

## Streetscapes: 27 West 67th Street; An Artists' Co-op, Put Up for Art's Sake

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY  
Published: September 10, 1995

THE 1903 co-op at 27 West 67th Street is one of the most important apartment houses in the history of New York City, but even after a million-dollar restoration project, it still looks like a factory. The original artist-owners didn't mind, however, because all they wanted was studio space -- the idea of making money came later.

The early movement for apartment houses for the well-to-do, beginning about 1880, was closely connected to the development of artists' studios -- the first co-op, the Rembrandt, at 152 West 57th Street, had both studio and conventional apartments.

But financial, legal and marketing problems ended the early elite apartment boom about 1885, and by the turn of the century the gentry were still complaining about the problems of private-house life, even as they filled the streets with town houses.

Artists, who usually needed high spaces and north light, also worked at a disadvantage. Robert V. V. Sewell, a mural painter, reported in 1903 that "any old skylight or hole in the wall has been placarded with the sign 'Studio to let.' "

Another painter, Henry Ward Ranger, conceived of a plan to build a high-rise studio/co-op but was rebuffed by speculative builders. He finally persuaded nine other artists -- including Childe Hassam, Frank Dumond and Walter Russell -- to do it themselves. Some were living in earlier studio buildings -- Hassam had been in the Rembrandt. But several others were in the suburbs -- Dumond in Rockland County.

In 1901 they chose West 67th Street, off Central Park West, a ragged block of stables, a planing mill, a warehouse and vacant lots. But it was next to Central Park and it backed up onto the rowhouses of West 68th Street, where restrictions effectively prohibited tall buildings. Assurance of light and proximity to an established residential district and Central Park made it a smart real-estate move.

The artist syndicate's architect, Sturgis & Simonson, refined the duplex/studio plan that had been used in the 1880's, matching a double-height studio in the rear -- facing north -- to single-height living and sleeping rooms doubled up in the front. Completed in 1903, the building had 14 studios, plus smaller rental apartments. Photographs of the studio interiors show them decorated in grand, Romantic style, filled with carpets, artistic knickknacks and giant artworks.

But the industrial Gothic exterior of red and black brick with green window frames was "not a thing of beauty," said The New York Times, which called it "a somewhat ornate factory . . . tall, bulky and sad."

This, too, fit in with the artists' scheme, avoiding the cheap tin cornices and tawdry catalogue ornament that speculative builders used to dress up their buildings. The lobby, with its plain marble wainscot, simple Classical mural by Sewell, cramped spaces and low ceiling, would have puzzled a commercial builder, but the absence of show suited the tenants just fine.

It appears that the original 10 artists split the total cost of \$350,000, and there is no evidence that they sought anything but a roof over their heads -- at first. But later reports indicate that they returned a 23 percent profit on their investment, and of course they had their apartments.

In 1905 a related syndicate, this time with more than shelter on its mind, successfully built 33 West 67th Street, this time with a more decorated front, and everyone saw that the game had changed. Ranger, Dumond, Hassam, Russell and others spread out and built co-ops at 130 and 140 West 57th Street, 2, 15 and 40 West 67th Street, and 44 West 77th Street.

Another co-op they put up, the Hotel des Artistes, at 1 West 67th, firmly fixed the block's position as an artistic center, and Noel Coward, James Montgomery Flagg, Fannie Hurst and other writers and artists moved to the street. In this period a 4-bedroom unit sold for \$18,000 to \$30,000, with maintenance of \$150 to \$200 a month.

In 1929 Pease & Elliman advertised the thoroughly conventional building at 40 West 67th Street using the phrase, "You'll find them fascinating -- these new co-operative apartments in 'The Artists' Colony.' " The original development of 27 West 67th Street can fairly be said to have opened the way -- as to social class and co-op theme -- for the development of elite apartment houses all over Manhattan after 1910.

In the last eight years the co-op has spent about \$1 million in facade repairs and the installation of a roof garden. According to Charles DiSanto of Walter B. Melvin, Architect, the project architect, the renovations include rebuilding the upper masonry and parapets, putting up a new copper roof and dormers, and rebuilding the moat.

The board is entertaining the idea of cleaning the building -- in some places soiling removes the distinction between the red and black brick. Such a project would permit a fairer appraisal of just how this building first looked to its builders -- before they saw the color of green.