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STREETSCAPES | WEST END AVENUE

A Preservation Handbook in a Few Short Blocks

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Museum of the City of New York, left; Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

'The Building with the Tower' When the Allendale, at 808 West End (99th Street), was designed in 1909, Rouse & Goldstone brought the water tank right to the corner and encased it in a striking Florentine-style temple. But the building was detempled earlier this year, leaving only a naked steel frame.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY
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WEST END AVENUE as it labors northward toward 96th Street presents a sort of humdrum tone — not nearly so distinguished as the blocks below 86th Street, with their bursts of Dutch- and Flemish-style

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architecture. But the stretch from 96th to 105th Streets is a perfect little laboratory of the design, decay and renewal of the apartment house of the 1910s.



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

According to the 1916 guide “Renting a Furnished Apartment,” West End was favored by the prosperous. It described “expensive baby carriages with their precious freight, rolled along by white-capped maids” as a common sight there.

Big buildings like the Tishman family’s Secessionist-style Dallieu, at 101st Street, had nine-room apartments renting for \$250 a month. The 1920 census shows that more than half of the residents employed cooks — even the one- and two-person households.

Start a downhill walk on West End Avenue at 105th Street, near the avenue’s terminus at Broadway. At the southwest corner, Rosario Candela designed 915 West End Avenue, one of his first buildings, in 1922. It has a certain dignified repose, but the exterior and the floor plans give no hint of the native genius his admirers often attribute to him.

The apartment houses in their current state are rich with examples of how not to repair buildings: the corner on No. 915 has been rebuilt, but the new caulking is bright white and brought flush to the surface, fighting the varied reddish tones of the brick itself. But a thoughtful mason has done something unusual with the expansion joint. Instead of inserting a straight vertical gap all the way up, he has staggered it so it looks like old-fashioned quoining.

The next three apartment houses on the same side were built by the Paterno family, all designed with a bold elegance by their favored architect, Gaetan Ajello, who left his name in each cornerstone.

But these near triplets have aged quite differently. The northernmost, 905, has a desolate, blighted look, especially over the entrance, where leaks from high up have come out through the brick, leaving behind great whitish salt stains called efflorescence. The cornice has been ripped off, the brick patching at the edges is a sad mismatch, and a crude line of electrical conduit runs from the original grand lamp bases to smaller fixtures set about six feet too low.

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By comparison, 895 West End Avenue, across 104th Street, has had all the luck. Its windows are original; their wooden frames have a texture that even expensive metal

INSIDE]

replacements cannot approach. In the 1990s, the firm of Walter B. Melvin Architects replaced a missing cornice with an estimable reinterpretation, using off-the-shelf brackets, but to good effect.

Best of all, the first two stories are in limestone in big rusticated blocks — it's sort of a mini-University Club — and the stone is blessedly unpainted. Bring a loupe, or even just a good pair of eyes, and peer up close at the ancient shells and other sea creatures from millions of years ago. There is a particularly scary spiderlike specimen below the second window to the left of the main entrance, and the whorls and patterns even run through the building's cornerstone. This part of West End has many good stretches of marine sediment turned to rock.

The last of the three Ajello-Paterno projects, No. 885, has a fancy canopy and far too fancy replacement doors, but no one has stripped the stone of its paint. Who knows what delights hide under it?

Across 103rd Street, 878 West End, also designed in 1922 by Candela, presents a peculiar spectral air. The absolutely plain pointed Venetian arches, the dead-flat brick facade and the half-missing cornice make this a good candidate for a Stephen King movie.

At 100th Street, 801 and 817 West End, both designed in 1910 for Arlington and Harvey Hall by Neville & Bagge, show how a pair of identical twins can get to distant cousinhood in a generation or two. With careless repointing, a bare scar instead of a cornice, and a filmy slush of waterproofing over its red brick, No. 817 is a shadow of its intact sibling, whose mortar is still deeply raked below the surface, its original carbon-black coloring enriching the red brick, not competing with it.

The saddest story of this stroll is the Allendale, at 808 West End (99th Street). Designed in 1909 by Rouse & Goldstone, this was "The Building With the Tower," according to ads in The New York Sun in 1910, which also called West End "the Fifth Avenue of the West Side." The tower was an ingenious redesign: the roof tank, usually set well back from the street, was brought right to the corner and encased in a gorgeous Florentine-style temple. But the Allendale was detempled earlier this year, leaving only a naked steel frame.

At 98th Street, No. 782 is still marvelously intact. It was designed in 1912 by Nast & Springsteen with a warm orange tapestry brick and coppery-gold terra cotta that remain deliciously untouched.

Across the street, Blum & Blum, the firm that designed 838 West End Avenue, also did the all-white 780 West End. The entranceway is an electric buzz of intricate terra-cotta ornamentation. It should be a multicolored portal in the Alhambra, but instead it is a snowfield of glazed clay, a hypnotic end to a half mile of apartment-house architecture.

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