

THE CHARACTER OF CENTRAL PARK WEST

Central Park West, the northern continuation of Eighth Avenue, runs along the western edge of Central Park. As it extends through the district, the avenue is characterized by a varied skyline rising above a uniform street wall. Constructed over roughly a fifty-year period, 1880-1930, low-scale institutional buildings, medium-scale apartment buildings, and soaring twin-towered apartment buildings designed in a number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century styles define Central Park West as a grand proscenium to the architectural variety of the district.

Today one of New York's finest residential streets, Eighth Avenue (renamed Central Park West between 59th and 110th Street in 1883) in the mid-nineteenth century was ungraded, unpaved, and led through a rural area spotted with rocky outcroppings, roaming goats, and modest wood-frame houses. As the city's population expanded during this period, demand for a public park increased to ameliorate crowding and benefit all of the people of New York. Land was set aside for a large park between Fifth and Eighth Avenues, extending from 59th to 110th Street. With the creation of Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux after their "Greensward" plan of 1857-58, as well as a series of transportation improvements such as the Eighth Avenue street rail line, opened from midtown to 84th Street in 1864, and the Ninth Avenue Elevated Railway (1879), the Upper West Side in general experienced a period of intense real estate speculation which lasted into the early 1880s before development began in earnest. Olmsted correctly predicted that the land immediately adjacent to the park would quickly rise in value and that the area would develop into a prime residential neighborhood. Initially, however, the west side opposite Central Park, unlike the more fashionable east side, did not attract the wealthy people who could afford the inflated prices of the land bordering the park. On the other hand, land prices along the park rose to such a degree that most speculative builders shied away from rowhouse and tenement construction, for which they would receive relatively modest returns. While the side streets of the district were built up with rows of speculatively-built houses during the 1880s and 1890s, Central Park West remained largely undeveloped.

A few of the buildings constructed during this early period of speculation and development remain on the avenue, such as the three surviving single-family houses of an original row of nine at 247, 248, and 249 Central Park West (Edward L. Angell, 1887-88), two houses of an original row of five at Nos. 354 and 355 (Gilbert A. Schellenger, 1892-93), and the Lolita, a flats building at No. 227 (Thom & Wilson, 1888-89). However, the early character of the avenue was really established by two great monuments: the Dakota, the pioneering luxury apartment building at West 72nd Street (Henry J. Hardenbergh, 1880-84), and the American Museum of Natural History between West 77th and 81st Streets in Manhattan Square (first building designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould, begun 1874), both designated New York City Landmarks. On the heels of these initial farsighted efforts came a number of low-scale institutional buildings during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Among them were the Synagogue of

Congregation Shearith Israel at 99 Central Park West (Brunner & Tryon, 1896-97), a designated New York City Landmark, and the Church of the Divine Paternity (now the Church of the Fourth Universalist Society) at the southwest corner of Central Park West and West 76th Street (William A. Potter, 1897-98), in the Central Park West - West 76th Street Historic District. Concurrent with this period of development several apartment hotels and apartment buildings were constructed in the 1890s, including the Hotel Beresford at the northwest corner of Central Park West and West 81st Street, the Majestic at West 71st Street, the El Dorado at West 90th Street, and the San Remo at West 75th Street, all later replaced by their towered namesakes of the 1920s and 1930s. Several grand luxury apartment buildings constructed prior to World War I increased the prestige of Central Park West, including the Prasada at the southwest corner of West 65th Street (Charles William Romeyn, 1905-07) and the Kenilworth at the northwest corner of West 75th Street (Townsend, Steinle & Haskell, 1906-08, in the Central Park West-West 76th Street Historic District). This phase of development was effectively halted by the war.

The next and last phase of development to have a major impact on Central Park West accompanied the economic prosperity of the 1920s, and was enhanced by the anticipation of the opening in 1932 of the new Independent subway line (IND) which runs below Central Park West with stops at West 72nd, 81st, and 86th Streets. At roughly the same time, the city widened the avenue bed from forty-eight feet to sixty-three feet. This period saw the construction of large-scale apartment buildings, in particular the towered buildings that give Central Park West its special skyline silhouette. With the enactment of the Multiple Dwelling Law in 1929, which allowed residential buildings of large ground area greater height and the use of towers, it became possible to build skyscraper apartment buildings. (For more information on the Multiple Dwelling Law, see the section of this report on multiple dwellings). The Beresford Apartments between West 81st and 82nd Streets (Emery Roth, 1928-29, a designated New York City Landmark), with its roofline animated by the prominent treatment of the water towers at three corners, presaged the appearance of the twin-towered apartment buildings that followed in the next three years. These distinctive buildings, all of which occupy entire blockfronts along Central Park West, include the Century Apartments between 62nd and 63rd Streets (Irwin S. Chanin and Jacques L. Delamarre, Sr., 1931), the Majestic Apartments between 71st and 72nd Streets (Irwin S. Chanin, 1930-31), the San Remo Apartments between 74th and 75th Streets (Emery Roth, 1929-30), and the Eldorado Apartments between 90th and 91st Streets (Margon & Holder with Emery Roth as consultant, 1929-31); all are designated New York City Landmarks. With the Great Depression, the heyday of construction on Central Park West came to an end; the dynamic twin-towered buildings serve as a brilliant climax to the last great surge of development activity on the avenue.

