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## STREETSCAPES: 780 West End Avenue; Making a Tall Building Taller

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

LEAD: THE sales office for 780 West End Avenue at 98th Street opened last month and the conversion of the building's 63 apartments into condominiums is under way. "We bought it because it was so distinctive" says Glen Siegel, a spokesman for Walter & Samuels, selling agents for the owner.

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This is more than the usual sales hyperbole. The 1914 building is truly distinctive because it was designed by the brothers George and Edward Blum in a radically different style from other apartment houses of the period.

The issue of appropriate design came up in the 1870's when structures began to rise above seven or eight stories. Most architects merely retreated to such historic styles as Romanesque, renaissance or classical, layering the new, taller buildings with a succession of horizontal banding, belt courses, balconies and cornices.

The inherent contradiction in disguising a tall structure in styling developed for much lower buildings was recognized by most architects, but only a few did something about it. Louis Sullivan of Chicago was one of these, adopting frankly vertical designs for structures like his Bayard loft building of 1898 at 65 Bleecker Street, just east of Broadway.

Other commercial buildings gradually followed suit, but the designers of residential structures continued to work in conservative styles. By 1910, the design of 10- to 15-story apartment houses had not progressed. Rather, they were all overblown versions of prototypes that rarely exceeded five stories.

Lobbies tended to be large and sumptuous - a sea of highly colored marble, stained glass, coffered ceilings and mosaic tile floors - contrasting sharply with the rather ordinary apartments that were typically created upstairs. But there was both a continuing search for novelty and also a growing idea that for this new type of high-rise living, a new type of architecture was warranted. The Blum brothers were the first in New York City to try to achieve it.

Both attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris just after 1900 when the Art Nouveau movement was in full swing, so they were familiar with the idea of an entirely nonhistoric system of design. They opened their practice in 1908 and their earliest works were generally in a style known as Arts and Crafts - earth-toned brick, with picturesque iron and tile on the exterior, as at their Phaeton at 545 West 112th Street,

just east of Broadway, completed in 1910.

Other, taller buildings followed these lines, among them the 12-story Dallieu at 838 West End Avenue, at West 101st Street, which mixed Arts and Crafts styling in the lobby with unusual brick and terra cotta work on the facade, in some places recalling the work of Louis Sullivan.

But their 780 West End Avenue, completed in 1914, was the building that broke all the molds. The lobby had an Arts and Crafts tiled floor in brown, green and gray, simple leaded, rather than gaudy, stained glass and simple decorations.

The exterior, however, had a new sort of streamlined design, with plain walls and distinctly vertical styling. Most of the windows are arranged not in the conventional horizontal zones of base, middle and top, but in strips, like express trains running straight up the building. From the second floor upward, nothing interrupts these vertical bays, and the sleekness of the design is reinforced by the building's color - all white brick and terra cotta.

The Blums also used nonderivative detailing - odd floral and shell patterns, berries, octagons, hexagons and other unorthodox forms. The brothers designed other buildings in this vein - 454 Riverside Drive and the Hotel Theresa at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue - but none combined all these elements so explicitly.

THE brothers continued to work for developers on lofts and apartments through the 1920's, still giving their buildings distinctive elements, like the subtle vertical organization of the facade at 791 Park Avenue, at East 74th Street, built in 1924, and the zigzag, marine terra cotta band course at 210 East 68th Street, at Third Avenue, built in 1928. But these subsequent works were watered down versions of their innovations at 780 West End Avenue and the new style was not widely imitated.

Now 780 West End has seen the usual interior changes associated with such conversions. A new glitzy, black marble floor now covers the original lobby tile.

But except for a band of terra cotta at the parapet wall, stripped off in 1987, the exterior still survives in an unchanged, if shabby state. The tenants sought landmark designation in 1987, when the exterior work began, but the Landmarks Preservation Commission expressed no interest at the time.

A spokesman for the 780 West Corporation says that no further facade work is planned, so the Blums's unusual experiment is expected to remain generally intact.