

REAL ESTATE

January 8, 2006



28, 126, 124 and 122 East 95th today. The original residents had their choice of red or buff brick; brown, olive or gray stone; round, bay, oval or arched windows; and rooflines with peaks, gables or corbels.

A Dozen 1888 Brownstones, Where Variety Reigns

By **CHRISTOPHER GRAY**

THE architectural shorthand for alternating variations in a row of brownstones is A-B-A-B-A-B, when two patterns repeat, and A-B-C-A-B-C, if there are three. But the dozen scrumptious dwellings built in 1888 at 116 to 138 East 95th Street tumble down the steep block from Park to Lexington in happy abandon, starting at A and never looking back through J, K and finally L.

This Queen-Anne-style half-alphabet of brick, sandstone and terra cotta was designed by the otherwise obscure C. Abbott French & Company for the developers John P. C. Walsh and William J. Walsh. The houses were first occupied by residents like Elias Einstein, a cloak manufacturer who lived at No. 122, and Max Wertheimer, a sponge merchant who lived at No. 132. One house, No. 126, sold for \$14,750 in 1891.

The original residents could choose from a wide assortment of the picturesque - red or buff brick; brown, olive or gray stone; round, bay, oval or arched windows; and rooflines with peaks, gables or corbels, each building a little canvas of the house-builder's art.

At No. 118, the first devil face appears, a red terra cotta keystone of an intricately horned, grinning Satan that also pops up farther down the row. Next door at No. 120 the same face looks out, but

in this case in buff terra cotta and alternating with abstractly modeled blocks.

At the top of No. 120 a wild leafy face stares out from the gable at the top. Next door at No. 122 - where Elias Einstein lived - the flowing beard of a fearsome Zeus-like head mixes with a panel of whirling vines, while his headdress expands up onto the base of an oriel, or projecting, window. The wonderfully outrageous bright salmon paint job dates from the 1940's but glistens from a recent reapplication.

The house at No. 124 - red brick and terra cotta with brownstone trim - boasts a voluptuous broken pediment in terra cotta over the main floor, wittily mended by a taut band of ribbon in the same material. Another leafy monster of terra cotta snarls out from the gable, surrounded by a vortex of vines set in an intricately roughened clay background.

Most of the houses have oversize features at the second floor - projecting windows in square, angled or round form - but at No. 126 the ground floor has a great, spreading half-arch of windows, eight feet wide, with lovely dimples and swirls in the ancient glass.

No. 134 has a somewhat industrial facade of simple red brick, but with an oval, multipaned window on the second floor whimsically set into a brownstone cradle. Next door, No. 136 has lovely olive-colored stone on the lower floors with a wall-to-wall arch above, below two rondels of grimacing terra cotta faces.

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The last house, No. 138, is another potpourri, its great oriel bay designed with 12-pane transoms and curved sides, and flanked by a checkerboard brick wall. This "wild work" - as the 19th-century critic Montgomery Schuyler labeled it - was common west of Central Park but rare on the East Side, where taste was less adventurous.

Perhaps because of the inherent variety in the 95th Street group, later alterations were less frequent than in the earlier uniform brownstone rows. Some stoops have been removed, one facade was entirely rebuilt and there is a mystery at No. 138 - at some point before 1940, an owner went to great lengths to remove a decorative panel or medallion just under the cornice.

One house, No. 136, is severely neglected, with broken windows, peeling paint and padlocked window gates - the hurt puppy of the row. But in the last 10 or 15 years most of the others have been burnished to a comfortable polish, not too shiny but still bringing out their boisterous charm.

Louise Hirschfeld lives at No. 122, the house her husband, the artist Al Hirschfeld, bought in 1948. She says it was he who painted it salmon - a shade he chose to emulate the house of Claude Monet in Giverny, France. It has changed little since he died in 2003 - indeed since long before that.

His venerable drawing board - deeply scarred from cutting mats - is still tilted at the front window in his top-floor studio. And the parlor floor is as he rebuilt it when he moved in, a single great space with smooth wood cabinetry and other midcentury design, dotted with his collection of South Pacific masks, exotic drums and other acquisitions. His daughter, Nina - whose name was hidden so many times in so many of his theater drawings - had the front room on the floor above, just underneath his studio.

Julia Bradford has lived since the 1970's at No. 126, which is spiffy and organized compared with the laissez-faire of the Hirschfeld house. On the second floor, she has an original fireplace, with a frame of luminous blue tiles surrounded by spindly Queen Anne-style cabinetwork.

From the outside, No. 126 presents the perfect house fantasy for the real estate voyeur, its great arched window freshly painted green in December with a Christmas tree visible at center. Indeed, Ms. Bradford, a learning specialist, said she moved there because "I fell in love with the windows."

The main floor of No. 134 is 50's modern. David and Suzanne Todd didn't find much original woodwork when they moved in during that decade, said Mr. Todd, an architect and former chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. But the library - behind the oval window on the second floor - is rich and dark with books and furniture from the lower Mississippi region (Mr. Todd's mother was from Vicksburg).

Outside the front door is a lovely large brass bell plate, utterly plain. It used to carry their name, but it now is worn to a near-mirror finish, the letters erased by decades of guests who walked through their doorway.

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