

REAL ESTATE | STREETSCAPES/19 EAST 72D STREET

A 30's Building Where the Duplex Was King

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY SEPT. 29, 1996

DESIGNED by Rosario Candela and Mott Schmidt in the mid-1930's to have more duplexes than any other type of floor plan, the limestone building at 19 East 72d Street shows how the rich really are different -- or at least live that way. Now the building's co-op board is spending over \$1 million to renovate the roof and the limestone.

As the Roaring 20's lurched to an end, New York real estate experts reacted to the 1929 stock market crash with anticipation, not sorrow -- for years they had complained that the market had siphoned off investment dollars that should have gone into real estate. But by the early 1930's everyone was crowded into the same lifeboat, as foreclosures multiplied and new construction stopped.

In 1929 Rosario Candela, the leading architect of luxury apartment houses, had filed plans for 16 buildings at a cost of \$21,770,000. By 1935 he was happy to design the two-story Rialto Theater at the northwest corner of 42d Street and Broadway -- his first New York building in three years.

In 1936 John Thomas Smith was living in comfortable circumstances at 1115 Fifth Avenue, at 93d Street. After getting his Yale law degree in 1901, he went on to

become vice president and general counsel to the General Motors Corporation, and also pursued outside investments in gold, copper, real estate, oil and banking.

He spoke German, Spanish and French fluently, read Greek and Latin and divided his time between New York and his Southampton, L.I., estate. But, according to his grandchildren, he was concerned about the continuing Depression and its effect on New Yorkers of lesser means, and he wanted to provide jobs.

So in 1936 he bought the northwest corner of 72d Street and Madison Avenue and began work on New York's first luxury apartment house since the 1920's, paying \$2.25 million for the land and construction out of his own pocket.

For his architects Mr. Smith teamed up Rosario Candela and Mott Schmidt. One Smith grandchild, who spoke on condition of not being named, says that John Thomas Smith "brought in Mott Schmidt to ride herd on Candela, who was thought too extreme, too Art Deco-y." Schmidt had been active in town-house design in the 1920's and had retained the traditional approach, while Candela's 1930's works were flashy: His 42d Street theater has a facade of blue glass.

There was no blue glass for 19 East 72d Street, only 15 stories of limestone, sumptuously carved along discreet Art Moderne lines at the lower three floors. In 1936 an article in The New York Times told of 59 apartments in the new building, but this was revised to only 34 units -- 20 duplexes of from 7 to 13 rooms each, one duplex of 21 rooms and 13 simplexes of 11 rooms -- for which the monthly rentals ranged from \$330 to \$1,000. At the time, a large eight-room apartment on Park Avenue rented for less than \$200 a month. Today, brokers say, apartments in the building typically sell for between \$3 million and \$4 million.

In an interview in 1984, the late Gregory Smith, John Smith's son, said that his father had adamantly opposed allowing stores in the building along Madison Avenue, even though doing so would have generated the most revenue, but that steel was put in at the second-floor level to permit such a conversion in the future. Another relative says the senior Mr. Smith thought the presence of stores "would cheapen the building."

The basement had separate laundry rooms for each tenant and seven vaults for valuables. According to the Real Estate Record & Guide the elevators were operated by attendants, but had push buttons "in case of a labor strike." The apartments had simple finishes, fireplaces in the living rooms and master bedrooms, and aluminum windows, among the earliest in New York. But air-conditioning was not offered because, the Record & Guide noted, "it is expected most of the tenants will live in their country or shore places in hot weather." Only one of the new tenants moved from a private house; the others came from top apartment houses like River House (435 East 52d Street), 79 East 79th Street and 740, 770 and 775 Park Avenue; Charles E. Merrill, founder of Merrill Lynch, moved from 925 Park. John Smith and his family moved to the 21-room duplex on the 14th and 15th floors, which has since been broken up into two apartments.

IN terms of exterior and interior finish, plan and general character, 19 East 72d Street is sometimes considered the last top luxury building put up in New York, certainly in the line of the greatest buildings of the 1920's. Postwar buildings have a comparative cheapness of detail and plan that is impossible to disguise with sheets of marble or top-hatted doormen. Mr. Smith died in 1947, and the family converted the building to a co-op in 1949. Since that time 19 East 72d Street has generally avoided the limelight, except for its exclusion of former President Richard M. Nixon, who sought to buy an apartment there in 1979.

Now if passers-by notice anything at all, it is not the absence of stores -- even more unusual on Madison Avenue now than it was in 1937 -- but rather the carved marble panels surrounding the main doorway. Designed by Carl Paul Jennewein, they present a puzzling group of Classical figures with no clear theme -- putti around a sundial, exotic animals, classical figures with musical instruments. Perhaps Jennewein also did the frog and the snail in the doorway woodwork, and the sensuous marine and bird carvings in the elevators, among the finest such work in New York.

The co-op corporation is at work on a \$1 million-plus program designed to largely restore the exterior of the building; it includes roof replacement, masonry repairs and cleaning. Cary Koplín, the co-op's president, says that windows are being replaced, at shareholder discretion.

Work is also under way to almost invisibly convert two of the three doctor's offices on Madison Avenue into a private office for an art dealer who lives in the building. But it will be hard to spot any change: Mr. Koplin says that the board is still adamantly opposed to any commercial presence in the building.

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