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STREETSCAPES | BROADWAY FROM 83RD TO 84TH STREET

An Architectural Revue



Left, Office for Metropolitan History; right, Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

The 1930 Art Deco Broadway Fashion Center building on the southwest corner of 84th, in 1941 (left) and today.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

Published: October 4, 2012 | 5 Comments

IT'S not really an urban suite; it's more of an off-tune architectural jug band, made up of three disparate buildings on Broadway from 83rd to 84th Street: an 1892 apartment house, an 1898 political club and a 1930 Art Deco building. The funny thing is that these quintessential Broadway structures are part of a new historic district — the Riverside-West End Historic District.

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The West Side Republican Club at 2307 Broadway, in 1898.

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According to the expectations of the 1880s, Riverside was supposed to be lined with millionaires' villas; Central Park West was supposed to replicate Fifth Avenue; and Broadway, ambitiously called the Boulevard, was meant to be a string of high-end shops, nightclubs, hotels and theaters.

By 1890, the West Side had dashed these hopes. Riverside was mostly vacant lots with only an occasional mansion. Central Park West was a string of big but hardly swank apartment houses. As for Broadway, The Real Estate Record and Guide described it that year as a collection of structures so miscellaneous it was "very little better than the back yard of a junk shop."

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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times  
2307 Broadway, today.

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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times  
The 1892 Amidon apartment house at 83rd.

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Into this unpromising environment came James Rufus Amidon, an investor either out of touch with local conditions or in the thrall of a dream. In 1892 he had Edward Angell design a seven-story apartment house bearing his name at the northwest corner of Broadway and 83rd Street.

Angell gave the Amidon a ladies' reception room on the ground floor, vestibules of Numidian marble and Mexican onyx, and seven-room apartments finished in white enamel and gold leaf with mantels in the style of Louis XV, Louis XVI and "Renaissance Rococo," according to The Record and Guide.

The layouts today would be considered tortured, with bedrooms and entertaining rooms strung out along long hallways, but the exterior is a pleasing work. Above a ground floor of marble rises a wall of mottled Roman brick the color of light-orange marmalade, with buttonlike details that impart a kinship with Stanford White's Century Association of 1890 on West 43rd Street.

The Amidon's tenants were fairly prosperous, but Christian Jacobson, the super, had to moonlight as a watchman on a Hudson River pier; he and his wife, Mamie, lived in the basement.

In late 1896, according to press accounts, he came home early from his shift and found his wife in bed with another man. After beating him senseless, he quarreled with his wife, and on New Year's Day 1897 he declared he would kill himself, a threat he had made before.

"Oh, that's the old story," she said. "Give me something fresh."

He did, for she next saw him with a rope around his neck, his toes just touching the floor. She did not act at once, claiming she thought he was just trying to frighten her; after cutting him down, it was clear he had not been.

The most remarkable Amidon tenant was surely Sophia Kremer, the Hungarian-born suffragist.

She was arrested for speaking at Broadway and 87th Street in 1911, the same year she started a restaurant and clubhouse for suffrage activities in a row house at 120 West 81st Street. The menu included Woman Suffrage Cake and suffrage ice cream, both yellow, the suffrage color.

"Pure food will be our slogan," Mrs. Kremer told The Syracuse Herald, denouncing the "slow poisoning" by adulterants in commercial food products.



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In 1914, The New York Herald reported that she handed out tickets to a suffrage lawn party to pupils at Public School 93. Laura Charlton, the principal, demanded the tickets back, telling the students that the suffragists “might lead you astray.”

But 15-year-old Gwendolyn La Pointe defied her, saying that she knew Mrs. Kremer and that she was “working hard for an honest cause; you have no right to take it from me.”

Women received the right to vote six years later.

Next door to the Amidon was the diminutive 1898 West Side Republican Club. It has lost its ground floor (and basement bowling alley) to Duane Reade, but the two upper floors are still intact, including the small inset balcony with a curved coffered ceiling. It was designed by Julius Schweinfurth.

In 1899 Theodore Roosevelt spoke to the club’s members, and The New York Times quoted him as saying: “Some shrewd people are apt to speak of our politicians as if they were a class apart. The men in public life, the men in public positions, are what the men in private life make them.”

Broadway continued in this manner through the 1920s, with a few large apartment houses but also much miscellany. In 1930 Sugarman & Berger designed the last piece of this blockfront, the four-story Broadway Fashion Center Building at the 84th Street corner.

A four-story commercial building was a few steps — no, flights — down for the architects. In 1929 they had filed plans for 17 buildings in [Manhattan](#), reaching heights of up to 30 stories. But in 1930, they filed plans for only three, and this one was the largest.

The developer, Abraham Gewirtz, was in the dress business but went into real estate, and this building was for fabric, fur, corset and gown businesses. It is an agreeable Art Deco work of black terra-cotta block but, to judge by what you can see from the sidewalk, its Art Deco lobby is getting a particularly brutal renovation.

The problem with Broadway was that “nobody knew precisely what to do with it,” said The Record and Guide in 1901, explaining the helter-skelter development along what should have been a Champs-Élysées.

But the tepid streetscape of West End Avenue, while respectable and homogeneous, is like a homework assignment you keep putting off; Broadway is like playing hooky.

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