

# WEST END AVENUE SURVEY

## A PROPOSAL FOR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION

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West End Avenue, extending from West 70<sup>th</sup> Street north to West 107<sup>th</sup> Street, is one of the premier residential boulevards of New York City. The avenue is lined with 218 buildings that create an extraordinarily cohesive streetscape that should be designated as a New York City historic district by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in its entirety. West End Avenue has experienced two major phases of development. The first phase, largely dating from 1885 to 1900, created a street of fine, upper-middle-class, single-family row houses with a few somewhat larger French flats and several impressive Protestant churches and other institutional buildings. In the second phase, dating from about 1910 to 1930, most of the earlier buildings were replaced with impressive apartment houses, most rising twelve to sixteen stories. The rapid transformation of a street of relatively recent high-class homes into one of equally grand apartment houses is unique in New York's development history. The result is an extraordinarily cohesive streetscape. With the exception of the institutional buildings, this is a streetscape created almost entirely by speculative developers and their architects working within the limitations of New York City's housing laws.

As of January 2009, the seventy-three blockfronts of residential West End Avenue were lined with seventy narrow single-family homes (many converted into apartments), two row houses that received entirely new facades when they were converted into apartments in the twentieth century, one apartment house on a row house scale (Pomander Walk), seventeen French flats, 112 large apartments buildings and six related apartment hotels, one former residential hospital, five houses of worship (several with adjoining rectories), and four schools. The row houses are primarily located in three clusters – between 76<sup>th</sup> and 79<sup>th</sup> Streets, between 90<sup>th</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> Streets,



and between 101<sup>st</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup> Streets. Along the remainder of the avenue, vistas consist largely of long views towards masonry apartment houses, erected with uniform rooflines, and all built out to their lot lines. Yet as one walks along West End Avenue it is never clear whether one is in or out of a historic district designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. Two historic districts – the West End Collegiate Historic District and the West End-Riverside Historic District – incorporate buildings along West End Avenue, including two of the major row house clusters and thirty-one apartment buildings or apartment hotels. If parts of West End Avenue meet the criteria for historic district designation then all of the avenue must certainly meet these criteria as well. This report provides a brief history of the development of West End Avenue, focusing on the second phases of development that created the extraordinary apartment house boulevard that forms a spine for the twenty-first-century Upper West Side, and the report argues for the designation of a single West End Avenue Historic District.

#### West End Avenue and the Early Development of the Upper West Side

The development of West End Avenue as a prestigious residential boulevard dates to the initial wave of residential development on the Upper West Side that followed the inauguration of service on the Ninth Avenue (now Columbus Avenue) elevated rail line in 1879. The opening of the elevated permitted affluent people to live on the Upper West Side and, for the first time, easily commute to jobs, shopping, and entertainment venues located farther south on Manhattan Island. With the inception of commuter rail service, speculative developers became active on the Upper West Side, building row houses, flats, and a few grand apartment buildings. Initially, development focused primarily on the blocks between Central Park West and Amsterdam



Avenue, closest to the elevated line. By the mid 1880s, development was booming on the Upper West Side, as this 1886 description from the *New York Times* attests:

The west side of the city presents just now a scene of building activity such as was never before witnessed in that section. . . . The huge masses of rock which formerly met the eye, usually crowned by a rickety shanty and a browsing goat, are being graded, and thousands of carpenters and masons are engaged in rearing substantial buildings where a year ago nothing was to be seen but market gardens or barren rocky fields.<sup>1</sup>

This description was written just as developers were beginning to invest in construction of new houses west of Broadway in what would become known as the “West End District.” Indeed, the late 1880s and early 1890s was a period of developmental boom along West End Avenue and adjoining streets. The area was widely touted in the popular and real estate press. In 1893 a writer for the *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* boasted of the West End’s assets:

If a man seeking for a home in the city desires to separate himself as far as possible from the cares of business and its possible encroachments – desires the quietness of streets untroubled by the rumble and confusion of business traffic – desires a neighborhood atmosphere that is essentially domestic, and where neither grocery, nor saloon, nor stable, nor “flats,” nor any other discordant establishment exists or is likely to make its appearance in any early generation – if he desires a clear, fresh atmosphere and sublime perspectives for his home life, he must go to the West End section to find it . . . It is *the* home section of the city, possessing

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<sup>1</sup> “Settling the West Side,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1886.

every advantage offered by any other section, without their disadvantages.<sup>2</sup>

That West End Avenue was built up with impressive single-family homes was something of a surprise, since it had been assumed that the avenue would be lined with modest commercial buildings. However, speculative developers purchased large plots on West End Avenue and, in many cases, formulated covenants that restricted lots to single-family homes for a certain number of years; some restrictions apparently lasted for twenty or thirty years while others were designed to run in perpetuity. Thus the avenue became a prestigious residential street for the upper middle class, with its wide sidewalks lined with trees and grass plots that were maintained by the Department of Parks, and its well-paved street bed limited only to private vehicles, with commercial vehicles prohibited. A number of row houses from the first wave of West End

Avenue construction survive, including groups in the historic districts, as well as several individual buildings or pairs, such as the handsome duo with beautiful yellow sandstone facades at 732-734 West End Avenue (Ralph S. Townsend, 1888), the five Neo-Renaissance style brick and limestone houses at 860-868 West End Avenue (Neville & Bagge, 1898), and the

pair of adjoining houses at 870-872 West End Avenue designed by M. V. B. Ferdon in 1891



Figure 1. 870-878 West End Avenue (M. V. B. Ferdon, 1891)

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<sup>2</sup> “Examples of Modern Town House Architecture,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 52 (December 16, 1893): supplement.

(figure 1). Row house development on West End Avenue continued until the late 1890s, especially towards the northern end of the avenue where some lots remained vacant. The largest surviving group of these later row houses is 860-868 West End Avenue at 101<sup>st</sup> Street (Neville & Bagge, 1898), an intact row of five Neo-Renaissance style brick and limestone dwellings. The anonymous 1893 *Record and Guide* writer quoted above proclaimed the West End a “home section,” meaning an area built up entirely with single-family row houses. The avenue, however, was not entirely lined with row houses. By 1900, West End Avenue also had a significant number of relatively modest apartment buildings, most of a type known in the late nineteenth century as French flats. The first apartment building in New York City specifically designed to attract middle-class tenants was the Stuyvesant on East 18<sup>th</sup> Street, designed in 1869 by Richard Morris Hunt (demolished). The success of this building and that of a several similar apartment houses erected in the next few years established the multiple dwelling as an acceptable form of residence for affluent people. The financial panic of 1873 cut short this initial phase of apartment house development, but by the early 1880s, with real estate investment booming again, impressive apartment buildings, often with elevators, electricity, and other modern conveniences, were erected in various parts of New York City. The Upper West Side became an important center for the grand apartment houses erected over the next few decades, including, most famously, the Dakota at Central Park West and West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street (1880-84). Although West End Avenue attracted the developers of upper-middle-class row houses, during the initial phase of development in the late 1880s and 1890s it did not attract apartment-house developers seeking the same class of residents.



