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Streetscapes/Cliff Dwelling at 96th Street and Riverside Drive; A Terra Cotta Masterpiece in Unusual Dimensions

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE Mayan- and Aztec-style terra cotta on the 1916 Cliff Dwelling, at 96th Street and Riverside Drive, makes it one of the most unusual apartment houses in New York. This year, the co-op finished repairing its east elevation -- just in time to have it covered by a new building next door.

After 1905, Riverside Drive developed as an avenue of apartment buildings, and real estate operators circled around the odd triangular plot at the northeast corner of 96th Street and Riverside, only nine feet wide at one end. In 1916, after attempts to join it with the larger inside lot facing 96th Street were unsuccessful, the investor Leslie R. Palmer built a 12-story apartment building adapted to its unlikely dimensions.

Palmer, a Westchester banker and, later, a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, had already built the highly colored loft building at the southeast corner of 14th Street and Seventh Avenue, which has remarkable terra cotta work. For that building, finished in 1913, Palmer worked with the architect Herman Lee Meader, who had just started his own practice.

Meader worked out a plan for the Cliff Dwelling that made the best use of its shallow lot: he put all the rooms facing 96th and Riverside. On the rear wall, facing east, he put the stairway, elevators and a few secondary windows. The Cliff Dwelling was built as an apartment hotel, with five one- and two-bedroom suites on each floor served by a restaurant on the mezzanine.

On the exterior, Meader again used terra cotta inventively. His designs of double-headed snakes, the skulls of cows, mountain lions, scowling masklike faces, spears and various American Indian details were worked into ornament. In 1916, The New York Herald praised the Cliff Dwelling's appearance on a lot that had been considered "only fit for a billboard" and hailed its "made-in-America feeling." The Herald said its name opened up a new horizon for developers who had "exhausted the supply of names and styles from every famous palace, chateau and castle in Europe."

The lobby was furnished with Navajo rugs; tiles of tan, green, black and blood red; and zigzag designs on the lamps and elevator cages reminiscent of American Indian designs.

It appears the architect, not the client, was responsible for the building's unusual design. Meader designed a simpler but similar building for a different client at the southeast corner of 25th Street and Lexington Avenue.

Meader's niece, Madeira Meader, of Honeoye Falls, N.Y., near Rochester, said family accounts paint Herman Meader as "eminently a fun guy." Her daughter, Jane Meader, says a family memoir elaborates on the architect's career. After training at Harvard, he worked in New York for Raymond Almirall and Ernest Flagg, both of whom were known for terra cotta and color effects in their architecture. He was intensely interested in Mayan and Aztec architecture and made regular expeditions to Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán and other sites.

In New York, Meader held elaborate parties at his penthouse apartment at 8 West 33rd Street, which attracted musicians, artists, writers, prizefighters, chess players and others -- at one, Meader staged a fight between a black snake and a king snake.

The first tenants of the Cliff Dwelling were small households: an artist, a magistrate, a theater manager, a children's clothing designer. In 1932, the building was converted to housekeeping apartments, and kitchens were awkwardly installed in the old foyers and even living rooms.

The building was converted to a co-op in 1979, says Douglas Schoettle, an architect and now the co-op's president, who bought his apartment in 1988. The tenants took over the mortgage and paid back taxes, which cost the original tenants of Mr. Schoettle's one-bedroom apartment about \$15,000. The apartment, on the 10th floor, has sweeping views up and down the Hudson and a view north to the George Washington Bridge from his bathroom, but guests must enter the living room through a galley kitchen.

Because of its small size and cramped kitchens, the Cliff Dwelling has an unusual provision: adjoining apartments have right of first refusal on sales, and there have been numerous combinations in the building, which was built with five apartments on each floor. "We don't have a full-floor apartment yet, but we're getting close," Mr. Schoettle said.

Over the years, the tenants have brought up new plumbing and electrical lines, installed a new elevator and continually repaired the facades, which are exposed to river winds and weather. Several years ago, developers began looking at the one-story parking garage on 96th Street that abuts the Cliff Dwelling's rear wall. "We got regular calls from builders who wanted to get a Riverside Drive address through our building, even tunneling through our basement," Mr. Schoettle said.

But last year, a new group announced plans for an apartment building, the Park West, which will almost completely cover the rear wall of the Cliff Dwelling. Mr. Schoettle says it will be three inches away, a separation required by earthquake codes, and the co-op decided to repair the wall at a cost of \$25,000 "as long as we were never going to see it again."

Mr. Schoettle says that while its new neighbor rises to the rear, the co-op worries about the Cliff Dwelling's face. Soon tenants will have to spend as much as \$100,000 to cure leaks in the cornice area, especially at what he calls "our rain god frieze." The spectacular lobby is also a problem; there is no doorman, so Navajo rugs or other furnishings are unlikely, but Mr. Schoettle would like to patch the unusual tilework damaged by new piping and other repairs.

But restoring the original metal and glass marquee -- torn off long ago -- seems out of reach. "It's so far down our dream list, we've taken it off," Mr. Schoettle said.

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