The large buildings fronting on Central Park West extend back from the avenue into the side street blocks of the district and have an impact on these streetscapes. The side street facades of these buildings, while displaying materials and details that are compatible with the rowhouses on the side streets, are erected on the building line in contrast to the rowhouses which are set back from the street behind areaways. The interplay

between the low-scale character of the rowhouse groups which dominate the side streets and the large-scale character of the taller buildings that terminate these blocks on Central Park West reinforces that role of the avenue as an eastern frame of the district.

The buildings lining Central Park West demonstrate the use of exuberant styles and materials as varied and picturesque as the avenue's skyline. As seen from Central Park this distinctive silhouette — composed of buildings of differing scale and style richly clad in brick and stone and punctuated by an assortment of roofline treatments such as gables, mansards, and soaring towers — presents a picture of architectural variety unique in New York City.

The surviving late-nineteenth century buildings, such as the Lolita designed in the Renaissance Revival style with neo-Grec and Queen Anne elements, employ contrasting materials to achieve polychromatic effects. The Queen Anne style rowhouses at 247, 248, and 249 Central Park West, executed in brick and finely-carved stone, are crowned by prominent slate roofs punctuated by gables and chimneys. The first great apartment building in the district, the Dakota, is an unusual example of the German Renaissance Revival style combining a bold massing of forms and a free use of historical detail in contrasting brick, stone, and terra cotta. The Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church at 51-55 Central Park West (Schickel & Ditmars, 1902-03) is an example of the neo-Gothic style in striking rusticated stone, while the Synagogue of Congregation Shearith Israel, faced in smooth stone, is a more formal example of Academic Classicism. A rare example of the Art Nouveau/Secessionist style in the district is the Society for Ethical Culture Auditorium at 33 Central Park West (Robert D. Kohn, 1913, a designated New York City Landmark). This building adds a special note of interest to the variety found in the district.

At first the designs of the apartment buildings of the early twentieth century continued to utilize polychromy and contrasting materials, even as massing became more formal and regularized. An example is the Beaux-Arts style Kenilworth, which is faced in red brick with white stone trim and crowned with a slate mansard roof pierced with dormers. As the neo-Renaissance style proliferated toward the end of the first decade of this century, facade composition and the use of contrasting materials became more restrained. The Brookford, at 315 Central Park West (Schwartz & Gross, 1911-12) reflects this aesthetic; its tripartite composition features a facade faced in brown brick with stone and terra cotta trim concentrated at the base and upper stories. Terra cotta would assume greater importance as a building material during the construction boom of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The buildings on Central Park West designed in the late 1920s by noted architect Emery Roth illustrate his distinctive aesthetic which combines modern massing with ornament inspired by Italian Renaissance and Baroque sources. The work of this architect reflects the transition from the neo-Renaissance aesthetic, in which classically-inspired ornament is applied to the facade, to the stylized detail and bold massing of the Art Deco style. One of Roth's works, the Beresford, is an example of the large-scale

apartment buildings constructed on Central Park West beginning in the late 1920s. Faced in brick and stone, it is embellished with Renaissance- and Baroque-inspired elements, while the top stories are stepped back, influenced by zoning laws, and given emphatic treatment in a manner characteristic of buildings designed in the current Art Deco style. The neo-Renaissance style reached a culmination in Roth's design for the twin-towered San Remo Apartments, faced in light brick with Italian Renaissance details executed in monochromatic stone, terra cotta, and metal. As Art Deco style apartment buildings proliferated, the use of contrasting color and materials gained a new importance in architectural design, emphasizing texture, pattern, and stylized motifs from a variety of sources. The Ardsley (Emery Roth, 1930-31), located at 320 Central Park West, is faced in brick with bold, linear cast-stone trim derived from Mayan sources. The Century and the Majestic, both with sophisticated twin-towered designs by Irwin S. Chanin, are among the most notable residential buildings in New York that embrace the Art Deco aesthetic.

The character of Central Park West is the result of two major development phases extending over a period of roughly fifty-five years, from 1880 to 1930. Only two buildings have been constructed on the avenue in the past twenty-five years, thus Central Park West remains much the same as it was in the 1930s, and retains the architectural variety and dramatic silhouette that make it a unique presence in New York City.

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