While nothing akin to the Dakota was erected on West End Avenue, a significant number of French flats were built for middle-class tenants. A real-estate analyst writing about the history of development on West End Avenue in 1912 noted that “as land values steadily rose some plots were held by their owners without improvement for speculative profits, and eventually were taken as sites for small flat houses.”<sup>3</sup> The scale, design, and level of amenity provided varied dramatically among the almost fifty French flats constructed during the initial phase of West End Avenue development. The term “French flat” came into official use in New York in the early 1870s when the city’s Buildings Department began using the term to define multiple dwellings of a higher class than tenements.<sup>4</sup> Some of West End Avenue’s French flats were quite impressive, rising seven, eight or even nine stories with amenities such as elevators. The most impressive was the Beaux-Arts style Alimar, at 925 West End Avenue, designed in 1899 by Janes & Leo as part of a larger development conceived by Hamilton W. Weed that included the adjoining row houses at 301-307 West 105<sup>th</sup> Street. The row houses are protected within the Riverside Drive-West 105<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District, but the adjoining Alimar is excluded from this district. The facade of the Alimar is a dynamic study in sculptural exuberance, with red brick, white limestone, and white terra-cotta cladding, projecting metal bays, and a massive mansard roof, creating a design only slightly more modest than Janes & Leo’s better known Dorilton on Broadway and West 71<sup>st</sup> Street. A 1910 advertisement for the Alimar boasted that the building “embodies the latest and best features of modern Apartment Architecture. Every known device of comfort, luxury and convenience was adapted in the construction, and in the

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<sup>3</sup> “The Reconstruction of West End Avenue,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 89 (June 22, 1912): 1359.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Croxley, *Alone Together: A History of New York’s Early Apartments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 69.

decorative scheme nothing that superior skill and refined taste can achieve is left undone.”<sup>5</sup>

Notable French flats survive on West End Avenue from 79<sup>th</sup> Street north to 107<sup>th</sup> Street. The New Century (1900), at no. 401, on the northeast corner of 79<sup>th</sup> Street, rises to nine stories, and, according to an advertisement, was built of fireproof construction, had a cold storage plant, complete laundry facilities, and the two apartments on each floor were provided with three bathrooms each.<sup>6</sup> The floor plans were a bit awkward, but included corner parlors with rounded bays that permitted views west towards the Hudson River and north and south along West End Avenue.

Almost as impressive were the Cecil, Van Horne, Waumbeck, and Lancaster, all seven-story buildings designed in 1898 and built at the north end of the avenue and the West End Hall on 101<sup>st</sup> Street,



Figure 2. West End Hall, 840 West End Avenue (George Pelham, 1904)

designed in 1904 at the end of the era of French flat construction (figure 2). All of these are Renaissance-inspired structures with stone bases, brick upper facades, and terra-cotta ornament. All originally had impressive projecting cornices. At the lower end of the economic spectrum are several extremely modest flats, resembling the tenements erected on less prestigious streets to house poor and working-class households. Examples include such five-story walkups as those that survive at 646, 702, and 704 West End Avenue, all built in 1895. The variety of multiple

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<sup>5</sup> *The World's New York Apartment House Album* (New York: New York World, 1910), 182.

<sup>6</sup> *The World's New York Apartment House Album*, 101.

dwelling, coupled with the single family row houses that predominated, provided a far more varied social hierarchy on the avenue than has generally been recognized.

The people who lived in the row houses and flats built along West End Avenue in the final decades of the nineteenth century were largely affluent, American-born, and Protestant. Their affluence and their religious affiliations

are evident in the institutions that they built. During the first phase of development six expensive Protestant churches were erected on West End Avenue. Two were Episcopal churches – St. Ignatius (1901; figure 3) and All Angels (1888; demolished, c. 1979); two were Dutch Reformed churches – Collegiate (1892) and Bloomingdale (1905; demolished c. 1916); one was a



Figure 3. St. Ignatius Protestant Episcopal Church, 552 West End Avenue (Charles Haight, 1901)

Methodist church – St. Paul’s (1895; now Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew); and one was a Presbyterian church – Fourth Presbyterian (1893; now Ascension Greek Orthodox Church). All of these were impressive buildings, designed by prominent architects; five were located on expensive corner sites.

By 1900, West End Avenue had developed into an avenue lined with a cohesive group of



buildings. The avenue was characterized primarily by four- and five-story single-family houses rising to a relatively uniform height, a height punctuated occasionally by a church towers or by a taller flat. The avenue was not completely developed in this phase of construction. By 1898, there were still a significant number of large vacant plots, including a few entire blockfronts. Much of the undeveloped land was at the northern end of the avenue and in and near the valley at 96<sup>th</sup> Street. But prime blockfronts were also vacant, including the entire plot that now houses the Apthorp, then owned by the Astor family, which was used for greenhouses and other marginal structures. The era of West End Avenue as a haven for affluent families residing in single-family homes would be short lived. By the early years of the twentieth century, grand, relatively tall apartment houses began to invade the low-rise avenue and by 1930 West End Avenue had been entirely transformed, both in its architecture and in the population that lived along its length.

#### West End Avenue Transformed: The Creation of an Apartment House Boulevard

The rapidity with which West End Avenue was transformed from a row house avenue into an apartment house thoroughfare was extraordinary, surprising even to contemporary commentators (figure 4). As one real estate writer noted in 1912, during the early years of apartment house construction, “it is remarkable that it should become necessary because of purely economic reasons to reconstruct an avenue modernly builded [sic] less than a generation ago, by merely superseding one class of housing for another.”<sup>7</sup> And over a decade later, in 1925, a boom year in apartment-house construction, a writer for *Building and Building Maintenance* noted that “within

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<sup>7</sup> “The Reconstruction of West End Avenue,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 89 (June 22, 1912): 1359.

the last few years, there has been a noteworthy change in the type of residential buildings fronting on West End Avenue in the upper West Side district of New York City. The transition has been due to the large number of high-grade apartment buildings which have been erected along practically the entire length of the street, displacing individual residences. . . . They gave the district distinction but do not conform with new economic needs and so have to go.”<sup>8</sup> Why did an avenue lined with costly and relatively new row houses succumb to redevelopment so rapidly? As the journal writers quoted above noted, economics were largely the cause, but social issues were also significant. The economic forces leading to the demise of the row houses were largely a result of the opening of service on the IRT subway line beneath Broadway in October 1904. The subway made the West End far more convenient than it had previously been since now an extremely rapid means of commuting was only steps away from West End Avenue residents’ homes. With the arrival of the subway, land values on the Upper West Side skyrocketed. Because land became so expensive, the construction of new row houses virtually ceased, as such development was no longer economically viable. The value of the land on which row houses were already built also



Figure 4. 780 West End Avenue (George & Edward Blum, 1911) with row houses to the south

<sup>8</sup> “Apartment Houses Supplanting Individual Homes Along West End Avenue, New York,” *Building and Building Management* 25 (February 2, 1925): 48.

rose and as apartment house developers attempted to assemble sites for their large projects they offered the row-house owners buyouts that were hard to resist.

