

REAL ESTATE | STREETSAPES/79TH STREET BETWEEN PARK AND LEXINGTON AVENUES

# Discreet Charm That's Nestled in an Urban Canyon

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY SEPT. 7, 1997

THE wide crosstown streets abreast of Central Park have mostly been gobbled up by apartment development, so the survival of eight houses in a row on the north side of 79th Street from Park to Lexington Avenue is a peculiarity.

Renovation work is under way or recently completed on half of these, so an investigation of this unusual canyon walled in by high-rises is a timely undertaking.

The railroad up Park Avenue was still an open cut in 1870, when three developers put up 19 three-story brownstones on the north side of 79th Street from Park to Lexington Avenue, which had just been cut through. Set on the sunny side of a wide street, they seemed ambitious for a territory where most blocks were still just open land. More brownstones went up on the south side of the block in the 1880's. But both sides remained unchanged for a quarter of a century, when a new generation of owners arrived.

The first of these were two sisters: Eufrasia Leland and Emma Wesson, along with a relative, Eufrasia Wesson Tucker. In 1907 the sisters had the architects Foster, Gade & Graham design the double-width Georgian-style house at 123 East 79th Street. The 1915 state census taker recorded both women in the big house with no other family or servants.

At the same time, Eufrasia Tucker had Robins & Oakman, an architectural firm, design a house next door at 121 East 79th Street. Although only a single lot wide, the Tucker house went all the way to the back of the lot, with a glazed studio in the rear looking east over the wide Leland-Wesson garden.

In 1911, Montgomery Schuyler, writing in *The Architectural Record*, praised the pair. "See how a big house and a little house may dwell together in amity," he wrote.

In 1909, two other sisters, Alice McCoon and Edith Martin, built the houses at 109 and 111 East 79th Street, striking limestone twins in the French Renaissance style, also designed by Foster, Gade & Graham. Alice McCoon was living at 109 with her two daughters in 1926 when her butler, Walter Carney, 33, stole \$900 in jewelry. She apparently fell for his standard ruse: checking into a top hotel, impersonating an impeccable reference over the telephone and then showing up for an interview with a Cockney accent he picked up in London during World War I.

In 1920, the family of E. Farrar Bateson hired Mott Schmidt to design what became the biggest house on the block, at 129-131 East 79th. Mr. Schmidt used his typically chaste Georgian design for the five-story house. A Bateson daughter, who spoke only on condition that her name not appear in a newspaper, recalls that they were served by two upstairs maids, two parlor maids, a cook, a kitchen maid, a laundress and her father's orderly from the war. She says that 79th was "a wonderful street" where the corner drugstore, the taxi driver who waited for fares at Lexington, and even Tony, the doorman at the apartment house on the corner, all seemed like part of the family. "Tony taught me how to ride a bicycle on that sidewalk," she said.

I N 1926, Vincent Astor bought the adjacent brownstone, at 127, and had Mott Schmidt replace it with an austere garage for his own use. But the Batesons were still happy; Mr. Schmidt designed the garage to complement their house, and Mr. Bateson "was so pleased because everyone thought it was ours," his daughter said.

The garage connected to Vincent Astor's own grand double-width house on the south side of 80th Street, one of four built by Astor, George Whitney, Clarence Dillon and Lewis Spencer Morris. These millionaires chose that location without apparent coordination, in part because the low houses on 79th and the rising ground on 80th provided excellent south light for their gardens. But by the 1920's, they were

competing with apartment developers, who liked the wide streets like 79th because they offered the same generous zoning as lots on the avenues.

From 1926 to 1930, Astor, Whitney and Morris bought 113, 121, 127 and 135 East 79th Street, effectively blocking apartment development on the entire north side, except for the corners. In 1927, when the co-op at the northwest corner of 79th and Lexington went up, an advertisement in *Country Life in America* boasted, "Every side is sun-bathed."

In the 1930's, Elbridge Gerry Chadwick, Vincent Astor's property manager, occupied the Leland-Wesson house at 123, securing that property also.

But in the 1940's, the old way of living began to fall apart. The Bateson daughter says that her parents moved to 740 Park Avenue at the end of World War II to cut down on servants. The owners of the 80th Street houses began to sell off their protected parcels in 1942; Vincent Astor's widow, Brooke, sold the last of these, their garage, in 1964.

By then, apartment development had been permanently retarded on 79th Street and the old private houses began to find a new market. Ronald Tree, a former Member of the British Parliament, and his American wife, the campaigner for New York City causes and United Nations Representative Marietta Tree, took over the old Leland-Wesson double house. Friends called it Little Ditchley because it was filled with art and furnishings from Ditchley, Mr. Tree's English estate in Oxfordshire.

MRS. ASTOR sold the garage to make way for the 1969 Hunter College School of Social Work, a stark, modern structure that replaced the houses at 127 through 135 East 79th and was designed by Wank Adams Slavin Associates. Although built to only seven stories, it was designed to carry a much larger tower.

In 1987, the building was extended an additional three stories despite protests from many neighbors; the decorator Mario Buatta, living in an apartment in the old George Whitney house on 80th Street, opposed the enlargement and told *The New York Times* that the social workers would "get a bit too fancy for their britches."

Now four house renovation projects are under way or just finished in the 79th Street row. The most notable is the complete renovation of the old Leland-Wesson house for the Brazilian Mission to the United Nations. It is also designed by Wank Adams Slavin Associates, who had worked on a venting problem for the Brazilian Government when they extended the Hunter College building.

Next door, 121 East 79th Street, is being reconverted to a single-family residence from apartments by an investor who would speak only on condition that he not be named. He said he bought the house in part because of price; on 80th, "it would go for 20 percent more," he said, because most people prefer the traditional narrow brownstone streets.

But other homeowners like 79th Street, especially after they have installed double-paned windows. George S. Kaufman, who developed the Kaufman-Astoria Studios in Queens, bought 117 East 79th Street in 1968. "Here there is more light and more security," he says. "And in my back yard I have the largest magnolia in New York, at least 40 feet tall."

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