

# Living Together

with Andrew S. Dolkart

## TENEMENTS

### **The First Multiple Dwellings**

Apartment houses only became acceptable for middle-class people in the late nineteenth century, and not until the early twentieth century did the very wealthy begin to move into apartment houses. So the first multiple dwellings were the tenements that were erected largely for poor immigrants. So I think we'll look first at the mid-nineteenth-century tenements and at reform housing efforts before we turn our attention to middle-class apartment buildings.

Exactly when the first tenement appeared isn't known. Some historians have dated it back to the 1830s, others to the 1840s, but it's clear that by the 1860s tenements—that is, buildings that were specifically built to house large numbers of poor families in the same structure with very few amenities—begin to appear in large numbers.

In the 1860s and 1870s, hundreds of tenements are built, primarily on the Lower East Side and in other neighborhoods of southern Manhattan, as more and more poor immigrants are arriving in New York City. When these tenements were built, there were almost no laws regulating tenement construction. In the early 1860s, the laws mandated that there be a fire escape on a building, that it have a strong, fireproof party wall. But very little else was mandated, and even those rules that were on the books were largely ignored by owners because there was no way of making sure that these rules were followed.

The earliest tenements were built on the 25-foot-wide lots that were laid out as part of the New York grid, so it was on a lot that had been planned to house a single family. Suddenly you had 20 or 22 families living in a custom-built building. These tenements were built with almost no amenities. What I like to call *pre-law tenements*, such as the building that the Tenement Museum now occupies on Orchard Street, were built with four apartments per floor, three rooms in each apartment. That's 12 rooms on which only one room in each apartment had a window. The inner room and the second inner room had no windows. There was almost no light, no ventilation. Although water was available on Orchard Street, and sewage was available on Orchard Street, owners were not required to hook in to these lines, and so there was no water in the building. There were probably toilets in the backyard that could be flushed once a day perhaps, if even that, by an owner's representative. So conditions were very, very poor, and people lived in enormously crowded situations.

A tenement reformer named Ernest Flagg, also one of the great New York architects, wrote about the 25-foot-wide-lot tenement, and he said that "[T]he greatest evil which ever befell New York City was the division of the blocks into lots of 25 x 100 feet. So true is this, that no other disaster can for a moment be compared with it. Fires, pestilence, and financial troubles are as nothing in comparison; for from this division has arisen the New York system of tenement-houses, the worst curse which ever afflicted any great community." Now this may be a little bit overwritten, but nonetheless it gives you an impression of how terrible conditions were.

When the buildings were new, when the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street was new in the 1860s, it probably provided a decent place for immigrants, and the early residents were largely German in this case because most immigrants to New York in the mid-nineteenth century were German and Irish. But by the late nineteenth century, as little maintenance was done on the building as it deteriorated and as more and more people lived in the building, conditions got even worse.

### **Dumbbell Tenements**

The plan of the buildings is extremely interesting. The apartments were less than twelve and a half feet wide, and the rooms measured maybe 11 by 13, and the inner room, the second inner room, was a tiny little bedroom, which must have

been an extraordinarily claustrophobic place in which to live.

This type of plan was attacked by tenement reformers. There were a lot of people that wanted to improve by legal mandate the construction of tenements. And there was a huge campaign to get buildings like this building to be declared illegal to construct anymore. And the first major tenement house law was passed in 1879 and led to what are referred to as *old-law tenements* or *dumbbell tenements*.

These were tenements that were built on a 25-foot-wide lot, still. And they were an effort at reform, but were a failure because although the reform required that there be a window in every room, many of these windows looked out on tiny little shafts. The buildings were pinched in the middle so that they had a dumbbell shape, thus the term dumbbell tenement. And they had these tiny light slots or light shafts in the middle that were so narrow that you could actually reach out and shake your neighbor's hand. They received almost no light, unless you lived on the top floor. If it was a hot day and people opened their windows, you might have 20 or 22 families living with their windows open in this tiny little shaft, so [imagine] the noise and the smells of all of these apartments. Plus people could throw garbage out into them, and there was no way of actually getting into the light court to clean it. And they served as flues in a fire.

So basically it was a disaster. As *House and Garden* magazine wrote, "The dumbbell block is perhaps the worst type of tenement ever allowed in a modern, enlightened community. The halls and ten of the fourteen rooms on each floor are dark and ill-ventilated, dependent for light and air solely upon narrow airshafts which give little or no light below the top floors."

### **The Business of Tenements**

So although this [dumbbell tenement] was meant to be reform, it really was a failure. But it was the law from 1879 until 1901, when what was called the *new law* was passed, and basically the new law outlawed the construction of tenements on 25-foot-wide lots. There was a realization that in order to create apartment buildings for working people that were livable, they had to be larger, and there had to be larger light courts. And so the big change comes in 1901 where there's a

minimum room size, every room had to have a window, the windows had to open up on light courts that maybe weren't huge, but at least they added a little bit of light and air into each building. However, there are still many, many pre-law tenements and old-law tenements that are still lived in because many of them were never torn down.