Row-house owners were open to selling because their houses, while only a few decades old, were already stylistically out of fashion and technologically obsolete. The dark-hued bricks, sandstones, and terra cotta found on many of the row houses erected in the 1880s and early 1890s and the irregular rooflines and textured fronts of the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles had been supplanted in popular taste by lighter-colored limestone and brick and by more classically-derived designs. Technologically, many of the row houses had been built before electricity had been introduced on the Upper West Side, and even those built after electricity had become available had rather primitive wiring. In addition, other utilities in these row houses were obsolete as they did not have the latest plumbing and heating equipment or the most modern kitchens.

Life styles also began to change for the affluent Protestant households that predominated in the row houses. These families were finding suburban life more and more attractive. The 1913 completion of electrification on the rail lines between Grand Central Terminal and Westchester and Fairfield Counties, north of the city, made commuting far more efficient, and many affluent people left the city for such popular new locales as Scarsdale, Bronxville, and Greenwich. As a critic for the magazine *Architectural Forum* noted in 1924 “many are leaving [New York] to make their permanent homes in the country, where estates are constantly increasing in size and number, as country life occupies more and more the time and interest of city people.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Two Notable Houses on Sutton Place, New York: The Homes of Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt and



Apartment construction was also possible because the covenants that restricted many lots to single-family houses were expiring and, in some cases, were simply being ignored. “Restrictive covenants which it was supposed would preserve the greater part of the avenue for private residences for all time have failed to hold in instances where they have been tested,” noted a *Record and Guide* writer, “and the restrictions that were for certain periods are expiring”<sup>10</sup>

But the physical redevelopment of West End Avenue would have been impossible if apartment-house living had not become popular for upper-middle-class households. “This thoroughfare furnishes a striking example of the decline in private house construction,” stated a real-estate observer in the *Record and Guide*, “and the rise of the huge apartment house in popular favor.”<sup>11</sup> By the early twentieth century, the apartment house had supplanted the row house as the residence of choice for more and more affluent New Yorkers. Apartments had certain advantages over row houses. They were especially appealing to those who did not wish to own property, since most apartment houses were rentals. Apartments tended to be laid out on one or two floors, obviating the need to constantly climb up and down stairs as was necessary in a multi-story row house. In addition, apartment dimensions were not limited to the narrow confines of a typical urban lot that usually measured twenty, or at most, twenty-five feet wide. Thus, apartments could spread over a large area with a pleasing flow between rooms. Apartments were also more secure than row houses and, since the tenant did not own the

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Miss Anne Morgan,” *Architectural Forum* 41 (August 1924): 49.

<sup>10</sup> “The Reconstruction of West End Avenue.”

<sup>11</sup> The Real Estate Boom in West End Avenue,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 90 (June 29, 1912): 1393.

building, repairs were the responsibility of someone else.

The early apartment houses, such as the Stuyvesant and the Dakota, were designed by architects who experimented with floor plans for a new type of housing. Often these plans were somewhat awkward with public, private, and service spaces overlapping and long, dark halls connecting rooms. Such plans were typical in the French flats along West End Avenue. However, by the early twentieth century apartment planning had advanced, and most new apartments for affluent tenants, such as those on West End Avenue, had more gracious plans, with a cluster of public rooms, including the entrance hall, living room or parlor, dining room, and, in larger units, a library. These were separated from the private bedrooms which in the finest apartments were invisible from the public spaces. In addition, a service wing, consisting of a kitchen, pantry, and one or more maid's rooms, were separated from both the public and private spheres, but, out of necessity, were convenient to the dining room. Rooms in the best apartment buildings were substantial in size, with high ceilings and handsome appointments. Apartments were also supplied with the most modern technology – steam heating, efficient electricity, the latest plumbing fixtures and piping, fast-moving elevators, telephone switchboards, and other advances. Indeed, the advertisements for the new apartments often touted their fine appointments and modern amenities. A 1913 advertisement for 490 West End Avenue, on the northeast corner of West 83<sup>rd</sup> Street (1912), bragged that “the apartments are furnished throughout with the best trim and most modern equipment, and have high grade sanitary plumbing fixtures, tiled floors and walls in the bathrooms, electric side-bracket lighting fixtures with base outlets for lamp connections. Two Otis electric elevators are operated continuously,

day and night. There is a telephone in every apartment.”<sup>12</sup> The apartments in this building also had hardwood floors, vacuum cleaners, garbage closets, gas ranges, porcelain lined refrigerators, and basement storage rooms.

The scale of the apartment houses erected on West End Avenue was determined by the requirements of the Tenement House Act of 1901. This law defined a tenement as any building housing three or more families living independently of one another and cooking separately. This definition applied equally to tenements built for the poor and apartment buildings erected for the wealthy. Thus, the builders and architects of West End Avenue’s apartment buildings needed to follow the same requirements as those erecting multiple dwellings for poor immigrants on the Lower East Side. The law’s requirement that every room, including bathrooms and kitchens, have a window looking out onto a street, rear yard, or light court, and its rules for maximum lot coverage in order to guarantee light and air, influenced the shape of West End Avenue apartment buildings, resulting in the front, side, and/or rear courts visible on all but the narrowest buildings. The law also required that all multiple dwellings of more than six stories be of fireproof construction. Thus, all of the tall apartment houses on West End Avenue were built of fireproof material – generally steel or concrete – and have fireproof stairs that these permitted safe and efficient evacuation in case of a fire. This explains why none of the tall apartment buildings on West End Avenue built after 1901 have fire escapes. Most significantly, the 1901 law capped the height of apartment building. The tenement law, as amended in 1902, capped the height of all tenements at one and one-half times the width of the widest street on which it had a

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<sup>12</sup> *Supplement to the World’s New York Apartment House Album* (New York: New York World, 1913).



frontage.<sup>13</sup> This law remained in effect until 1929. Thus, during the peak years of development on West End Avenue, between 1910 and 1928, all buildings had to adhere to a consistent set of building rules, resulting in the creation of an extraordinarily cohesive group of buildings rising to a consistent height.

