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REAL ESTATE / HIGH-RISES

# Houston's Land of Personal Palaces — The Mondrian Breaks From the Condo Crowd With Unique Look, Private Perks

Inside the Jamea Brothers' Museum District Showcase Building

BY CHRIS BALDWIN // 09.26.19

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*The Mondrian is high end in every respect. (Photo by Divya Pande)*

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Condo hunters tend to show up and ask for the list of possible upgrades. These are buyers with sophisticated tastes and means. They want the best of the best.

Sean Jamea usually smiles when they request the list at Oxberry's new Mondrian tower. Then, he hands them one of the smallest sheets they've ever seen.

"The list of upgrades we can do is very small because most upgrades we've chosen to do as standards," Jamea says.

The Mondrian at the Museums is Sean Jamea and his older brother PJ Jamea's showcase project. It is the building they've been waiting to do since they gave up promising careers (PJ is a trained architect, Sean is a lawyer) to form Oxberry in 2005 and develop their own projects.

In their estimation, The Mondrian had to be beyond special. Anything else would be a failure.

"Me and my brother wanted to build something we would live in ourselves," Sean Jamea says.

The result is an eight story mid-rise with a high-rise feel in Houston's Museum District. Right down the street from Asia Society Texas Center's famed Yoshio Taniguchi-designed building, The Mondrian takes its cues from the lofty tone of its setting.

"Being catty-corner from such a great architect, we knew we couldn't just do some ordinary building," P.J. Jamea tells *PaperCity*.

That had the Jamea brothers seeking out an architecture firm willing to take risks — and ruling out many. They finally settled on the Washington D.C. office of Perkins + Will — and tapped Houston's MaRS to do the interiors.

“We had to go to D.C., had to go to MaRS,” P.J. says. “By choosing certain paths you know you’re going to pay for it, but the results show.”

The result is a unique tower where certain sections almost appear to be floating thanks to the interlocking design of the units, all of which have at least one double height section in them. Think of it like a game of Tetris come to life. With only 20 condos spread over eight floors, the Jamea brothers knew they had the space to play.

The Mondrian is not designed to cram as many units as possible into the land. The idea of the tower is to create individual showcase retreats — with prices starting at \$1.55 million and racing up to \$3 million-plus for the penthouses. Each two or three bedroom condo is supposed to be its own mini palace.

With that in mind, all the Mondrian’s condos boast large balcony patios with fireplaces. It’s about bringing the amenities inside the units themselves, making each home in the sky a world of its own. This is not the type of building where you’ll run into your neighbors much at all — if you don’t want to. The Mondrian isn’t built for forced awkward chit-chat.

 The Mondrian at the Museums; photo credit Divya Pande

The Mondrian had to be striking to fit in with its Asia Society neighbors in the Museum District. (Photo by Divya Pande)

The kitchens are oversized, the closets are plentiful and the hallways are wide. The building is prewired for almost everything and high-tech enough that residents will be able to send QR codes to people who need temporary access to their units (caterers, package delivery drivers, maids, babysitters, etc...) that will open the doors during a preset window. The Jameas even brought in an acoustical engineer to make sure that everything sounds just right — and private.

Sean Jamea jokes that The Mondrian “has all the perks of a \$100 million project.” Only, he’s only half kidding. The Mondrian cost \$20-million-plus to make, but it shoots to reach some of the showy standards of nine figure buildings in other major metropolises.

In this neighborhood that means showing a real love for art. The double height sections and museum-modeled drywall finish provide plenty of white wall space for discerning art collectors to display their treasures. Which is altogether fitting for a tower named after Dutch painter Piet Mondrian.

“Generally, people who come into this building have some artistic appreciation,” the sales guru tagging along with the Jamea brothers on a tour offers. (Luxury real estate specialist Douglas Elliman Texas is handling sales of The Mondrian’s units.)

## Mondrian’s Walk Into the Future

Sean Jamea has encountered prospective buyers who show up with the neighborhood’s walkability score printed out. Seeing that always gives him a little thrill. He remembers when the idea of Houstonians willingly moving into the city’s urban core to live in a sky-high condo was considered laughable.

Now, projects like Mondrian are built around the notion that being able to walk to restaurants and museums is the lifestyle of choice. MF Sushi happens to be a quick six minute stroll from The Mondrian. And 19 museums are within easy reach.

“We wanted to make it fit within a walkable neighborhood,” Sean says. “. . . It’s about being part of your community — the ability to come downstairs, walk the dog, talk to your neighbor.”



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This is a vision that took a while to rise up. The brothers looked for the right piece of land for about a year before acquiring the current Museum District site in 2015. Construction started in 2017 and now it’s ready — a different type of condo building making the scene.



By packing the amenities into the units themselves, the Jameas aimed to keep HOA fees down – and at 34 cents a square foot on the 2,900 to 4,800 square foot units, The Mondrian's fees are about half of some comparable buildings' charges.

One thing that The Mondrian does boast is a 24-hour concierge. Every palace needs someone at the door. And every palace should stand out from the crowd.

“Being unique serves as the model,” Sean Jamea says. “That’s what we’re going for.”

