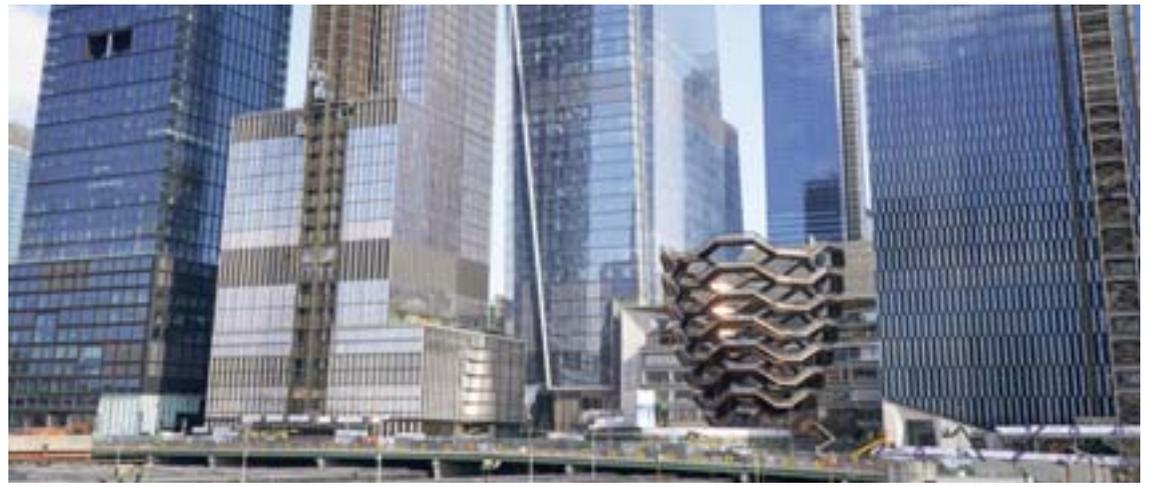




View of the shops & restaurants at Hudson Yards in New York City. — AFP photos



The Hudson Yards development, including 'The Vessel,' stands on the West Side of Midtown Manhattan.

New York's controversial Hudson Yards complex set to open

With an arts center, posh stores, uber expensive apartments and lots of controversy, the largest privately funded real estate development in US history opens Friday in Manhattan. It's in a place called Hudson Yards, and it took seven years and a cool \$16 billion to build. The project was erected on a giant slab of concrete covering a rail depot and makes New York a new center of urban planning innovation in a city with a red hot real estate market. In this new neighborhood, some apartments will fetch as much as \$30 million. The area between 10th and 12th avenues and 30th and 40th streets was long a no-man's land. Now it is ready to welcome New Yorkers and tourists in a new tribute to the US financial capital's legendary skyscrapers.

The six towers in this development, conceived by prestigious architects in the 2000s when Michael Bloomberg was mayor, did not set a record for height. But they are brimming with technological innovation. The complex has its own waste treatment, a blackout-proof electrical generating system and automatic underground doors to protect sensitive equipment from rising waters as a result of climate change.

A new New York icon?

The project's goal is not just to use idle space in a city that is fabulously dense and crowded. Rather, the idea is for the neighborhood to be fully integrated into the Big Apple, said Douglas Woodward, a professor of architecture at Columbia University

who took part in the design master plan. Aside from the residential towers and offices—which already host corporate offices of companies like L'Oreal USA and software company SAP—the complex has about 100 high-end stores like Dior and Fendi, and 25 restaurants from big-name chefs like Jose Andres and Thomas Keller. It also has an artistic center named The Shed that will open in April, and an outdoors area with trees to create a campus atmosphere, Woodward said.

Unlike London's Canary Wharf neighborhood, which is far from the city center, or La Defense, located west of Paris, Hudson Yards is just a few minutes from Times Square thanks to a subway station that opened in 2015. The neighborhood can also be reached by foot via the High Line, a raised walkway built on a former rail line that in just a few years has become a major city attraction.

Stephen Ross, the real estate developer behind the project, wants Hudson Yards—said to be the city's most ambitious since Rockefeller Center was built in the 1930s—to become “the biggest tourism attraction and icon in New York.”

Despite the inherent risk of such a massive investment, and the fact that many of the apartments are still available for rent—with a single room apartment going for \$5,000 a month—the 78-year-old real estate magnate is brimming with confidence and said he will soon move to a Hudson Yards penthouse. “What we are doing here is so unique” that residents “will want to be here,” Ross said during a recent visit to the work site.



Workers walk on 'The Vessel' in the Hudson Yards development on the West Side of Midtown Manhattan.

“People want to live in a place where everything is, that's what people live in a city for. “It's a live-work-play environment, and you are in the city! This does not exist anymore,” he said.

Chorus of critics

Not everyone is as enthusiastic. “I can't help feeling like an alien here, as though I've crossed from real New York with all its jangling mess into a movie studio's backlot version,” New York magazine architecture critic Justin Davidson wrote in February. “Everything is too clean, too flat, too art-directed.” Davidson slammed Hudson Yards as “para-Manhattan,” a site that has “no history, no holdover greasy spoons, no pockets of blight or resident eccentrics.” At a time of growing outrage over tax breaks given to big companies such as Amazon, some are angered by the subsidies and tax breaks granted to the project, estimated at around \$6 billion. — AFP

Fast cars, polo and parties: Thai 'High Society' flourishes in unequal kingdom



It's polo season in Thailand and teams of jodhpur-clad Argentines and monied Asians gallop onto the flawless field, as spectators spill from a pavilion-glasses of drinks in hand—for the final chukka. The “Sport of Kings” is undergoing an unlikely renewal in Thailand, one of the world's most unequal countries, which goes to the polls on March 24 with the widening wealth gap in sharp focus. Thailand boasts 50 billionaires, according to the latest rich list published by China-based researchers at the Hurun Report, the ninth-most in the world and more than France, Japan and Singapore.

Some of that cash paid for the play at a recent charity event at the Thai Polo & Equestrian Club, an unexpected oasis of immaculate lawns, wood-paneled changing rooms and stables a stone's throw from the raucous “Sin City” of Pattaya. “Is polo elitist? Yes, you cannot deny it is a very elite sport,” says

Nunthinee Tanner, the club's convivial co-founder and doyenne of the Thai equestrian scene. “A small group play across the world because it's very expensive and takes a lot of practice.”

As she speaks, Thai “HiSo” (High Society) women in striking millinery and high heels pick their way over the soft turf. Laughter peals from the Veuve Clicquot tent where men in seer-suckers and pink trousers have encamped for the day. “It's a sport of CEOs and royalty,” Nunthinee explains. On cue, billionaire Harald Link—a German-born naturalised Thai businessman and philanthropist who co-owns the club—leads the home team onto the field, mallet in hand. Other team patrons include Brian Xu, the Shanghai-based head of the world's biggest pencil-making firms, while Sultan Abdullah was a last-minute no-show after his sudden elevation to the Malaysian throne. — AFP