

# Picturesque Block Unlike the Usual Rowhouse Street

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY NOV. 24, 1996

DROP by the restoration work on the town house at 180 East 75th Street, between Lexington and Third Avenues. The orange stucco facade is charming, but just as picturesque is the block itself, a mixed bag of residences that do not resemble the typical East Side rowhouse block. The block seems pleasantly irregular, but its current look was fashioned by a single plan in the early 1920's.

The earliest construction on 75th Street between Lexington and Third was a row of brownstones at 168-176 East 75th, built in 1880.

Their occupants probably sought to emulate the high-stoop respectability of other rowhouse blocks closer to Fifth Avenue, and so must have been disappointed when other developers put up modest apartment houses, one family to a floor, on the rest of the block by the mid-1880's. These walkups were not tenements: The term "flats" accurately captures their modest respectability.

A gilt edge brushed up against the block in 1904, when the little rowhouses at Nos. 168-176 were rebuilt into a charming complex of private garages by the architect Edmund Stout. These soon served the real mansion owners who lived farther west, like George F. Baker, the president of First National Bank, who owned

168, and Mortimer Schiff, a partner at the investment banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb, who owned 174.

Although this process replaced older buildings with new ones, the arrival of garages seemed a sure sign that the well-to-do would never actually live on the block -- people of means had been avoiding "stable streets" for over half a century. Under normal circumstances the flats on 75th Street would probably have continued a slow decay, like the corresponding blocks on 76th and 77th Streets, which were taken over by big garages and modern apartments.

But opinions of the gentry about the home and the urban environment were changing in the 1910's, as people who had grown up on Fifth or Madison Avenues began to accept new locales like the "Block Beautiful" on East 19th Street off Irving Place and Turtle Bay Gardens, from 48th to 49th Streets between Third and Second Avenues.

In 1920 the modern character of the block was fixed, as a concern that called itself the Seventy-Fifth Street Syndicate began a buying binge of 14 of the aging flats on both sides of the street with the goal of "converting the block into a fine residential area," according to sale documents.

Arthur G. Quinn, a lawyer, was listed as the president, although he is not otherwise known for real estate operations. Quinn may have been guided by Douglas L. Elliman, whose real estate firm handled all the sales to the syndicate. Or perhaps some unidentified investor devised the project.

The first venture of the syndicate was at 157 East 75th Street: In 1920 the architect Mott Schmidt, who was also working on a makeover of fashionable Sutton Place, combined the apartment houses at 157 and 159 as a co-op, shaving off all the brownstone and leaving plain tinted stucco in its place. This was the new style for altered buildings -- really an antistyle -- which Schmidt was also using in houses for Elsie de Wolfe and others on Sutton Place.

The early tenants included the actor George Arliss, but also the socially prominent -- over half of the tenants were listed in the Social Register, a percentage comparable to that at Park Avenue co-ops of the period.

At the same time the Seventy-Fifth Street Syndicate continued to sell properties to members of the gentry, who found it easy to move to a block governed by a coherent scheme. Robert LeRoy, a lawyer and partner at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, bought No. 182 and had the architects Polhemus McKenzie & Coffin redo the front; Lawrence Peck redesigned the front of 184 for Dr. Ejnar Hansen; the lawyer and public figure Lloyd Garrison headed a small co-op that bought 186 East 75th Street.

In 1921, the architect Harry Clawson bought 180 East 75th Street and gave it a new stucco facade with English Renaissance character. One project, a mews of Mediterranean-style houses at 163-173 East 75th Street, was never realized. But by 1926 -- when Clawson redid 161 East 75th Street to add it to the 157 co-op venture -- the block was largely complete, redone with that heterogeneous elegance common to the blocks off Lexington. Other developers were attracted to the activity, and built the more traditional apartment houses at 188 and 192 East 75th Street.

Bronson Binger, an architect with Feld, Kaminetzky & Cohen, was born just before his family bought the LeRoy house in 1931. He remembers that No. 182 was "a wonderful private house" with a great central hall and generous scale deriving from its origins as a flat. He also recalls 75th as an unusual block because of its mixed quality: "There were tenements down near Third Avenue, and a lot of the people who worked for us lived in the tenements, and we played with their kids. Every manhole cover on the block was a marble pitch." His father, Walter Binger, was an engineer in charge of designing the East River Drive.

LATER the architect Francis D. Rogers had the house at No. 182, the painter Lily Cushing Emmet took an apartment at 186, and the architect-decorator Page Cross lived in the co-op at 157.

The tenements on Third Avenue were demolished by the 1960's, and the restaurant Mortimer's has been a swank fixture at Lexington and 75th since 1976. The Bingers later moved to 180 East 75th Street, and the family sold the house only last July.

Now new owners, Stephan and Lisa Hess, are adding a top floor and restoring the front even though it is not a landmark. Mr. Hess, an investment banker, says he

and his wife like the old-fashioned, mixed character of the block, want to preserve rather than remodel the house and have even kept the Bingers' old telephone number, with the vintage exchange "BUtterfield 8."

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