The first sign that West End Avenue would become an avenue of high-class apartment houses dates to 1905 when construction began on Stanley Court on the northwest corner of West 106<sup>th</sup> Street (figure 5). This was the first of the twelve-story apartment houses on the avenue and, with its steel frame, limestone base, brick upper stories, terra-cotta trim, deep cornice (removed), and spacious apartments (originally two apartments per floor, each with ten rooms and three baths) it became a prototype for the apartment buildings erected



Figure 5. Stanley Court, 945 West End Avenue  
(Charles E. Birge, 1905)

over the next few decades. Stanley Court was followed in 1906 by the Apthorp. Although this building occupies the entire blockfront between West 78<sup>th</sup> and 79<sup>th</sup> Streets it is not really a West End Avenue building since its main entrance is on Broadway, with only a secondary entry on West End Avenue. The Apthorp was followed in 1907 by the Hohenzollern at 485 West End

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<sup>13</sup> Laws of the State of New York, chapter 352, section 52 (1902). In the 1901 act, the height was capped at one and one-third times the width of the street (chapter 334, section 52).

Avenue on the southwest corner of West 84<sup>th</sup> Street. This exceptionally ornate brick, stone, and terra-cotta building is a bit of an anomaly since it does not rise to the maximum permissible height, standing at only nine stories.

The major redevelopment of West End Avenue really got underway in 1909, with the construction of two twelve-story buildings – the Allendale at no. 808 on the northeast corner of West 99<sup>th</sup> Street (figure 6), and the North Bennington at no. 817 on the southwest corner of West 100<sup>th</sup> Street. Architecturally, these are two of the finest apartment houses on West End Avenue. The Allendale was a prominent presence on the avenue with its Tuscan-inspired corner tower (demolished) visible for blocks north and south, and the North Bennington, one of a pair, completed



Figure 6. The Allendale, 808 West End Avenue (Rouse & Goldstone, 1909)

with the construction of the South Bennington the following year, has exceptional terra-cotta ornament, including peacocks with feathers unfurled at the parapet. All of these early buildings – Stanley Court, the Apthorp, the Hohenzollern, the Allendale, and the North and South Bennington – were built on vacant or largely vacant plots and did not displace earlier row houses.

Between 1909 and America's entry into World War I in 1917, forty-one large apartment houses were erected on West End Avenue – five begun in 1910, five in 1911, eleven in 1912, one in 1913, three in 1914, nine in 1915, six in 1916, and one in 1917. Most of these apartment buildings replaced existing row houses. By 1912, it was evident to a *Record and Guide* analyst that “the knell of the private dwelling [has] been rung.”<sup>14</sup> It was not, however, only private houses that were replaced by large apartment buildings. In 1916, the Bloomingdale Reformed Church on the block between 106<sup>th</sup> and 107<sup>th</sup> Streets, then only ten years old, was demolished. Many of the early French flats were also replaced. The same *Record and Guide* real-estate writer described how “at the southeast corner of 101<sup>st</sup> street [no. 838], there is an instance of where an apartment house erected only fourteen years ago is being removed from a site that will be occupied by a house which the times consider modern.”

Almost all of the apartment buildings erected in this initial wave of apartment-house construction followed a common massing and design template. They were generally twelve story buildings (a few are thirteen stories and one rises to fourteen stories) massed in a rectilinear manner with a flat roof and no setbacks. As would be expected, each rose to the maximum height permitted under the tenement law. The street fronts generally had limestone bases, brick upper stories, white terra-cotta trim, and projecting cornices or ornate parapets. Most had their main entrances on West End Avenue, but some buildings, especially those on the east side of the avenue, closest to the subway stations and shops on Broadway, had their main entrances on the side street. The apartments in these buildings tended to be quite large; many buildings had only two apartments

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<sup>14</sup> “The Reconstruction of West End Avenue.”

on each floor. The apartments in the twelve-story buildings had especially high ceilings, while those with thirteen or fourteen stories had somewhat lower ceiling heights. So common were buildings with large apartments of seven to fourteen rooms that when 782 West End Avenue was completed in 1913 advertisements noted the singularity of its small, four-room apartments, stating that “this is the only apartment house on this fine residential Avenue that has small apartments facing the Avenue.”<sup>15</sup> The apartment houses of this period also tended to have expansive lobbies, often finished with marble walls and floors, complex plaster ceilings, stained-glass, iron railings, and other decorative features.

Construction throughout the United States ceased during World War I, thus work began on only one new building on West End Avenue in 1917 and none in 1918. Following the armistice, new construction resumed very slowly. The volatile market in building materials and the demands of returning soldiers for higher wages inhibited private investment. Only two new buildings were begun in 1919 – an apartment house and a hotel, and a third project entailed the complete facade redesign and interior modernization of an earlier flat. In 1920, construction began on only one new apartment house and in the following year no new construction occurred. By 1922, markets had stabilized and a serious housing shortage resulted in the start of a major housing boom. Fifty-two new apartment houses were erected on West End Avenue between 1922 and 1928. The peak years for construction were 1924 (thirteen apartment buildings), 1925 (twelve buildings), and 1926 (eight buildings). News reporters were astonished at the extent of new construction. “West End Avenue is enjoying the greatest building activity in its history,” wrote a real estate writer for the *New York Times* in 1924, while a writer for that publication noted the

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<sup>15</sup> *Supplement to the World's New York Apartment Album*, 13.

following year that “West End Avenue, for the last two years, has been the scene of the greatest apartment house construction in that section of the city.”<sup>16</sup>

Superficially, the apartment buildings of the 1920s resemble those built before the war, since they had to respond to the same tenement laws. Buildings continue to be rectilinear in massing, with brick facades and terracotta ornament. However, a closer examination reveals a major difference between apartment buildings erected before and after World War I. While most of the earlier apartment buildings had twelve floors (figure 7), most of those built after the war had fifteen or sixteen floors of apartments (figure 8). This means that the ceiling heights in the later buildings were considerably lower than those in the earlier buildings. Also, in general, apartment sizes were smaller, with more apartments on each floor. An article written about the construction of 588 West End Avenue in 1922 noted that “this building is being erected to meet the demand for small housekeeping units which

has grown so insistent in this section of the city. The suites will be equipped with every modern

