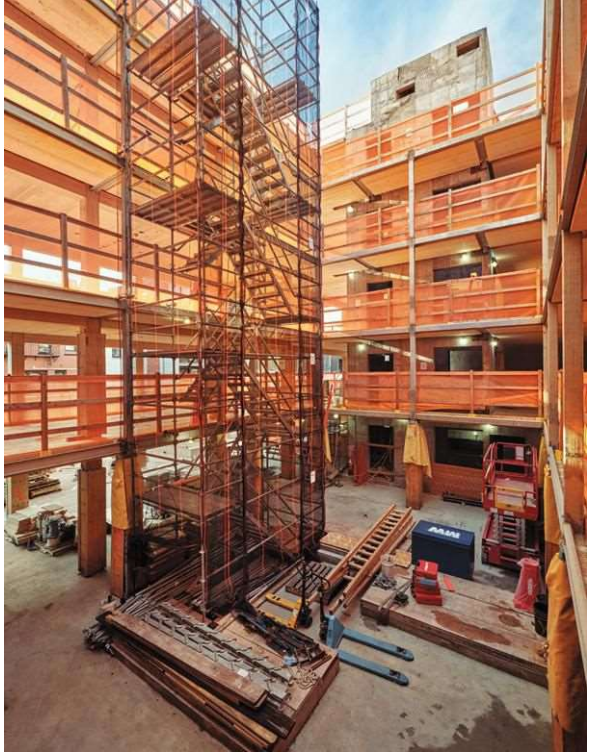


GROUND-FLOOR PLAN



SECOND-FLOOR PLAN





THE MASS-TIMBER structural system includes glulam posts and beams, and CLT floor panels (above). The spiral stairwells are located on the north and south sides of the courtyard (opposite, top). Frame 122 shown in context (opposite, bottom).

which was the first cross-laminated building in the city. Designed well before the local adoption, in 2022, of an updated code that permitted mass timber's use for structures up to 85 feet tall, Frame 283 required extensive back-and-forth negotiations with the Department of Buildings to receive the required permits.

At this building, on the other hand, the design team and the developer sensed the winds of change and took a gamble, breaking ground and demolishing the garage months before the approval of the updated building code. The risk paid off. In December 2022, with shop drawings prepared in coordination with an Ontario-based mass-timber fabricator, the developer gave production the go-ahead, making the project the first CLT structure completed through the revised building code. Glulam columns and beams, as well as cross-laminated floor panels, began arriving on-site in July 2023, where they were installed at a steady clip, averaging a new floor every week and a half. Although the design team wanted to use CLT for the elevator cores, they were ultimately impelled by the Department of Buildings to use standard poured-in-place concrete.

"Mass timber is certainly becoming more prevalent, and it was exciting to utilize the material in New York," notes Buck. "I hope that this project shows people that it is not only possible to use, but that it is resilient and often looks great too."

The firm, which currently numbers six (including Buck), will continue to work with timber, albeit in different forms and scales. The team is designing The Hudson Company's new campus in Dutchess County, New York, which will host a lumber mill and gallery, as well as an off-grid mass-timber house, which will utilize solar power and geothermal wells. If they are anything like Frame 122, these projects portend great things for Buck's budding practice. ■

Credits

ARCHITECT: Brent Buck Architects — Brent Buck, principal; Sarp Arditi, project architect; Joanna Ptak, staff

ENGINEERS: Murray Engineering (structural); ANZ Consulting Engineers (m/e/p, sprinkler); Ancora Engineering (excavation)

CONSULTANTS: Frank Seta & Associates (envelope)

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: CM & Associates

CLIENT: Frame Home

SIZE: 30,725 square feet

COST: withheld

COMPLETION DATE: March 2025

Sources

MASS TIMBER: Element 5

MASONRY: The Belden Brick Company

METAL PANELS: ATAS International

ENVELOPE: Sto (EIFS); GE (water barrier)

GLAZING: Saint-Gobain

WINDOWS: Schüco

INTERIOR FINISHES: Benjamin Moore (paints and stains); Nemo (wall tile); Mosa (floor tiles); Acoustitech (acoustic insulation)