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REAL ESTATE

Streetscapes / East 80th Street Between Park and Lexington Avenues; 4 Mansions That Made Up a Multimillionaires' Row

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY OCT. 18, 1998

Correction Appended

SINCE August, the Junior League's clubhouse at 130 East 80th Street has gleamed -- a gentle cleaning has brought out all the sophistication of its Regency-style facade.

Built as Vincent Astor's town house in 1927, the soft, buff-colored building is part of a row of four curiously similar mansions of unusual size, scale and harmony for such a side street. How did this million-dollar row arrive on a middling block from Park to Lexington Avenues?

The entire south side of 80th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues was built up with modest three-story brownstones in 1871. They were occupied by people of modestly comfortable means, such as the educator Thomas Hunter, who lived at 140 East 80th and who at that time was the president of the teaching college at 68th and Park (then Fourth) Avenue that later took his name.

But with the railroad blowing smoke and cinders in an open cut up Fourth Avenue, this section had only modest prospects. After the turn of the century --

when millionaires continued to filter up Fifth and Madison Avenues and the railroad was electrified -- a few richer families put new town-house fronts on the small brownstones on 80th Street.

In 1921 Lewis Spencer Morris, a lawyer and an eighth-generation descendant of Lewis Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, bought the brownstones at 116 and 118 and put up a double-width town house for himself and his wife, Emily Coster Morris. Designed by Cross & Cross and completed in 1923, this suave neo-Federal design successfully evoked the age and social position of the Morris family, and the 36-foot width of the house announced that a new level of householder had settled on the street.

Two years later Vincent Astor bought the houses at 128 and 130 East 80th. At age 20, Astor had inherited the \$87 million estate of his father, Col. John Jacob Astor, after his father died on the Titanic in 1912.

Vincent Astor hired Mott Schmidt to design a house for a man who could have anything, and the architect developed what remains one of the most stately residences in New York, in a soft yellow limestone reminiscent of London town houses.

Astor and Morris both began buying up properties on the 79th Street block to the south, to preserve the light to their south gardens. Their actions appear to have attracted two more multimillionaires in 1929: George Whitney, who bought the brownstones at 120 and 122, and Clarence Dillon, who bought 124 and 126.

Whitney hired Morris's architects, Cross & Cross, and they designed a lighter, more cosmopolitan Federal-style house. Dillon retained Astor's architect, Mott Schmidt, and got a richer, more modeled neo-Georgian style design than Astor's house.

Both Dillon, head of Dillon, Read & Company, and George Whitney, partner and later head of J. P. Morgan & Company, had been spectacularly successful in banking. Dillon, an alumnus of Harvard, Class of 1907, must have had something to talk about over the back fence with Whitney, also a Harvard alumnus, Class of 1905.

Dillon also successfully outmaneuvered Whitney's company in 1925 for control of the Dodge automobile concern, and then arranged a merger with Chrysler, making Chrysler-Dodge one of the Big Three automakers. In 1957 Fortune magazine estimated Dillon's net worth at \$100 million to \$200 million.

THESE four houses, of identical width and similar design, form the type of streetscape that urban designers often dream of emulating -- but these quadruplets arrived entirely by accident. Surviving children of the original owners agree that their parents had no concerted plan, and there are no comprehensive property restrictions such as those that were essential to colonies like Sutton Place and Turtle Bay Gardens.

The Morrises were the first to sell, in 1942; Astor sold in 1947 to the New York Junior League, a combination women's social club and charity organization. That group is now the senior owner in the group of four: the Dillon house, at 124, is the residence of the Iraqi ambassador to the United States; the Whitney house, at 120, is now apartments, and the Morris house, at 116, has gone through several hands but is still a private residence.

Over the summer the contractor Preserv cleaned the Junior League building, and the soft, warm stone glows like candlelight; Carl Culbreth, the owner of Preserv, says it is Roche limestone, imported from France. The other three brick houses benefit from the change wrought on their stone neighbor.

Mario Buatta, the decorator, lives in an apartment in the old Whitney house and says that the security at the Iraqi Embassy is a nuisance. "You can't even get out of a taxi without someone telling you to move on," he said.

Sarah Bond, a real estate broker with the Corcoran Group who lives on the block, said that the Junior League caused a stir three years ago with a plan to build its clubhouse out to the rear lot line, a plan that would destroy its own garden and jeopardize those of its neighbors. Lynn Jackson Quinn, president of the New York Junior League, said the plan was "definitely on the back burner."

Mrs. Bond also said that No. 116, until recently the New York home of the financier Sir James Goldsmith, who died in 1997, is on the market for \$16 million.

Leslie J. Garfield, a broker who handles high-end town houses, said No. 116 still holds the record for the highest price paid for a single-family dwelling in Manhattan -- it sold for \$11 million 10 years ago.

Correction: *November 1, 1998, Sunday The Streetscapes column on Oct. 18, about four mansions on East 80th Street, misstated a broker's reference to a record sales price. The broker said that the house at No. 116, sold for \$11 million a decade ago, holds the record for the highest sales price of a house on the block, not in the city.*

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