Because it was very difficult to get the government to act to improve housing conditions, there was a huge argument that housing was not an issue for the public realm, that housing reform should be done by private individuals. And that if somehow you could show private developers that there was a way to build a tenement and make a profit, that provided decent housing, then the developers would do that.

Now this was somewhat naïve, but there were efforts to come up with model tenements. And the earliest reform efforts go back to the 1870s. The idea of the so-called model tenement was a European idea. Model tenements were not planned to be perfect housing. They were often experimental housing, and they were planned to give working-class people decent apartments with light and air and running water, and they would also be profit making.

But the difference between a typical speculative tenement and a model tenement was in model tenements the owners agreed to limit their return, usually to about 7 percent on their investment, whereas in a speculative tenement they were very, very lucrative. You might make 15 or 20 percent profit on your investment each year.

### **Model Tenements**

So model tenements begin to appear in the 1870s. In fact the first model tenements in America are located in Brooklyn in the neighborhood that's now called Cobble Hill. They're called the Home and Tower Buildings, and they were built by a man named Alfred Tredway White. White was a wealthy businessman who was a member of the Unitarian Church. It was through Unitarian theory that he became very much involved in progressive reform efforts. And he built a series of buildings for the working poor, for what was known in the nineteenth century as the

"deserving poor." These were hardworking people that just couldn't make enough money to live in decent conditions. You were required to be a family with two parents, you had to be employed. They were very careful in screening people to make sure that there were no alcoholics or anybody with social problems who might have a negative impact on the structure.

The buildings have small apartments, but they were very carefully designed to be fireproof. All the entrances are from balconies so in case of a fire you'd go out on the balcony and then you'd go down the stairs, which also were open, so that you would never have an enclosed stair where smoke would rise. Also there was running water in each apartment. Each apartment has cross-ventilation, it has windows that look out on the street or that look out onto a huge courtyard in the back. And there were baths in the basement. This isn't something that sounds like much to us today, but at a time when most poor people had no access to bathing facilities at all, not even public baths—which were something that didn't develop until the early twentieth century—the idea that you could actually go into the basement and take a bath was an extraordinary improvement.

There wasn't a lot of money to expend on architecture in these buildings, so most of the beauty of the building is in the structure. They used the brick in interesting ways—they put little towers at the ends, and the iron balconies were designed in a beautiful manner.

And they also had enormous courtyards. And these were also doubled as a place where children could play at a time when it was considered that children who played in the street would somehow grow up to be criminals, and that the street was not a healthy place for children to play. The idea that children could play in a large backyard court and that their parents could look out the window and supervise was very important. You not only had an enormous amount of light and air because of these courts, but you also had a safe place for children to play.

### **East River Houses**

Model tenements begin to be built in larger numbers in the late nineteenth century. The City and Suburban Homes Company, which was a joint-stock company where the investors were mostly very wealthy families. Many of the largest industrialists in New York invested money in the City and Suburban Homes Company. And this

company built entire square blocks of model tenements, including several buildings that were built exclusively for African American tenants. But even with all this model-tenement construction, it didn't answer the question. It never solved the housing problem. It was still more profitable to build speculative tenements, and far more people lived in the poor-quality speculative tenements than ever lived in model tenements.

One of the most interesting of the model-tenement complexes. And you can see the footprint of several model-tenement complexes here, and you can see the different experimentations with courtyard plans. The plan in this image is the East River Houses, often called the Shively Sanitary Tenements. And these are perhaps the most beautiful of all model tenements because they were built by a single individual, they were built by a member of the Vanderbilt family, and they were built specifically to deal with one of the major scourges in tenement areas, which was tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis was the major killer of Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. And if you were wealthy and you got tuberculosis, the cure, although it wasn't a perfect cure, was to go to the Adirondacks or someplace where the air was clean and sit and breathe fresh air and eat hearty food. But if you were poor of course you really couldn't afford to do that. The East River Houses were built specifically to cater to families where a member had tuberculosis. And this would keep a family together and also would be a way to help cure the tuberculosis. They're built off of the East River. There's a park between these buildings and the East River. And there are balconies, and there are triple-sash windows, and you could raise the windows up and the person with tuberculosis could go sit out on the balcony and breathe the fresh air coming from the East River.

I suspect it wasn't particularly successful in curing tuberculosis, but nonetheless it was an extraordinary idea of how to deal with one of the major diseases of the turn of the century. The balconies were designed in an extremely beautiful manner, and the Vanderbilts always claimed that they made a small profit from these buildings, but there are no records, and since they had enough money the profit was not a big issue. I've always wondered whether or not the profit was really there.

