

Streetscapes/Beekman Place; A Two-Block Street Down by the East Riverside

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

Published: November 30, 1997

Correction Appended

THE two-block-long Beekman Place is one of New York's smallest streets, and for the last two decades the residents have watched with concern as project after project was proposed that would substantially change its group of riverfront houses. Now construction activity at the double-width Merle-Smith house, at 25 Beekman Place, dominates the tiny street. But to Beekman Place residents it is only the latest chapter in a long campaign to keep this special enclave unchanged.

Beekman Place owes its name to the Beekman family, which built its mansion, Mount Pleasant, in 1764 overlooking the East River near what is now 50th Street. In the English occupation of Manhattan during the Revolution the house was occupied by Lord Howe. In the 1860's James W. Beekman made a new street parallel to First Avenue, Beekman Place, from 49th to 51st Streets, and sold off the surrounding blocks to developers.

From 1867 to 1869, both sides of Beekman Place were built up with typical brownstones. Of these only the curiously shallow ones at 32 and 34 still survive close to their original design, measuring only 25 feet deep and 33 feet wide.

The rowhouses were comfortable but not pretentious, but the developers recognized their unique position -- each riverfront house had an oriel window facing the water. Early directories show owners with occupations like jeweler, doctor and marble dealer. Julius Wile, then just beginning his career as a wine importer, moved to 33 Beekman Place in 1871.

As with most such 19th-century neighborhoods, it just didn't get any better. By the turn of the century, many of the aging brownstones had been turned into boarding houses, and a riverfront panorama from about 1910 shows laundry hanging out the back windows of the Beekman Place houses.

At the time the high, rocky bluff of Beekman Place was flanked by a coal yard on 49th and an ice plant on 51st. Industry had taken over the river's edge. But the area still had a discernible charm. Just after World War I, a reporter for The New York Sun described the rocky shore at the foot of Beekman Place as a clover-covered cliff where "mothers in the neighborhood take their knitting and embroidery every afternoon and bask in the

shade -- even Coney Island and Rockaway have nothing on the beach at Beekman Place."

The Beekman family still owned a strip of land between the rowhouses and the water, and in 1914 they began efforts to break a restriction guaranteeing that no building would ever block the view of the river from the Beekman Place houses. In 1920 the Beekmans' lawyer, Herbert L. Fordham, claimed that radical changes in the area should void the restriction. The residential enclave on Beekman Place was "the solitary reminder of a vanished dream" and "New York needs its waterfront for business," he told a judge.

But things were not so bad on Beekman Place that no one cared: 12 of the 13 riverfront owners retained three different law firms to fight the Beekmans' move. The homeowners succeeded; in 1922 the Beekmans sold the waterfront parcel, and the present one-story garage was built.

IN the same year Fordham made his argument, his position was weakened by the revival of enclaves like Sutton Place, at 57th Street. The first real evidence of such elite interest at Beekman Place was in 1919, when Ellen Shipman took over the house at 19 Beekman Place, at the northeast corner of 50th. Shipman graduated from Radcliffe and studied with the artist-architect Charles Platt, and was emerging as one of the foremost landscape architects in the United States.

In the early 1920's Shipman turned the old brownstone into a sophisticated Georgian style house, designed by Butler & Corse and featured in *House Beautiful*.

In 1925 Jackson Reynolds, head of First National Bank, hired Harrie Lindeberg to redesign 33 Beekman Place with that designer's typically sophisticated interiors. In the same year Joseph B. Thomas built the Venetian-style apartment house at 455 East 51st, on the East River, reconstructing 39 Beekman Place to protect the southern light for the building.

The next year, Van Santvoord Merle-Smith, a diplomat, war hero and banker, bought the two houses at 25 and 27 Beekman Place and gave them a new neo-Classical facade designed by Pleasants Pennington. This imposing house had a squash court behind the pediment at the fifth floor.

In 1929 the actress Katharine Cornell, described by Alexander Woolcott as "the first lady of the American stage," altered 23 Beekman Place in more modest style. Two years later she played her signature role, as Elizabeth Barrett in the play "The Barretts of Wimpole Street."

When the sumptuous apartment house at 1 Beekman Place went up in 1929 the cachet of the little street was broadcast wide. But in 1981 Fowler Merle-Smith, one of Van Santvoord Merle-Smith's sons, recalled that, in contrast, "Sutton Place always seemed to us very fancy, with a lot of doormen."

Rebuilding continued on well into the 1930's. In 1934 William S. Paley, head of CBS since 1928, built the seven-story house at 29 Beekman Place.

The East River Drive was opened in the 1940's, and the United Nations began to influence Beekman Place even before the complex was completed in the early 1950's. The songwriter Irving Berlin lived at 17 Beekman Place from 1948 to his death in 1989; the building is now owned by the government of Luxembourg. In 1949 the alternate representative to the U.N. from Venezuela, Dr. Lorenzo Mendoze-Fleury, rebuilt 39 Beekman Place.

IN 1978 the modernist architect Paul Rudolph extended the old Katharine Cornell house up to seven stories, and around the same time developers proposed the replacement of the old Shipman house with a 14-story apartment building. The Merle-Smiths -- the last original family of the 1920's Beekman Place revival -- sold their house in 1984, and a developer proposed a tallish building covering most of the block.

This news alarmed residents, who organized and successfully battled in the courts to downzone the neighborhood. "There were champagne parties in many of the buildings," recalled Buddy Radisch, president of the Beekman Place Association, founded in 1981 -- which did not take a position on downzoning.

Since the mid-80's the Merle-Smith house has remained neglected and vacant. A new owner, identified by building records as Enrico Minaldi, bought the building this summer for \$5 million, and filed plans to alter it into apartments. There was no telephone listing for Mr. Minaldi, and Paul Downs, a lawyer listed on some records, did not return calls requesting more information. Mr. Radisch said the plans called for eight apartments, with new windows in the squash court wall.

"We're very happy with the change," he said. The project will end years of concern about the house. The Beekman Place Association has been particularly active recently, with new dark-red litter baskets and 12 new Bishop's Crook lampposts to match the original one remaining at the southeast corner of 51st and Beekman. That one still has a 1973 plaque from the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture.

Mr. Radisch said that, in general, the foreign consulates and missions were the only ones that could afford to properly keep up the old private houses. Now South Korea, Tunisia and Kuwait own four of the nine houses on the river side of Beekman Place from 50th to 51st Street.

Mr. Radisch said that when he was a child, he would visit the old Paley house during the time it was occupied by the showman Billy Rose. After that, he said, "I always wanted to live on Beekman Place." He moved there in 1970.

Correction: December 14, 1997, Sunday The Streetscapes column on Nov. 30, about Beekman Place, referred incorrectly to a house visited by Buddy Radische, now the president of the Beekman Place Association, when he was a boy. No. 29, the former William S. Paley house, was never owned by the showman Billy Rose; he lived at No. 33.

Correction: December 21, 1997, Sunday The Streetscapes column on Nov. 30, about Beekman Place, referred incorrectly to a house visited by the current president of the Beekman Place Association, when he was a boy, and a correction last Sunday misspelled his surname. No. 29, the former William S. Paley house, was never owned by the showman Billy Rose; he lived at No. 33. The association's president is Buddy Radisch, not Radische.