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Streetscapes/Manhattan; 2 Little-Known Architects of Distinctive Buildings

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

FEW people know about Boak & Paris, but one of them is Annice Alt, who in the last two years has become a principal scholar and prime booster of the two architects, designers of some of the most inventive and distinctive Manhattan apartment buildings of the 1930's.

Mrs. Alt, 70, grew up in Evanston, Ill., where, she said, "everyone knew about Frank Lloyd Wright." But she did not have much time for architectural interests during her career as a child care consultant, from which she retired in 1995. In 1987 she and her husband, Franz, a mathematician, left an apartment at 86th Street and West End Avenue to move to 250 Cabrini Boulevard, at the corner of 187th Street, to an apartment with views of the Hudson, the Palisades and the George Washington Bridge.

Her nine-story building, put up in 1937, is not at first glance so different from others in the area, where styles run from subdued classical to zigzag Art Deco. But it does have a startling, almost intact lobby with a cream and black marble fireplace, nickel steel trim, doors with etched glass, colorful terrazzo flooring, original Moderne-style light fixtures and at least six pieces of what appears to be original lobby furniture. These include three bureaus and three tables in the Art Moderne style.

Mrs. Alt was interested in her building, and in 1999 she took a popular course on researching buildings, Urban Genealogy, given by the architectural historian Anthony Robins at the Municipal Art Society. With the skills she learned she found the original building application at the Department of Buildings and discovered that 250 Cabrini was designed by Boak & Paris for the developer Samuel Minskoff.

Curious about what kind of firm designed buildings in the Depression, she checked architectural books and building records in Manhattan and the Bronx to come up with a list of more than three dozen buildings.

She discovered that Russell M. Boak was born in 1896 in the Bronx, attended public school and, after finishing eighth grade, went to work as a draftsman in the office of the architect Emery Roth, who designed scores of Manhattan apartment buildings in the 1910's and 20's.

Boak's initials turn up in 1915 on the elevation drawings for 1000 Park Avenue, at 84th Street, and in 1925 on the firm's elevation drawings for 333 West End Avenue, at 76th Street. The initials of his future partner, Hyman F. Paris, appear only on floor plans prepared by the Roth firm.

It appears that nothing is known about Paris's birth, childhood or training. Sometimes the decorator William F. Paris is incorrectly cited as Boak's partner.

In 1927 Boak and Paris broke off to form their own firm. At first they designed "typical Emery Roth buildings, nice, but nothing special," Mrs. Alt said. Their early work included the apartment house at the northeast corner of 106th Street and Broadway.

In the 1930's, though, she said, their work became more inventive. They gave 315 Riverside Drive (designed in 1930 at 104th Street) definite Art Deco overtones, including strips of half-round molded brick running up the facade and unusual window grilles with stylized floral motifs.

IN 1932 Boak & Paris designed a pink and black terra cotta movie house on Broadway near 99th Street - now the Metro Theater, formerly the Midtown. It was designated a landmark in 1989. In 1933 they did their first building for Samuel Minskoff, an apartment house at 3 East 66th Street.

Many elements of their later work appear there: elegant window grilles of iron with brass trim; multicolored terrazzo floors of geometric style; varicolored marble lobby fireplaces; dropped living rooms; neo-Classical details reworked in modern style; sophisticated molded plaster ceiling decoration; and elaborate iron and brass entry doors, also in modern style.

Mrs. Alt said that Boak & Paris really hit their stride in the last half of the 30's, when they designed 50 East 78th Street (1936; also for Minskoff) with its curved inset entry lights and unusual lobby fixtures; 5 West 86th Street (1937), with its bundled-reed-type pilasters at the entry and crossed-spear ironwork on the door; and 160 East 89th Street (1937), with its embossed classical-style wall decoration and intact steel casement windows.

The typical high-style Boak & Paris building also has some corner steel casement windows and a simple parapet (usually interrupted by an urn or flat floral or leaf details) instead of a full cornice.

Together the architects did two remarkable things: they survived and even prospered during the 1930's, when more established architects could not, and they developed an elegant model for the urbane but down-sized apartment building in Depression-era New York.

"There's a panache to their buildings, they're not garish, like the zigzag Art Deco of architects like H. I. Feldman, Horace Ginsbern," Mrs. Alt said. Feldman's designs included Art Deco buildings on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx; Ginsbern's included the 1937 apartment house at 1150 Grand Concourse, at McClellan Place, and an Art Deco garage at 406 East 91st Street.

Boak and Paris split up in 1942. It appears that Paris retired, but in 1944 Boak entered into a partnership with Thomas O. Raad that also produced some inventive buildings, although with far fewer of the decorative touches that marked the 1930's work.

Among them were the angular sawtooth-plan apartment buildings at 430 and 440 East 56th Street, designed for the Doelger family in the 1950's. The buildings are surrounded by garden plots; the rear gardens, which could have been concealed from view, are left visible from the street, a sensitive touch.

Mrs. Alt is still discovering new things about Boak & Paris and serves as a clearinghouse for residents of the firm's other buildings -- like 444 Central Park West, at 104th Street, which has unusual tiled radiator covers, and 152 East 94th Street -- who have become concerned about doing sensitive restorations. She would like to prepare a monograph on the firm, one reason she retired from her co-op board last month.

For decades the facade flanking the entryway of 250 Cabrini has been covered in beige paint, which is

now peeling. Consultants had said the underlying surface was only terra cotta, but a trial stripping has revealed a rich, red Brescia marble.

Further investigation has indicated that the unusual built-in sidelights at her building's entryway -- painted black and abused -- are hidden treasures, not steel but brass, designed with full-height glass panels in each one, not just at the top. Even with a couple of years of research behind her, she is still coming up with surprises.