The apartments were very, very small in these model tenements. They were not great housing. Affluent people would not have wanted to live here. Most of life in these buildings centered in the kitchen, which was often the largest room. But there were separate bedrooms. In order to get from the kitchen to the bedroom, you didn't have to walk through another room. One of the problems with tenements is to get from one room to another you often had to walk through a bedroom, which meant that you had no privacy and that you would wake children up. Here each room is separate. There's a little vestibule in your apartment, which gave you some privacy from the public realm. There's cross ventilation, there's fireproofing, there's running water. Even though the apartments were small they still had many amenities that people living in typical tenements did not have.

### **Union Housing**

By the 1920s it became apparent that model tenements were not going to solve the problem and that the government was not going to get involved in housing construction, so the working poor began in a few cases to take housing construction into their own hands, and unions began building what were called *not-for-profit cooperatives*. Unions and other groups of like-minded individuals funded the construction of large housing complexes that would have apartments on the same scale as middle-class apartments, that would be open to union members or to members of a particular organization. These buildings are mostly in the Bronx, and they're mostly opposite parks, so that there would be light and air and recreation.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union was the largest organization to build these not-for-profit co-ops. And what that means (a not-for-profit co-op) is that in a typical co-op (a cooperative apartment house in New York) you own shares in a stock company, and you can sell your apartment, or you can sell your shares to the highest bidder so that you can make a large profit on your sale, except that the board of directors has to approve of your sale. But you can make a profit of any sort.

In a not-for-profit co-op, you buy the shares for a modest amount of money, and when you want to move you sell the shares back to the co-op corporation for the same amount of money. So it's not profit-making housing; it was to perpetuate quality housing so that once you left, somebody else could move in and afford to buy the apartment at a reasonable rate.

The Amalgamated Houses in the Bronx were designed in a very picturesque suburban style. They have an enormous amount of open space, much more open space than was required by law when these were built in the 1920s. And they're opposite Van Cortlandt Park, so there was a tremendous amount of light and air. And besides being apartment houses with very spacious apartments, they also provided amenities like an auditorium and classrooms and craft spaces and playgrounds and places where both children and adults could meet. So it was a whole community of union members.

One of the most interesting of the not-for-profit co-ops is called the United Workers Houses, which are located opposite Bronx Park. And they were built by secular Jewish communist garment workers in the 1920s. And even though almost everything this group did was politically charged, they chose to build Tudor apartment buildings, they chose to build in their first effort a very traditional group of apartment buildings. Because as we will see in a little while, Tudor came to symbolize home in America.

Now their second apartment-house complex that this group built was much more avant-garde in its architecture, but for their initial foray it was very traditional until you look more closely. The buildings had very large light courts, and the entrances, though, are carved with ornament, such as hammers and sickles over one doorway or smoking factories over another. These not-for-profit co-ops were also a very interesting reform effort, and they created quality housing for several thousand families, but they, too, could not respond to the huge housing crisis in New York.

### **Government Housing**

And it's not until the 1930s during the Depression that the government finally becomes involved in housing. And even when they do finally become involved, it is not until there has been a huge debate over whether or not the government should be involved or whether the private housing community could somehow solve the problem, which as had been shown over the decades, they clearly could not.

The first government-funded housing was funded by New York City, and appropriately enough is called First Houses. First Houses is located on Avenue A at about East Third Street, and it started out as a private construction project by the



Astor family, which actually owned the buildings. And the Astors' idea was that they would demolish every third tenement to create light and air, and as they did this the cost became so high that they persuaded the city to take over the project. And the city continued the project, they did demolish every third tenement, creating light courts. And they refaced the structure of the old tenements in very simple brick. They rearranged the interior layout so that the apartments all were sizeable and all had modern amenities—they all had modern kitchens, they all had individual toilets. They created a nice place for working-class people to live.

And in the backyard where each tenement had had its own individual backyard, probably with a wall between each backyard, they combined them all into a large playground for children. And this was a very, very important idea, getting the children off the street and finding a secure place for them to play.

### **Federal Housing**

By the mid-1930s the federal government begins to build public housing as well. The Congress finally passes a law that allows the federal government to invest in housing construction. And this was not only to create quality housing but it was also during the Depression to create work for architects and for construction workers. So the reason why the government got involved in housing was very complex. Creating good housing wasn't the only reason.

The first two major public-housing projects in America are the Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn and Harlem River Houses in Harlem. And these are low-rise projects that were very large projects in which streets were closed, so they're built on what are known as super blocks, with no streets running through them and very large areas of open space.

Williamsburg Houses are set at an angle to the street, and as if to say the street is not a friendly place to be. Instead, you don't want to be on the street, you want to be inside in the protected core of the complex, which was a vast open park with trees and benches and playgrounds, sunny places and shady places, a really delightful place to be. And again, only four stories.

