

A Block Full of Late-19th-Century Row Houses

Its look has remained largely unchanged for many decades.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

JOAN COHEN says she bought her brownstone at 41 West 70th Street five years ago because the peaceful, expansive block between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, with its generously sized late-19th-century row houses, has remained largely unchanged since a couple of apartment buildings sneaked in during the first part of the 20th century. But with an apartment house projected for a triple lot at 8 West 70th, the situation may be about to change.

The oldest row houses on the block are the picturesque brick and brownstone set at 60-64 West 70th, just in from Columbus Avenue, designed in 1886. They have unusual corner chimneys and panels of carved ornament of almost Celtic form, designed by Hubert, Pirsson & Company.

Across the street, the developer-architect Charles Bueck built the row at 53-63 West 70th in 1891, giving the houses slightly varying facades to avoid the cookie-cutter quality that high-end purchasers had come to shy away from. In the early 1890's, Gilbert Schellenger designed two slightly more conventional sets of houses, at Nos. 33-41 (1892) and Nos. 43-51 West 70th (1891).

Not long after the house at No. 51 was built, it was bought by Dr. Simon Baruch, a social activist and advocate of municipal baths. Baruch, who was born in Germany and emigrated to Virginia before the Civil War, had been a surgeon in the Confederate army. Along with his wife, Isabelle, he generally opposed feminist causes like suffrage. In 1914, Mrs. Baruch was interviewed by The New York Times under the headline "Modern Womanhood Sadly Shirks Its Holy Duty."

Their son, Bernard M. Baruch, a financier and an adviser to Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman, lived in the house for a few years when he was in his 20's.

Across on the south side of the street, a house at No. 38 is the only one left of a group designed in 1888 by the architect Charles Clinton. An early photograph shows a picturesque row, with varying roof lines with Flemish gables. Next to it, at 40-58 West 70th, the architects Thom & Wilson designed a suave, elegant series of brick and brownstone houses, with particularly graceful carving in brownstone around the windows.



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A close inspection, by ascending the stoops, reveals details like inner storm doors set into angled recesses. When they are folded away, they look as if they are part of the paneling in the vestibule. Several of these houses have deliciously untouched brownstone, deep and rich; they have not been misguidedly restored with the usual brown stucco.

In this row two families with now-familiar names — Goldman and Sachs — once lived side by side, at Nos. 44 and 46 West 70th. Samuel Sachs lived at No. 44 in the 1890's with his wife, Louisa, two children and six servants. He had been associated since 1882 with his father-in-law, Marcus Goldman, in the firm of Goldman, Sachs. Goldman lived next door at No. 46. Both these houses, and many in this row, have exquisite quartered oak visible in their vestibules, with the bright highlights and deeper, mellow sections typical of the Victorian era.

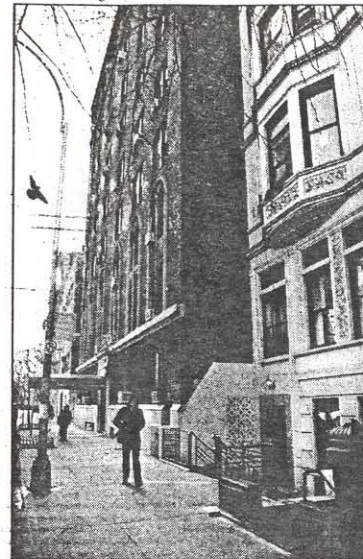
Next door to the 1888 house at No. 38 is the nine-story 30 West 70th of 1916, an early apartment house project by the developer Julius Tishman.

Back on the north side of the street, two

separate rows extend to the corner apartment house at 101 Central Park West: 23-31 West 70th, designed by Gilbert Schellenger and finished in 1892; and 9-21 West 70th, built in 1894 and designed by Thom & Wilson. Although the Schellenger houses have some competent carving on the lower sections of their oriel windows, he did not have the touch Thom & Wilson did. Their row is light and sophisticated, with a deft use of Roman brick.

The Austrian-born psychiatrist Abraham A. Brill lived in the house at No. 15 in the 1910's and 1920's. His 1948 obituary in The Times said that he introduced writings of Freud to the English-speaking world by lecturing and translating Freud's books, among them "The Interpretation of Dreams," published in English in 1913. "Many new phrases, which have now become household words, such as 'libido' and 'Oedipus Complex,' were first introduced into the American language by Dr. Brill," The Times said.

On the south side of the street, Thom & Wilson designed another row in the early 1890's, Nos. 22-28. The Real Estate Record



Graham Morrison for The New York Times

The south side of West 70th Street looking toward Central Park West, with Congregation Shearith Israel at the corner, in 1937, left. The block today, above. The apartment house, at No. 18, was built in 1925.

and Guide noted that in each house there was a gas log fireplace next to the commode in the bathroom, a room that it said was "unsurpassed on the West Side." The room also included a divan and a shower "with India rubber enclosure" — an apparent reference to the shower curtain.

Of another row, designed by Buchman & Deisler, only No. 20 survives. Next door, at No. 18, is a 1925 apartment house, and beyond that a vacant lot at 10 West 70th.

Except for the two midblock apartment buildings, this block of 70th Street saw little change through the 1920's — at least physical change. The 1925 census recorded the Canadian-born Anna Swift, 40, described as a chiropractor, living in a house at 8 West 70th Street with her sister, two nieces, a nephew and three servants. In 1936, Swift, who operated 8 West 70th as the "Danish Institute," was convicted of prostitution. She served a sentence, but then in 1940 was arrested again at the house — along with several women described as masseuses — and again convicted.

After World War II the changes were incremental, although Swift's house, near

Central Park West, was taken over by Congregation Shearith Israel, whose synagogue building is at the corner. In 1953 the congregation remade it and an adjacent building into a community house.

The first design was for a glass-walled structure, but the congregation ultimately chose a masonry front very evocative of its time — with two-tone cast stone, an off-center entry with a beveled surround, and banded bays of windows.

There are a few other midcentury traces on the block, some rather nice, like the 1950's terrazzo floor in the lobby of 54 West 70th with the cardinal points of the compass. But a few are rather painful, like the rather brutal subdivisions into apartments of once elegant houses like Nos. 59 and 61.

In recent years the large row houses on this block have attracted a generation of owners who have recombined cut-up apartments and rebuilt at least one lost stoop. In 1999 the architects Feingold & Gregory designed a new stoop for No. 9, a project completed in 2000.

The house at No. 41 is empty and partly gutted, as the Cohens begin the long process of reconverting it from apartment use. Mrs. Cohen said that they bought in 1998 but did not get full possession until last year. She said that much of the interior detail had been lost but that she was attracted to the house because she "can't see any postwar construction from the front or the rear," except for the Shearith Israel community house.

That may change. Last year the architects Platt Byard Dovell White filed plans for an apartment building to replace the Shearith Israel community house and the vacant lot at No. 10. Samuel White of the firm said that the building would be built by Shearith Israel, working with a developer yet to be chosen, and that it would be 14 stories tall — shorter than the 18-story apartment house at 101 Central Park West across the street.

Mr. White said that the design, which requires the approval of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and other agencies, would provide Shearith Israel with income, as well as four floors of offices, classrooms and meeting rooms. The block is part of the Central Park West Historic District.

He said that his firm had avoided a retro feeling and had designed a facade with a screen of warm-colored stone in front of a glass wall, with the stone dropped back from the corners to reveal the glass. "We wanted a sharp definition between the synagogue and this building," he said. ■