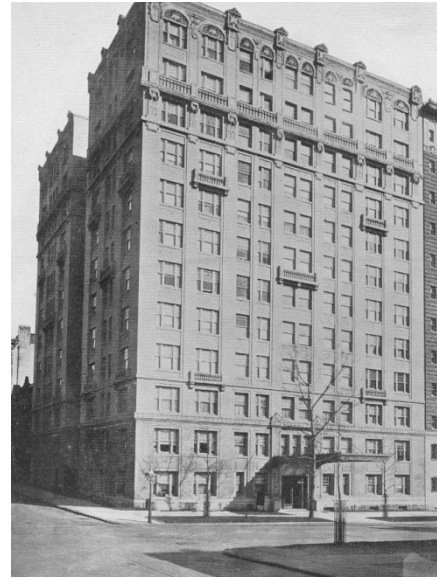


Figure 7. The Chautauqua, 574 West End Avenue (Emery Roth, 1911)

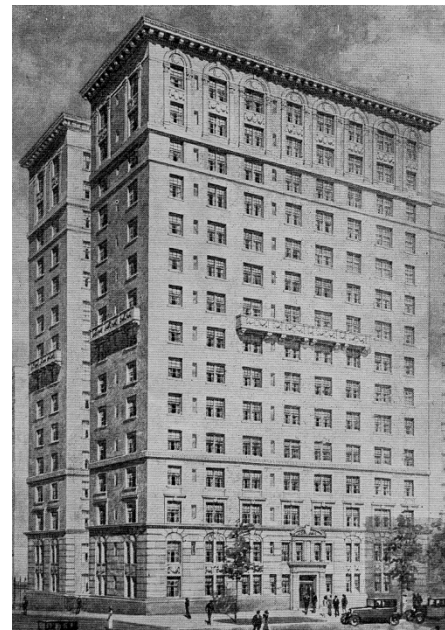


Figure 8. 890-898 West End Avenue (Schwartz & Gross, 1924)

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<sup>16</sup> “A Building Boom on West End Avenue,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1924 and “Big Apartment House Building Boom on the Upper West Side,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1925.



convenience for easy housekeeping and the elimination of the servant problem.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the inability of all but the wealthiest households to find servants resulted in the disappearance of maid’s rooms from many of the new West End Avenue apartments. Also, many apartments had no formal dining rooms. Lobbies also shrank in size and appointment as less money was spent on interior decoration. Similarly, less was spent on exterior embellishment – stone bases become more modest or disappear entirely, and the terra-cotta decorative ornament became simpler. A new feature of apartment buildings that became popular during the 1920s was the penthouse – one or two apartments set back on the roof with surrounding terraces and gardens. These are not generally easily visible from the street.

Besides apartment houses, a few apartment hotels were erected on West End Avenue. Six hotels were erected on the avenue between 1915 and 1929. These apartment hotels had suites of rooms laid out like apartments. Guests generally leased suites for long-term use, often as permanent residences. The popularity of the apartment hotel was discussed in a 1926 article about the Hotel Windermere at 666 West End Avenue on the northeast corner of 92<sup>nd</sup> Street (figure 9):

There is a constantly increasing demand in all the best residential districts of New York City for



**Figure 9. Hotel Windermere, 808 West End Avenue (Schwartz & Gross, 1926)**

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<sup>17</sup> “Rapid Progress on Tall Apartments for Upper West Side,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 110 (July 15, 1922): 73.



apartment hotel accommodations. More and more families are finding that the small suites in apartment hotel buildings, with complete hotel service supplied, relieve them of the troublesome problem of engaging domestic help and all things considered are more economical than maintaining an extensive private home or large housekeeping apartment [i.e., an apartment with a kitchen].<sup>18</sup>

Apartment hotels were popular with a certain group of tenants, but this was not the only reason that they were built. Apartment hotels were especially attractive to real estate developers since they were considered to be commercial buildings by the city. This designation meant that their construction was subject to zoning laws, but not to housing laws such as the 1901 tenement act. Apartment hotels could, therefore, be taller than apartment houses, they could occupy more of their lot area, and their fireproofing requirements were less stringent because kitchens were forbidden. Thus, developers who chose to erect apartment hotels could build larger buildings and, in many cases, disregarded the ban on kitchens by providing pantries or alcoves, with sinks and refrigerators, and with electrical outlets into which tenants could plug their own stoves or hotplates.

Apartment hotels were especially popular on the Upper West Side in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Curiously, of the six hotels erected on West End Avenue only one appears to have been built as a means for erecting a building taller than would have been allowed under the housing laws. Four of the hotels – the Cardinal (no. 243), Esplanade (no.

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<sup>18</sup> “West End Avenue’s Tallest Apartment Hotel Under Way,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 117 (May 15, 1926): 7.

305), Willard (no. 330), and Marcy (no. 720) closely resemble contemporary apartment houses. The Paris (no. 752) was probably erected under a new set of housing rules promulgated in 1929 (see below).<sup>19</sup> Only the Hotel Windermere, designed in 1926, is taller and occupies more of its lot area than an apartment building. The twenty-two-story Windermere, rising through a series of setbacks as required by the zoning ordinance of 1916, towered over its neighbors. The hotel contained 367 one- to three-room suites and had a large ground-floor dining room. The residential hospital built at 263 West End Avenue, in the northwest corner of 72<sup>nd</sup> Street (1923), was also a commercial building that was built taller than surrounding structures.

City regulators were aware of the illegal conversion of many apartment hotel suites into housekeeping apartments. In an effort to deal with the proliferation of this illegal condition, the building laws were revised in 1929, permitting taller buildings that would follow the zoning rules. Apartment buildings were no longer limited in height, but now could be constructed with additional stories as long as setbacks were provided. The new regulations came into effect just before the stock market crashed in October 1929 so it had only limited influence. However, West End Avenue remained a prestigious residential boulevard even during the Great Depression, and five large apartment buildings were erected before America entered World War II. These were tall structures, with eighteen or nineteen floors of apartments and penthouses, each massed with a series of setbacks that began at the height of the cornices and parapets of the older avenue apartment buildings. As was appropriate for the economic conditions of the period, apartments in these new buildings were relatively small, with a number of studio and one-bedroom units that would appeal to those on modest budgets. At 565 West End Avenue, built in

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<sup>19</sup> It is not clear if the Paris was begun before or after the 1929 rules went into effect.