Williamsburg Houses, Harlem River Houses, and other early projects were very successful, and there was a huge waiting list to get into these projects. So

successful were they that the city had this notion that if these had been successful we can build more housing, we can build more decent housing for poor people in high-rises. And so by the 1950s and 1960s instead of these modestly scaled projects, you get the projects of huge numbers of high-scale apartment houses.

Some of these become very problematic as you have huge numbers of people with social problems moving into the same building. But one thing that can be said about public housing in New York is that for the most part it has been a great success. Unlike Chicago and Detroit and St. Louis and other cities that have had to tear down their public housing, New York has never had to do that.

Public housing continued to be built until the latter part of the twentieth century, when the funding dried up. And it's interesting that we are now back in an argument that was had a hundred years ago and more about whether or not it is the government's role to support the construction of housing for the poor.

## APARTMENT LIVING

### **The Stuyvesant**

As people were debating as what type of tenement should be built in New York, apartment houses built for the middle class begin to appear very slowly. The first apartment house built specifically to cater to the middle class is a building called the Stuyvesant, which dates from 1869 and was designed by the architect Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt was one of the most prestigious architects in America—we've seen other buildings by Hunt—and the first American to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. And it was appropriate that he was the architect for this first middle-class apartment house because one of the models for the middle-class apartment house was the fact that the Parisian middle class had been living in apartment houses for many decades. And Hunt was familiar with the French apartment building.

So the notion of the middle-class apartment house is brought over from France, but Americans did not like the planning of French apartments, which they thought were rather promiscuous. The fact that bedrooms were entered right off of the living room in some cases, and there was no privacy for bedrooms, or that you had to walk through different rooms to get from one place to another in the apartment. So

the Americans experiment with a different kind of plan.

The Stuyvesant, which unfortunately has been demolished, was built as if it were a row of four row houses. It is massed with a very strong series of verticals so that you can read it as four individual row houses. This was done on purpose because the notion of the apartment house was so new.

One of the issues with persuading the middle class that they wanted to move into an apartment house was, How did you deal with the fact that if you lived in an apartment house, you were giving up some privacy, and that you might actually have to meet a neighbor whom you really didn't want to have anything to do with?

So one way that this is done is to have multiple entrances. So the Stuyvesant actually is divided into two separate buildings, so there are two separate entrances. And then there are two apartments on each floor in each of the buildings.

There is a main stair for you and your guests, and there's a service stair as well so that you never had to bump into your servants or to the deliveries. So this was very important since you're trying to attract middle- and upper-middle-class people to move into this building.

Now because this was an early apartment house—in fact the first apartment house—the plan was very experimental. And the plan was really flawed. This was the type of plan that people complained about. The public room is in the front, the parlor. You always want to have the parlor overlooking the street, where it'll have the most light. And the dining room is in the middle. And in order to get from the parlor to the dining room, you have to walk past the doors to several bedrooms. And this was considered really scandalous, that your guests might actually be able to peer in to a private bedroom.

In addition, the kitchen and the bath are all the way in the back, so it's not very convenient for your servant to get the food from the kitchen to the dining room because they're not really very close to each other. And in addition, it has very long, narrow, dark hallways. So these were problems with the layout, problems that

apartment-house designers experimented with for the rest of the nineteenth century until they came up with an ideal plan that would separate the public spaces—the parlor and the dining room—from the private spaces, like the bedrooms, and from the service spaces.

The Stuyvesant was very successful, and it was followed by several other early middle-class apartment houses. But apartment-house construction stops in 1873 with the Panic of 1873, and it's not until the 1880s that we have the first major wave of upper-middle-class apartment-house construction.

### **The Dakota**

The most famous building from this period is the Dakota. The Dakota, on Central Park West and West Seventy-second Street, was an effort by Edwin Clark, the force behind the Singer Sewing Machine Company. And with part of his fortune he invested in real estate, including a lot of real estate on the Upper West Side. And he commissioned the architect Henry Hardenbergh to design an upper-middle-class apartment house opposite Central Park. And Hardenbergh designed a spectacular building that looks sort of like a German castle, and almost treats Central Park as if it's the castle's private estate.

And it's designed with a very picturesque roofline of gables and little tiny dormer windows, specifically so that these would be visible from the park. The top stories were originally servants' quarters, so it wasn't that people had great views from those upper levels out onto the park, it was service space. So the top was meant to be seen from the park, you weren't meant to see the park from the top of the building.

Hardenbergh designed the building in a light-yellow brick with light-sandstone trim so it would be a very cheerful structure. It was designed for affluent upper-middle-class people. It wasn't designed for the wealthy social leaders of New York, who still would not have dreamt of moving into an apartment building. But industrialists, for example, like the Steinways of the piano company or the Schirmers of the music-publishing company, rented apartments in this building.

Now this was a large building with a significant number of apartments. And so privacy was an issue. You enter the building through an arch on Seventy-second

Street into a beautiful courtyard with a fountain in it. And the courtyard not only was a gracious entry, but it also provided a lot of light and air to rooms that looked out onto the courtyard.

