We went to the top of New York's latest skyscraper to find out how it's being built

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The view from the unfinished south face of 45 E. 22nd St., now the tallest building between Midtown and the Financial District.

Bruce Eichner very much enjoys showing off his latest building.
We're in rarefied air, 777 feet above Manhattan's Beaux-Arts Flatiron District — well higher than the golden tops of the Metropolitan Life Tower and New York Life Building a few blocks north.

"We're actually looking down on Rupert Murdoch's three floors at the top of that tower there," said Eichner, founder of the real estate development firm The Continuum Company, with a rather professional smile.

He's pointing down to the top of One Madison, which, until about a month ago, owned the airspace above Madison Square Park.
No more.

All photos by Hollis Johnson unless noted.

In his late 60s, Eichner is a thin man in a pinstripe suit, round tortoise shell glasses, and a local's accent. His company is already responsible for several New York skyscrapers, two condominium towers in Miami, and a casino in Las Vegas.

He likes to share the big numbers surrounding his newest project, throwing around phrases like "five hundred thousand tons of rebar," or "two thousand yards of concrete," or "a one-million-pound tuned-mass damper" at an unsuspecting reporter.

He takes great joy in watching me copy them down.
Bruce Eichner, developer and founder of The Continuum Company.

The skyscraper — like hip-hop or the hot dog — is one of New York's great contributions to the world.

It may not have had its genesis in New York, but here — with the iconic Flatiron Building blocks away from us — the skyscraper was developed into what would become the defining feature of just about every modern city.

And since then, New York has demanded continuous change to the shape of its newest towers, thanks to ever-increasing zoning restrictions and property values. Today, developers must build higher and in smaller footprints than ever before.

"Each generation has spawned a taller and thinner series of buildings," Eichner said.

Since the millennium, tall, slender luxury residential buildings like One57 or the nearly 1,400-foot-tall 432 Park Ave. have joined the list of the tallest structures in Manhattan.

45 E. 22nd St., which squeezes into a roughly square footprint of about 75 feet wide and slowly expands into a 105-foot-wide octagon at the top, is an excellent example of these forces at work.

From some angles, the building can look like a baseball bat standing on its handle.

For Eichner, much of the challenge lies in navigating the complex zoning laws of New York.
He carried with him a binder full of diagrams of the project, including one of the air rights of nearby buildings he had to purchase before ground could be broken.

"My little map-o; my own Game of Thrones," he said

A rendering of 45 E. 22nd St. as it will look when completed.
The building expands as it rises out of a relatively small footprint of about 75 feet wide.

Ray Romani, head contractor for the project.

We are joined on the site tour by the head contractor, Ray Romani.
His grandfather was a stonemason in Italy, his father is one here. Now he builds skyscrapers.

I pry him for a bit of poetry about what it must be like to create his own piece of the New York skyline.

"It's always nice to work on these iconic buildings," is all he will offer, though it seems to pain him a little.

At the peak of construction last month, 237 workers were on site. Now that the building's skeleton is completed, that number will slowly drop until work is done in 2017.

Romani doesn't say much as we walk around at his building, but he does greet every single worker we pass — the elevator operators and the men hanging glass panels — by name.

The great engineering and construction challenges of this project (like the 2,000 yards of concrete in the foundation, which had to be poured continuously from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. on a Saturday while the block below was closed off) are no different from any of those challenges in a lifetime of projects.

There are bound to be many, all needing a variety of superlatives.

While we chat, men are busy disassembling the "cocoon," a steel structure covered in blue tarpaulin.
Until now, it has followed the building's top edge as it rose at a rate of about two floors per week, protecting construction workers above and pedestrians below.

Now that the building is topped out, sections of the $1 million apparatus are being lowered down, piece by piece — likely to be used for another project elsewhere.

Soon the building will receive the last of its curtain wall of glass, and installation of utilities, furnishings, and amenities will follow.

Another thing we notice about the site: it's clean.

Concrete floors are well swept, and there is little construction debris to be found anywhere — just pallets of building materials waiting to be employed.

There are at most a handful of workers on each floor we visit. Men working near the edge are wearing harnesses and safety lines, while orange netting and cable fences cover each open face.
About two-thirds of the way up, workers are still installing the glass walls. Interiors cannot be furnished until the building is fully enclosed.
Just to the north, the Empire State Building, completed in 1931, required 16 months and 3,400 workers. At least five lives were lost during construction.

Eighty-five years later, Romani and the just over 200 men on site are very, very good at constructing complex buildings with a surgical precision.

Removing the last components of the 'cocoon' at the penthouse.
While New York's towers were once monuments to the rise of the white-collar workforce, buildings like 45 E. 22nd St. appeal to a much more elite demographic...

... which is the reason for some of the project's biggest numbers: The penthouse will sell for around $44 million, while a single-bedroom apartment much closer to terra firma will go for $2.5 million.
The top of the Metropolitan Life Tower.

It's all about two things, Eichner said: "neighborhood and the view."

And his building will certainly have both of those.

A rendering of a completed apartment.
And amenities — residents will enjoy a gym, golf simulator, half basketball court, a library, courtyard, and an automated vending-machine-style parking garage.

Half of the 54th floor will be an entertaining space that can be reserved by residents, Eichner said, so that owners of apartments situated lower down the building can enjoy the penthouse experience with their guests.

"This is the most complex, complicated, and luxurious building I have ever worked on," Romani said.