1936, for example, each floor below the setbacks had seven apartments – one two-bedroom unit, four with one-bedroom, and two studios. Each apartment had a small kitchen and a windowless dining gallery. Despite the more modest apartment layouts, these Depression-era buildings were equipped with the latest amenities in order to attract rent-paying tenants. At 336 West End Avenue (1931), apartments may have been relatively small, but they had fashionable sunken livingrooms, silencers and air filters, radio aerials and outlets in the livingrooms, mirrored doors, closets with electric lights, Venetian blinds, and enclosed radiators; the fully equipped kitchens had exhaust fans, electric clocks, gas refrigerators, enameled cabinets, colored tubs and sinks, electric iron outlets, chromium-plated hardware and plumbing, linoleum floors, and enamel insulated ranges with heat controls and grease absorbers; and bathrooms were supplied with colored tiles and fixtures, utility closets, medicine cabinets, and chromium-plated hardware.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the construction of a few new buildings during the Depression, another development occurred on this and other residential avenues of Manhattan. This was the subdivision of large apartments into smaller units. Owners during the Depression found it difficult to rent the largest apartments and, in some cases, economic conditions became so bad that banks foreclosed on the owners. At 525 West End Avenue (1912), the Bank for Savings foreclosed and “when [it] took possession of the property, it had to cope with an acute renting problem, many of the large apartments in the house being vacant.”<sup>21</sup> The bank virtually gutted the building, creating 128 apartments where there had originally been only fifty-two. The building’s original architect,

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<sup>20</sup>“Apartment Built This Year Rents Well,” *Building Investment* 8 (October 1932): 22.

<sup>21</sup> “Bank Invests \$350,000 in Modernization,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 146 (September 21, 1940): 4.

Schwartz & Gross, was hired to undertake the alteration. The smaller units created here and in other West End Avenue buildings were far easier to rent in the dismal economic climate of the Depression.

All of the apartment houses erected on West End Avenue were speculative ventures with builders investing in the construction of these buildings in hopes of making a profit, either in the short term by selling the building as soon as it was completed or in the long term by holding on to the building and collecting rents. Since the nineteenth century, speculative construction had welcomed immigrants and small investors. Many speculative row houses were erected by Irish immigrants or their American-born children. Apartment house construction in the early decades of the twentieth century reflected the ascent of new immigrant groups. The apartment houses on West End Avenue, like apartment houses elsewhere in the city, were largely put up by Jewish and Italian builders – either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Jewish builders such as Harry Schiff, Isaac Polstein, Abraham Bricken (a major Garment Center builder), and Julius Tishman were active on West End Avenue. The most prolific builders were members of the extended Paterno family. The



Figure 10. Anthony Paterno's initials over the entrance to 473 West End Avenue (Gaetan Ajello, 1923)

family of Giovanni Paterno immigrated to America from Castelemezano near Naples. Giovanni Paterno began the families building business and following his death in 1899, four of his sons, Joseph, Charles, Michael, and Anthony, became involved, as did their brothers-in-law Anthony Campagna, Armino Campagna, Victor Cerabone, Ralph Ciluzzi, and Joseph Faiella. The Paternos, either individually or in conjunction with one another, were responsible for more than twenty buildings on West End Avenue. The Paternos' must have been quite proud of their apartment houses since they frequently placed their initials over the entrance (figure 10).

Developers often worked with a small group of architects who specialized in the design and planning of apartment buildings that would meet all of the local regulations while simultaneously providing units planned to meet the expectations of the upper-middle-class households who could afford West End Avenue rents. The most prolific architect active on West End Avenue was the firm of Schwartz & Gross (figures 8-9). Simon Schwartz and Arthur Gross, architects who had met while studying at the Hebrew Technical Institute, were apartment house experts, responsible for twenty-five buildings on West End Avenue and several hundred elsewhere in Manhattan. Other architects active in the design of apartment buildings on the avenue were Rosario Candela (twelve buildings), George Pelham (eleven buildings), Gaetan Ajello (nine buildings; figure 10), George & Edward Blum (seven buildings; figures 4 and 11), Neville & Bagge (seven buildings), and Emery Roth (five buildings; figure 7).<sup>22</sup> As the names suggest, like

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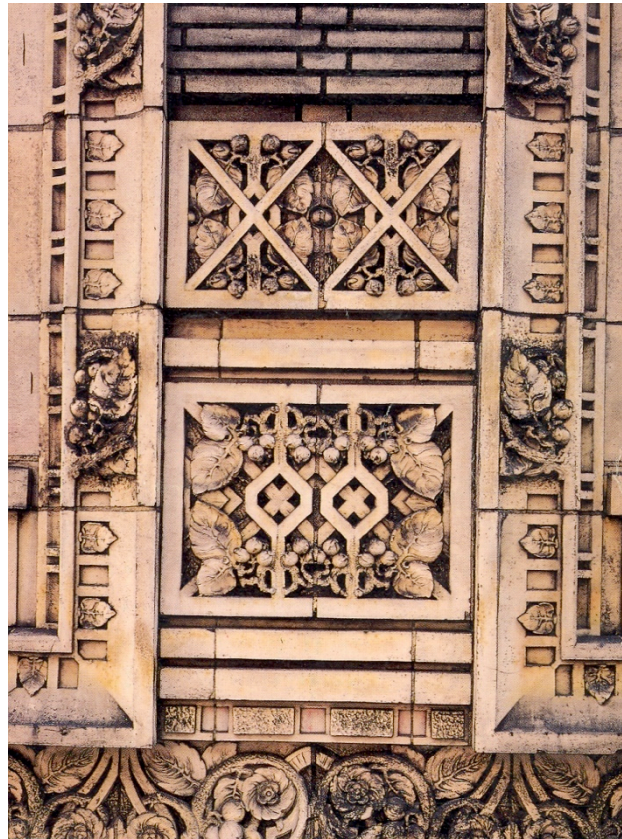
<sup>22</sup> For the Blums, see Andrew S. Dolkart and Susan Tunick, *George & Edward Blum: Texture and Design in New York Apartment House Architecture* (New York: Friends of Terra Cotta Press, 1993); for Candela, see Andrew Alpern, *The New York Apartment Houses of Rosario Candela and James Carpenter* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2001); for Roth, see Steven Rutenbaum, *Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emery Roth* (New York: Balsam Press, 1986). Pelham also designed eight row houses and there flats on West End Avenue.

the builders, several of these architects were either Jewish or Italian. Builders did not necessarily hire architects who were members of their own ethnic group. While the Italian Paternos frequently commissioned buildings from the Italian Rosario Candela and Gaetan Ajello, they also worked with Schwartz & Gross, and while Alsatian-Jewish immigrants George & Edward Blum received work from Julius Tishman they were also responsible for a building commissioned by non-Jewish builder T. J. McLaughlin & Sons.