But in addition it allowed Hardenbergh to divide the building up into four separate apartment houses. There are four elevators, and there's an entrance in each corner so that you only actually live in a building with one-quarter of the residents. And there are two apartments on each floor in each quarter of the building, so you have much more privacy. The elevators initially ran by water, they were hydraulic elevators, so they were very, very slow. But it's very early in the history of the passenger elevator.

Although the apartments in the Dakota were beautifully appointed—they had high ceilings, they had beautiful woodwork, gorgeous mantle pieces—the plan has not yet been perfected. In order to get from the parlor to the dining room, you continue to have to walk past bedrooms, and the rooms are still linked by long, narrow, dark hallways. So although this was an apartment building that catered to more affluent people and that had beautiful finishes to it, architects had yet to figure out how to plan these buildings.

### **The Hotel Chelsea**

Other apartments during this first wave of construction include the Chelsea. What's now the Hotel Chelsea on Twenty-third Street was one of the earliest cooperative apartment houses in New York, and it remained a cooperative until it was transformed into a hotel at around the turn of the century.

This was a very stylish building. It uses the Queen Anne style. It has an eccentric roofline with tall chimneys, a wonderful sense of texture and of planes. And it has more sunflowers than probably any other building ever built because there are thousands of sunflowers on the beautiful cast-iron balconies.

### **The Osborne**

Another one of the great apartment houses from this era is the Osborne, which is on Seventh Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, an area where a number of important early apartment houses appear. The Osborne is a massive, rock-faced stone building, loosely modeled on an Italian-Renaissance palace. But what's particularly interesting about it is how this building adapts a different mode of entry. At the

Dakota the idea was to separate people into many different, rather small entrances. But at the Osborne you walk into a palace. It uses marble and mosaic, and it was a way for the people who moved to this building to be able to think that they were living in some great palatial building. And if you had visitors coming, they arrived in this extraordinary lobby, and they knew that they had arrived at someplace important, that it wasn't a cheap apartment house at all, but that it was a grand and impressive building. And this idea of designing impressive lobbies is something that remains with us to this day.

Most apartment houses in New York, whether for the middle class or luxury apartment houses, are designed with very beautiful lobbies with comfortable furniture in them, places where you can ostensibly sit. Many times they have fireplaces in them, the fireplace being a symbol of home. Now, these fireplaces were probably never lit, but it gave the illusion of a homey interior as soon as you walked into the building.

## EXPLOSION OF APARTMENT HOUSES

### **Technology's Impact**

In around 1900 the construction of middle- and upper-middle-class apartment houses really begins to explode, and this is largely a result of the electrification of neighborhoods because once electricity was available, it was much cheaper to have elevators because electric elevators ran more efficiently and were cheaper to both build and run than hydraulic elevators. So electricity has a tremendous impact on the development of the apartment house.

Also, by 1900 as the subway is beginning to be constructed in a number of New York neighborhoods (the subway opens in 1904), land values rose enormously. And in places like the Upper West Side once the subway is announced, land values skyrocket, and much of the land, especially on and near Broadway or on expensive avenues like Riverside Drive and Central Park West, which are opposite parks, become too expensive for low-rise construction. And a large number of apartment houses begin to appear.

### **The Dorilton**

One of the most noticeable of this wave of apartment houses is a building called the

Dorilton on Broadway at Seventy-first Street, which was built in about 1900 and was designed by Janes and Leo. The Dorilton takes French ideas and uses them in a more ornate matter than any French architect would have done. There are probably more cartouches on this building than on any building in Paris.

This was a building with its enormous mansard roof that was noticed at the time. It's hard not to notice this building, as Montgomery Schuyler, the architecture critic for the *Architectural Record* noted. He said that "It was a most questionable and question-provoking edifice in the guise of an apartment house. It not merely solicits but demands attention. It yells 'Come and look at me' so loud that the preoccupied or even the color blind can not choose but hear."

And I think that was of course part of the point. This is a building that was meant to be noticed. This was a competitive market in apartment buildings, you wanted to be able to rent your apartments, so you made the building noticeable. So as Montgomery Schuyler notes, "Even if you were dozing off on a streetcar you'd be jerked awake when you passed a building like this."

You enter this building through sort of French rococo gates into a nice spacious courtyard, into a lobby with marble on the walls. And there are two elevator banks, and each elevator takes you up to two apartments. So there are four apartments on each floor, two at each elevator.

And by the time the Dorilton had been built, the idea of the apartment plan had finally been perfected so that the Dorilton separates the public rooms (the parlor, the library, and the dining room) from the private rooms (the bedrooms), and from the service spaces. And the kitchen is close to the dining room, and it doesn't have long halls that run through the entire apartment so that the public rooms flow very nicely one into another. And this type of building—this was not the first—marks the perfection of the apartment-house plan for the upper-middle class because still this wave of apartment houses was still for the upper middle class. The very wealthy still were avoiding apartment houses. They could afford to continue building single-family homes.

