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Streetscapes: 655 Park Avenue; Letting the Sunlight In

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

CONTRACTORS doing facadework are temporarily disassembling one of the parapet walls at 655 Park Avenue, on the east side of Park between 67th and 68th Streets. It's just a few feet off the top, but it gives west side residents a little bit more morning light.

And that's just the way they like it, since 655 was built in 1924 after West Side owners bought the site and restricted buildings to half the normally permitted height.

In the late 19th century, Park Avenue had medium-grade apartment houses and brownstones and a dozen or so major institutions, like the Seventh Regiment Armory from 66th to 67th Streets, Normal (now Hunter) College between 68th and 69th Streets and the German (now Lenox Hill) Hospital between 76th and 77th Streets. Hahneman Hospital, a homeopathic institution, got the east blockfront between 67th and 68th Streets from the city for a hospital it opened in 1878.

After the turn of the century, luxury development swept up Park, especially on the elevated ground between 67th and 72d Streets. In 1919, Harold I. Pratt, son of a founder of Standard Oil, began a limestone town house at the southwest corner of 68th Street. His neighbors up to 69th Street, including the families of Percy Pyne, William Sloane and Arthur Curtiss James, occupied a string of mansions.

The entire row benefited from light and air let in by the low-rise institutional buildings across the avenue from 66th to 69th -- the armory, the hospital and the college.

But apartment development began to succeed mansion construction, especially in large sites available in one purchase. In 1919 Hahneman planned a new hospital on Fifth Avenue between 105th and 106th Streets. It offered its Park Avenue property for sale. The Pratts, Pynes, Sloanes and Jameses bought the blockfront for \$1.25 million, intending to keep out tall apartment development.

At first they planned a U-shaped, seven-story building with 12 triplex apartments -- more like individual houses -- designed by the architects of Pratt's house, Delano & Aldrich. But there was no demand for such hybrid dwellings and in 1923 the families resold the blockfront. They placed unusual permanent restrictions on the land, permitting either private houses built to a maximum height of 80 feet (measured at 68th Street) or "a first-class, high-grade apartment house" limited to 75 feet -- half the height permitted by the zoning then in effect.

The restrictions permitted somewhat greater heights farther back from the Park Avenue building line and also required that the facade be executed in brick with limestone and or marble trim. One story in circulation is that the restriction was meant to protect the sunlight in the Pratts' breakfast room, but their

sole surviving in-law, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said, "My mother-in-law wanted to allow sun for her bedroom on the third floor."

That is indeed what Harriet Pratt got, because Mott Schmidt and James E. R. Carpenter, the architects for 655 Park Avenue, produced a building that rose only seven stories at the 68th Street corner. With its large, street-opening garden court, refined Georgian detailing and low height, 655 Park is an anomaly among luxury apartments, which are almost uniformly built to their highest allowable height.

WITH the armory to the south and the college to the north, 655 Park forms the centerpiece of a group that is almost Bostonian in its relatively even balance with the street. In Manhattan south of 110th Street even the broadest boulevards are typically overpowered by tall buildings.

Property restrictions were the only method available to 19th-century owners who sought to protect their land from factories, tenements or other construction deemed undesirable. House owners, especially the Vanderbilts, fought vigorously but in vain in the early 1900's to keep hotels and offices off Fifth Avenue near St. Patrick's Cathedral, often buying property and restricting it, then hoping to find another millionaire who wanted to build a mansion on what was becoming a very busy street. But the use of such restrictions waned after the 1916 zoning law went into effect.

No. 655 was built as a "100 percent cooperative," a shift from the previous "group ownership" schemes where the shareholders occupied about half the building and rented out the other half for income. None of its 51 apartments of 7 to 14 roomshad access to the wide, green, T-shaped courtyard, which had only a gate from Park Avenue. This is a garden for looking at, not sitting in.

Mark Daniels, managing agent for the building, says that the work now under way includes probes to investigate facade conditions and that all the parapets may ultimately come down, depending on what is found. So it may get even a little bit sunnier on the other side of the street before work is done next year.

Photo: Building at 655 Park Avenue in 1924. Restrictions imposed by owners of houses across the street only allowed 75-foot height on Park Avenue side. (The New-York Historical Society)