As has been previously noted, architecturally, these designers created an impressive and relatively uniform group of buildings using such popular materials as brick, limestone, terra cotta, and cast stone, highlighted with iron balconies, pressed-metal cornices, metal entrance marquees, and other architectural flourishes. Although the designs have much in common, each building (or in some cases pair of buildings) is unique. Brick colors vary from bright white to deep red; terra cotta and cast stone were molded into a myriad of different ornamental forms; stone bases were smooth, or textured, or rusticated; and rooflines were marked by deep projecting cornices or ornamented parapets. Stylistically the ornament on the buildings varies widely. The most popular styles used for ornament on these buildings were the Italian Renaissance and Neo-Classical. However, other buildings display Romanesque, Gothic, and Byzantine detail. Within the basic form, some architects created works that are quite distinctive. Gaetan Ajello's buildings from the pre-World War I era, for example, are identifiable by their exceptionally bold, three-dimensional ornament, evident, for example at no. 645, on the southwest corner of 92<sup>nd</sup> Street (1912), and no. 895, on the southwest corner of West 104<sup>th</sup> Street (1912). Although Schwartz & Gross's office designed scores of apartment buildings faced with



Renaissance and Neo-Classical detail, they occasionally designed a building with extraordinarily unusual Arts and Crafts detail, with features seemingly inspired by the decorative designs of Louis Sullivan, notable on two of West End Avenue's most beautiful buildings, the Chautauqua at no. 574, on the southeast corner of West 88<sup>th</sup> Street (1911, figure 7) and the Cleburne at no. 924, on the northeast corner of 105<sup>th</sup> Street (1912). An Arts and Crafts sensibility is also evident at three masterpieces designed by George & Edward Blum, architects who were among the most innovative apartment-house designers in New York City in the pre-World War I years. Their three major buildings from this era are the Evanston at no. 610, on the southeast corner of West 90<sup>th</sup> Street (1910), with its stylized organic terra-cotta ornament and its spectacular iron fence; 780 West End Avenue, on the southeast corner of West 98<sup>th</sup> Street (1912; figure 4), with its dense geometric and organic ornamentation in white terra cotta; and the Dallieu at no. 838, on the southeast corner of West 101<sup>st</sup> Street (1912; figure 11), with its terra-cotta diamond grid and latticework supporting fig plants.



**Figure 11. Terra-cotta ornament on George & Edward Blum's Dallieu, 838 West End Avenue**

Residents in the new buildings were also a more diverse group than those who had lived in the

earlier row houses. Many old West Side families chose to stay in the neighborhood as the row houses were replaced by apartment buildings and moved into the new West End Avenue buildings. But West End Avenue also became a haven for successful immigrant households. Jewish families in particular were drawn to the rental apartments of the avenue. Many of these new residents were involved in the garment trade. Indeed, one of the interesting features of West End Avenue development is that the same architects responsible for so many of the avenues apartment houses also designed the loft buildings in the new Garment District that developed west of Sixth Avenue and north of 34<sup>th</sup> Street in the years after World War I. Indeed, the opening of service on the Seventh Avenue extension of the IRT subway in 1918 made commuting between West End Avenue and the Garment District extremely easy. Just as the construction of impressive churches indicated the predominance of Protestant households on West End Avenue in the late nineteenth century, the construction of grand synagogues represents the arrival of Jewish families to the area. The earliest synagogue in the West End was B'nai Jeshuran, erected on West 87<sup>th</sup> Street, just east of West End Avenue, in 1916-18. This was followed in 1926 by the construction of the enormous Ansche Chesed complex (synagogue and community house) on the northeast corner of West End Avenue and West 100<sup>th</sup> Street (figure 12).



**Figure 12. Congregation Ansche Chesed, 824-830 West End Avenue (Edward I. Shire, 1926)**

The apartment buildings of the 1930s follow a similar design pattern to those of earlier decades, despite the fact that they are taller buildings with setbacks. These buildings, like their predecessors, were built out to the lot line and were faced with brick and stone. Also like the earlier apartment buildings, several of the Depression-era apartment buildings were embellished with ornament as is evident at Boak & Paris's magnificent buildings at no. 336, on the southeast corner of West 76<sup>th</sup> Street (1931), and no. 450, at the southeast corner of West 82<sup>nd</sup> Street (1930), with, respectively, medieval Italian and English Jacobean detail. Several of the buildings from the 1930s display the new Moderne (or Art Deco) decoration that became fashionable for apartment buildings in the 1930s. Margon & Holder's 400 West End Avenue, on the northeast corner of West 79<sup>th</sup> Street (1930), is a transitional building, with traditional red brickwork and a band of Moderne zigzag ornamentation above the second story. More typical of Moderne design are George

F. Pelham's Traymore Hall at no. 411, on the southwest corner of West 80<sup>th</sup> Street (1935), and



Figure 13. 450 West End Avenue (Boak & Paris, 1930)



Figure 14. Traymore Hall, 411 West End Avenue (George F. Pelham, Jr., 1935)

H. I. Feldman's no. 565, on the northwest corner of West 88<sup>th</sup> Street (1936), both of which are clad in the pale yellow brick that became popular for Moderne facades and have fashionable corner steel-casement windows.

West End Avenue was not, of course, the only avenue in Manhattan that attracted apartment-house development in the early twentieth century. Riverside Drive and Central Park West on the west side and Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue on the east side also became centers for apartment house construction. Three of these streets – Riverside Drive, Central Park West, and Fifth Avenue – have apartment buildings on only one side of the street, since these buildings face parks. Only Park Avenue is comparable, with its parallel blockfronts of apartment buildings, many designed by the same architects who worked on West End Avenue. But West End Avenue and Park Avenue have completely different development histories. Due to the presence of the New York Central Railroad's tracks, Park Avenue initially developed with factories, tenements, and small row houses. Thus, when the tracks were covered in the early twentieth century and mansions and apartment houses for the wealthy were built, very little of architectural consequence was replaced. West End Avenue, on the other hand, illustrates one of the most interesting development and redevelopment stories in the history of New York City real estate.