### **Names with Cachet**

These early buildings have names. And names were another way of marketing the building. So almost every one of these apartments—the Dakota and the Dorilton,

which we've seen, or the Kenilworth or the Prasada or the San Remo—all of these have fancy European-sounding names that gave a sort of special cachet to each building. And many times the names were forgotten after the initial marketing was completed.

### **Apartment Hotels**

At the same time that apartment houses were appearing, another type of building begins to appear, the apartment hotel. And these are like apartment houses in the way they look, but they have suites of rooms in them that did not have full kitchens. And you would eat in the restaurant at the hotel, or you could have your food sent up on dumbwaiters and you could eat in your apartment. You could even rent a maid to come and serve you.

And the apartment hotel becomes an alternative for middle-class people to the apartment house. You didn't have to worry about maintaining your own apartment, you had hotel services so somebody came and cleaned for you. And they were especially popular with people who came to New York for only part of the year. If you came for the season, to go to the opera or to go shopping, or you just wanted to spend a few months in New York, you might rent space at an apartment hotel like the Ansonia on Broadway and Seventy-third Street, another French Beaux-Arts-inspired building also filled with sculptural detail and cartouches on the façade.

## **SPECULATION IN APARTMENT HOUSES**

### **Immigrants and Construction**

These apartment houses are the next generation of speculative construction after the row houses. And many of the speculative builders of the row houses were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Lots of Irish immigrants got involved in speculative row-house construction because for speculative construction you didn't need social connections, and all you needed was a little bit of money for a down payment to get going on your project. And apartment buildings are the next wave of this.

Once speculative row-house construction stops, speculative apartment-house construction becomes the new wave. And these, too, attract immigrants and the children of immigrants, but by the early twentieth century when the huge waves of



apartment houses are being built, most of the builders are either Italian or Jewish immigrants or their children. And at this time, so were many of the architects who were designing these buildings.

### **Apartment Architects**

[And just] as a group of architects specialized in the construction of speculative row houses so too there were a group of architects who specialized in the construction of apartment buildings. So the three firms Schwartz and Gross, Neville and Bagge, and George Pelham probably designed over 50 percent of the apartment houses that were built in New York in the early twentieth century. And other firms like George and Edward Blum and Gaetan Ajello also contributed large numbers of buildings. And just like the architects of speculative row houses, these were not in general the best-trained architects. Few apartment-house architects went to America's new architecture schools, few of them studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Either they trained in other architectural offices, or like Schwartz and Gross they studied at the Hebrew Technical Institute.

And so apartment houses really need to be seen as a continuation of the speculative building that really created New York. It was the speculative builders of row houses and apartment houses who built the vast majority of the buildings in New York City. And it is to them that we owe a great debt because they created the streetscapes that we know and in many cases love today.

This is Claremont Avenue on Morningside Heights. Morningside Heights was the first apartment-house neighborhood in New York. After the subway opened in 1904, the neighborhood within a few years was entirely lined with apartment houses, all built by speculative developers and all designed by a limited number of apartment-house architects who specialized in this kind of work.

### **Apartment Houses with Numbers**

It wasn't until 1910 that apartment-house construction for the very, very wealthy begins to take off. The first superluxury apartment house on upper Fifth Avenue was begun in 1910 and finished in 1912, and it's 998 Fifth Avenue. It did not have a name. Apartment houses for the very wealthy did not have names until relatively

recently. The *New York Times* noted that 998 didn't need a name because all you had to say was "998" and people understood that this was the grandest apartment house in New York.

For this venture the developers went to McKim, Mead, and White. They hired the most prestigious architectural firm in New York to design this extraordinarily luxurious apartment building. And McKim, Mead, and White provided Douglas Elliman with a building designed in the Italian-Renaissance style, which they specialized in, and a building that has both street façades clad in stone. Most apartment buildings used some stone at the base and brick above because brick was less expensive. But here it's limestone with yellow marble trim and an enormous copper cornice, so very expensive materials were used on this building.

The typical Italian-Renaissance palazzo is divided horizontally, usually into three sometimes four floors. So the *piano nobile* is of course on the second floor. But here you have the Italian-Renaissance palazzo expanded out into a 12-story building. So the ground floor, the rusticated ground floor of the Italian-Renaissance palazzo, is now four floors on 998 Fifth Avenue, and the *piano nobile* is actually the fifth floor here. It has the most impressive windows with pediments and balconies.

