

The New York Times |

REAL ESTATE

Streetscapes/70th and 71st Street Between Madison and Park Aves.; How 7 Rear Yards Became a Secret Garden

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY MAY 21, 2000

Correction Appended

BUILT as a group in 1929, seven contiguous houses facing 70th or 71st Street between Madison and Park Avenues were put up by the developer Alfred Rheinstein with restrictions to preserve their rear gardens as a unit. For him, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. As the first owners left, fences went up, but the great, green interior of the block still remains an enclave of peace and beauty.

When Presbyterian Hospital decided to move to 168th Street and Broadway and leave its Upper East Side complex in the mid-1920's, the whole block from Madison to Park, between 70th and 71st Streets, came on the market at once. In 1927, the developer Louis Abrons told The New York Times that a group he headed would build "the finest apartment house in the world" on the 200-by-400-foot property.

But the block was soon divided into four development parcels, with apartment buildings at 720 Park Avenue, 730 Park Avenue and 33 East 70th Street (which stretches along Madison Avenue to 71st Street) and, for the midblock area, private houses protecting the apartments' light.

The Abrons group transferred the midblock parcel to Rheinstein, who had built commercial buildings, among them 21 West Street. Rheinstein and his family took for themselves the site at 42 East 71st Street, and in 1928 sold the other lots, persuading five of the other six buyers to use his architect, Aymar Embury.

On East 70th Street, No. 41 was built by Walter and Carola Rothschild; he was the chairman of Abraham & Straus and Federated Stores. The house at No. 43 was built by Walter and Florence Hope; he was a lawyer and Republican Party leader. No. 45 was built by Arthur and Adele Lehman; he was a partner at the Lehman Brothers banking firm and son of one of its founders.

On 71st Street, No. 40 was built by Charles and Alice McVeigh; he was a banker and lawyer. The house at No. 44 was built by Richard and Katherine Hoyt; he was a banker, pilot and yachtsman. The house at No. 46 was built by Richard and Dorothy Bernhard; he was a banker, and she was the daughter of Arthur and Adele Lehman, directly across their rear yard.

Completed in 1929, the houses are complementary, even the Hope house, designed by Mott Schmidt.

Some of the new householders were relations, like the Bernhards and the Lehmans; some were friends, like the Rheinsteins and the Rothschilds. A few were well-known art collectors, like the Lehmans, who had a special tapestry room in their house. They generally stayed out of the newspapers, although in 1925 Richard Hoyt set the speed record to Albany in his boat Teaser; he also backed Charles Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight.

They all shared a giant backyard, kept open and free from rear extensions by deed restriction. Embury's wife, the landscape architect Ruth Dean, designed at least some of the gardens. Developments like Sutton Place and Jones Wood Gardens, on 65th and 66th Streets between Lexington and Third Avenues, had incorporated communal gardens, but Rheinstein's houses kept their individual backyards.

ALTHOUGH the deed restriction specifically permitted fences up to seven-and-a-half feet high, old photographs and surviving family members indicate that the

concept of neighborliness was such that only low wire fencing or hedges divided the yards.

Charles McVeigh Jr. says that "we didn't talk over the fence." But Walter Rothschild Jr. recalls throwing a football back and forth with the McVeighs, and said that "there was a good deal of conversation about dogs who barked too early in the morning." Mr. Rothschild also remembers one of the Hoyt daughters sneaking cigarettes. "We could see her hanging out the window," he said. The Bernhard and Lehman houses were unusual in that a path connected their two yards.

Rheinstein's concept gave the place a civility rare in New York. Instead of the usual warren of little slots surrounded by high board fences, the backyards formed a sort of common forest. Instead of utilitarian rear facades of absolutely plain brick, each house had a fully developed garden facade. Instead of the sense of the back of the house being a throwaway space, the rear area, closed off from the city, formed a kind of preserve.

Of the original residents, Robert Bernhard, who lived in the house after his mother died, says that his family was the last to sell, in 1983. Others moved in, among them the lyricist and playwright Alan Jay Lerner, who bought the Rheinstein house in 1960, four years after the premiere of his musical "My Fair Lady" and a few months before "Camelot" opened on Broadway. Lerner sold the house five years later.

Now private families own only three of the houses, and institutions or governments hold four: 41 East 70th is owned by the Twentieth Century Fund; 43 East 70th is the residence of Qatar's permanent representative to the United Nations; and 40 and 44 East 71st are owned by the governments of Tunisia and South Korea, respectively. But these institutions have not built out in their rear yards.

Although every garden now has a high fence of iron or wooden bars, the fences are partly transparent, and compared to the interiors of other blocks this one is still blissfully open. The garden can be surreptitiously glimpsed from the service entrances of the flanking apartment buildings. The area is in in the Upper East Side Historic District.

Design 2000, an Italian firm, is finishing a renovation of 43 East 70th Street for Qatar, and the firm is restoring the rear yard. Leopoldo Rosati, the company's New York representative, says it even moved some noisy ventilating equipment to the roof to recapture more of the garden's value.

Robert Rheinstein, the senior estimator at a construction company, recalls that his father was happy with the results of his unusual seven-house development. "He was extremely proud of the common garden idea," Mr. Rheinstein said. "The architectural quality of the rear facades, their uniform line, with no extensions allowed -- he felt it materially added to the value of the properties. He cherished it."

Correction: *May 28, 2000, Sunday A picture caption last Sunday with an article about the gardens behind two rows of Manhattan houses misstated one street. The houses at Nos. 40, 42, 44 and 46 are on East 71st Street, not 70th.*

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