The *New York Times* recognized this in 1924, when a reporter wrote that:

Nowhere on the west side is the doom of the private individual residence so strikingly seen as on West End Avenue. While that thoroughfare is being developed along lines very similar to those seen on Park Avenue, there is this difference in that, while the palatial multi-family structures on that east side

thoroughfare displaced, chiefly, old flats, the modern West End apartments have caused the demolition of scores of the most expensive and finest private dwellings erected on the west side.<sup>23</sup>

Very little change has occurred on West End Avenue since World War II. – the avenue’s one grand mansion, the Charles Schwab House, located on the block bounded by West End Avenue, Riverside Drive, and West 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Streets, was demolished and replaced by a large red brick apartment building in 1949; two schools were constructed (P. S. 75 in 1949 and the Calhoun School in 1973); All Angels Episcopal Church was demolished and replaced with the especially homely West River House in 1979; and a low-scale apartment house was demolished in 2007 for the construction of a new building on the southwest corner of West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, an early twenty-first-century building that, curiously, is being marketed as “the finest pre-war ever built”! There have been alterations to buildings along the avenue, but few have had a negative impact on its architectural character. Most alterations have been limited to the replacement of multi-pane wood windows with single-pane sash. A few cornices have been removed and some architectural ornament stripped. But several buildings have had their cornices restored (such as the Alimar), others have been cleaned (the South Bennington has been magnificently cleaned and restored), and several have had stripped or deteriorated detail reinstalled (780 West End Avenue).

In 1984, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the West End-Collegiate Historic District, which includes the west side of West End Avenue between West

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<sup>23</sup> “West End Avenue Residences Going,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1924.



75<sup>th</sup> and the midblock between West 78<sup>th</sup> and West 79<sup>th</sup> Streets, and the east side between West 76<sup>th</sup> and West 77<sup>th</sup> Streets. This designation was followed in 1989 by the designation of the Riverside Drive-West End Historic District, which incorporates both sides of West End Avenue between 87<sup>th</sup> and 94<sup>th</sup> Streets. In addition there are eight individual landmarks on West End Avenue – West End Collegiate Church, the Apthorp, the John B. and Isabella Leech House at no. 520, the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew (only the church, not the rectory), Pomander Walk, and the three row houses at 854, 856, and 858 West End Avenue. It is hard to understand why some buildings are protected and others are not, and as one walks up or down West End Avenue it is difficult to know whether one is in or out of a protected landmark district. This would change with the designation of a West End Avenue Historic District, stretching from 70<sup>th</sup> Street north to 107<sup>th</sup> Street.

#### The Case For a West End Avenue Historic District

As has been noted, traversing the length of West End Avenue means moving in and out of designated landmark districts and past several individual landmarks. As this report has made clear, West End Avenue is a cohesive unit running from West 70<sup>th</sup> Street at the south, where the early twentieth-century residential character begins, to the north end of the avenue at 106<sup>th</sup> Street on the east side and 107<sup>th</sup> Street on the west side. Just why certain blocks are in designated districts and certain blocks are out remains unclear. What is clear is that the two historic districts that include portions of West End Avenue were designated primarily to recognize and preserve the intact row house blocks, with the apartment buildings as an afterthought. Yet, it is the apartment buildings that give West End Avenue its special character.



It is hard to explain why George & Edward Blum's unusual Evanston is in a historic district, while their equally stellar 780 West End Avenue and Dallieu remain unprotected; why Schwartz & Gross's Chautauqua is in a historic district, but their Cleburne is not; why H. I. Feldman's Moderne apartment house at no. 565 is a landmark, but Margon & Holder's equally interesting Moderne building at no. 400 is not; and why some buildings by Gaetan Ajello, Schwartz & Gross, and other prestigious architects are landmarks and others are not; or, indeed, why neither of Boak & Paris's exceptional buildings has been designated; or why B'nai Jeshuran, just off of West End Avenue, is in a historic district, but Ansche Chesed is not a landmark; or why St. Ignatius Episcopal Church and the rectory to the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew remain unprotected by landmark designation. Other apartment house streets of similar vintage to that of West End Avenue have been designated landmarks in their entirety. Central Park West's apartment buildings are protected in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, from West 62<sup>nd</sup> Street to West 96<sup>th</sup> Street, while Fifth Avenue's run of apartment houses and apartment hotels, between East 59<sup>th</sup> Street and East 96<sup>th</sup> Street is protected in three separate, but adjoining historic districts – The Upper East Side Historic District, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Historic District, and the Carnegie Hill Historic District. Large portions of Park Avenue are within the boundaries of two of these East Side districts, and, like West End Avenue, the remaining sections of Park Avenue should also be designated.

West End Avenue as a totality clearly meets the criteria for designation as a historic district. The buildings along this street are architecturally significant as major examples of upper-middle-class

apartment-houses, designed by some of the most important architects active in this type of work during the early decades of the twentieth century. The avenue is also historically significant, illustrating a unique development pattern that turned a prosperous row house street into an apartment boulevard in an extraordinarily rapid time frame. The development and redevelopment also illustrate the confluence of economic and social forces that created and recreated a neighborhood. The landmarks law states that a historic district must have a “sense of place.” More than perhaps any other residential street in New York City, West End Avenue has this sense of place – a sense created by a unified group of buildings, all built to the lot line, most rising to a consistent height, all clad in similar materials, almost all built within a few decades of one another, largely by a small group of architects. West End Avenue is one of the streets that define residential New York. It is a quintessential New York City residential boulevard illustrating how New Yorkers are, for the most part, “cliff dwellers,” residing in tall, solid, and elegant apartment buildings.

Designation as a single historic district will protect those architectural features that give character to West End Avenue. In the last two years, two of West End Avenue’s most significant, but unprotected buildings have been badly altered. In 2007 the defining Tuscan tower on the Allendale, 808 West End Avenue (1909), was destroyed. In 1911, *Building Management* magazine stated that this tower was a “distinctive architectural feature . . . [that] can be seen from any point on West End avenue from its beginning at Sixty-ninth street to its northerly point and from all other points on the west side within a radius of a mile, where a reasonably unobstructed view may be obtained.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, over the past few years,

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<sup>24</sup> “The Allendale Apartment, New York,” *Building Management* 11 (March 1911): 34.

culminating in the summer of 2008, much of the singular ornament on George & Edward Blum's nearby masterpiece, the Dallieu was destroyed – cornices and balconies were removed, original doors replaced, and a homely parapet wall erected. These unfortunate alterations need not have occurred.

The West End Avenue Historic District should be calendared by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission as soon as possible, and the entire avenue should be designated as a historic district, thus protecting these buildings and the character of the street for future generations.

## Note of the Building Survey

Every building on West End Avenue was surveyed during the summer and fall of 2008. Each building was also photographed and preliminary research undertaken to determine the date of construction, architect, original owner, and other basic information. At times, sources conflict, especially relating to number of planned apartments. Each survey form includes the name of the building, where applicable; address and location; legal block and lot number; basic descriptive information; original owner; architect; brief comments; and any bibliographic material that was discovered during the research process. Exhaustive research has not been completed on individual buildings.