These apartments are lavish in scale. The public rooms are about 35 feet wide by about 70 feet long, which is larger than most townhouses. And the enormous hall and the parlor and the dining room and the salon flow one into each other so that you can have very gracious entertaining. The public rooms overlook Fifth Avenue, and then in a whole other wing the private rooms, the bedrooms, overlook Eighty-third Street and are also quite spacious, and each one has its own bathroom. And then there's a large area with a kitchen, a pantry, a servants' hall, and about six servants' bedrooms. So these were well appointed for very, very wealthy people.

### **An Original Renting Plan**

Douglas Elliman, the developer of this project, wasn't sure that he would actually be able to attract very wealthy people to move into this building because it was really a novel idea for the very wealthy. So he came up with a very interesting renting plan. He decided that what he would do would be to offer a large apartment to a very prestigious member of New York society at an incredible bargain rate. And

once they had moved in, everybody else would want to live in the building. So he offered an apartment to Elihu Root, a very famous New York jurist and society leader who had been living in a single-family house on Park Avenue, and Root and his family moved into the building and suddenly of course the building had social cachet, and members of the Guggenheim family and other prominent New York families moved into the building. And it was very successful.

And this building becomes a model for the apartment houses of the next two decades. The form of the building—the rectilinear boxy form, the use of horizontal Renaissance-inspired massing—become a model for middle-class apartment houses and apartment houses for the wealthy that would rise in the nineteen-teens and the 1920s on Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue, on West End Avenue, on Riverside Drive.

The typical building, though, is not entirely stone. Only the most expensive buildings are stone. Typically the lower floors are stone, often rusticated, and the upper floors are brick, sometimes ornamented with terra-cotta, and often there's a cornice, just like on 998 Fifth Avenue. And similarly on West End Avenue. One of the major differences is that on the East Side they have addresses and on the West Side they have addresses and names.

## KEEPING THEM IN THE CITY

### **Emulating the Suburbs**

Now many wealthy people begin moving into the apartment house, but many other wealthy people are attracted out of the city, and they're taking the new parkways, like the Bronx River Parkway, which was built in the mid-1920s, and moving to new suburban areas to the north of the city.

The architecture magazines began commenting on the fact that country life was occupying more and more of the time of what had formerly been city people. Some of these wealthy people might keep a small pied-à-terre in New York, but more and more people were moving out, more and more affluent people were moving out of New York entirely.

There was a fear that New York might become a city of the very rich and the very poor, with the entire middle class moving out to the suburbs, especially in

Westchester County, just north of New York, and to a little bit lesser extent to Nassau County east of the city.

So developers were, and landowners were, fearful that their investment in New York was going to decline, that so many people were going to move out of the city that they wouldn't be able to build anymore, that they wouldn't be able to rent apartments. So they began to think of ways of trying to keep the middle class in New York City.

And one of the ways of keeping the middle class in New York was to emulate the suburbs. So this is Scarsdale, and Scarsdale is a mock English-Tudor village. By the nineteen-teens and the 1920s, Anglo-Saxon architecture becomes the symbol of American home life. Even as the United States was becoming increasingly less and less an Anglo-Saxon society, English architecture becomes a model, as well as American colonial architecture. These two, the English Tudor and American colonial, become models for suburban development. So this was what was being built out in the suburbs, so this begins to be built in the city, too.

### **Hudson View Gardens**

Developers began thinking of ways to design buildings that would be urban buildings but would have a suburban look to them. They would have the amenities of a suburban home and the convenience of an urban home.

And perhaps the best example of this is a complex called Hudson View Gardens which is, as the name tells you, near the Hudson with Hudson views. It's on 183rd to 185th streets in the Fort Washington neighborhood in northern Manhattan.

A large percentage of the property is landscaped gardens with terraced gardens and sunken gardens and a rose garden. It uses Tudor style—it has half-timbered gables and brick that looks like it's hundreds of years old. It has a private drive just like you would have a private driveway if you lived in the suburbs. It had its own restaurant, it had its own post-office branch, it had a barber shop and a beauty salon, and one of the first apartment houses, if not the first, to have a day-care center. So it had urban convenience and suburban amenity to it.

And the buildings used bricks that were imported from Holland that were specifically

manufactured to look rough so that they would look like they were hundreds of years old, so this complex would have the illusion that it had been built hundreds of years ago. You can even see there are places where stucco is visible with very irregular rows of brick. And the image you're supposed to have is that this building has been here for hundreds of years and the brick is beginning to crumble away and is leaving the raw stucco underneath. So it creates this "ye olde English village" image.

Apartment houses like Hudson View Gardens were marketed to women. The idea was that the man might pay for the rental, but the woman chose the home. And so there were extensive advertising campaigns that were geared to women. The 1920s marks the beginning of massive advertising campaigns for apartment houses in newspapers, apartment-house brochures, even on the radio, now apartment houses begin to be marketed.

This is one of the early prospectuses for Hudson View Gardens, and you can see that basically it deals with how an apartment at Hudson View Gardens would improve a woman's life. They were marketed at what one of the advertisements referred to as "the new woman." And what the new woman was, was the woman that stayed home, took care of the kids, maintained the house, but used all of the modern conveniences that were available at Hudson View Gardens—modern refrigeration, a motor-driven "sani in the sink" electric dishwasher (this must have been a very early dishwasher), convenient kitchen cabinets, incinerator chutes. You could send the laundry out to be done. It was a very easy place to live, or so it was marketed.

And then the housewife would be so fresh by the end of the day because of using all the modern conveniences that she could meet her husband and go to the theatre or go dancing in the apartment through radio stations that were piped in to the apartments. And so this was marketed as a place where a woman and her family would remain happy and comfortable.

### **Tudor City**

This idea of taking the Tudor design is extended even further with the design of Tudor City. Tudor City is right in the heart of Manhattan. It's on the far east side at Forty-second Street. And it was a complex that was built by the Fred F. French Company. Fred F. French was one of the largest developers in New York of both

apartment houses and office buildings. And French purchased land at the far east side between about Forty-first Street and Forty-third Street. And his idea was to build an apartment complex where people could walk to work. In the 1920s, Midtown had developed as the second downtown, with large skyscrapers being erected around Grand Central Terminal. And so the land in east Midtown was becoming increasingly valuable. And so French purchased an enormous amount of land, land that wasn't that desirable because just to the east where the United Nations is located now were a series of slaughterhouses, so the view wasn't very nice, and the smell couldn't have been very nice either.

But he was able to assemble a large amount of land, and he built a complex that included apartment houses with large apartments in them, as well as a series of apartment hotels with smaller apartments, so that he could cater to single people, to families, to people that wanted to live in the city convenient to where they worked but also live in this suburban environment.

So the use of Tudor detail is very evident, especially at the top stories of the tall hotel buildings. And then they're advertised with huge neon signs that said "Tudor City" on them, which you could see from all the way down to Times Square.

French began an extraordinary advertising campaign to attract people to Tudor City, with many different advertisements in the New Yorker and in Playbill. And this is one of my favorite advertisements, and it's a couple that's gone to the theatre and they're getting up before the play is over, and they have a terrible expression on their face. And the text reads, "For years he hasn't seen a play to the end. Just at the crucial moment in the last act he gropes his way past protesting neighbors to make a dash for the 11:10," clearly to the suburbs.

But, no longer. In October he moves to Tudor City. His commuting days are over. Henceforth he will stroll to the theatre from this oasis of peace and quiet, with its green grass and shady trees, ten minutes walk from Broadway.

Tudor City has all the conveniences of living. A restaurant, maid and valet service, a miniature eighteen-hole golf course . . . .

Live in Tudor City and walk to business.

### **Six-Story Buildings**

These same styles, the Tudor and the colonial, also begin to appear on working-class and middle-class apartment houses. And a vast sea of six-story apartments in Tudor and colonial and Mediterranean and other suburban-inspired styles appear all over Brooklyn and the Bronx, northern Manhattan, and Queens. And this six-story building typifies the type.

They're six stories for the most part because six-story buildings could have elevators. You could actually have a walk-up up to five stories. And for the middle class you wanted to have an elevator building. So six stories was the maximum that you could build using semi-fireproof construction. So for these more modest middle-class buildings, six stories was as high as they went because once you went higher you had to use fireproof construction, which was much more expensive. So buildings like these at six stories could use some wood in the construction, but they had to have fire escapes, which is why all apartment houses in New York of six stories or less have fire escapes, and those that are more than six stories for the most part do not have fire escapes because they're built of fireproof construction.

### **The Art-Deco Appeal**

In the late 1920s and the early 1930s during a final wave of apartment-house construction before the beginning of the Depression, builders began experimenting with the opposite of what we've been talking about. In order to keep people in the city, they're exploiting the dynamics and the excitement of the city, and instead of using suburban styles they're using the modern, very urban art deco as a way of appealing to people and having them stay in the city.

And you have some of the twin-towered buildings on Central Park West, like the Century, which you see here, and one of the great projects both built and designed by builder-architect Irwin Chanin. And art-deco apartment houses also appear in very large numbers in the Bronx and in Brooklyn, usually on a more modest scale with fire escapes to them. The art deco, which we've seen on commercial architecture, uses some conservative French Beaux-Arts ideas but ornaments these buildings with dynamic zigzag ornaments and stylized design, often using interesting materials. Here in orange brick with polychromed terra-cotta on an apartment house in the Bronx.

## MODERN APARTMENT HOUSES

### Castle Village

Construction did not stop totally with the Depression. There was a hiatus in construction during the worst years of the 1930s, but in the late 1930s there was a flurry of new construction, right before World War II began, in which some very interesting new ideas begin to appear in New York apartment houses. And you begin to get the beginning of some modern planning and design ideas.

This is especially evident from the planning point of view at Castle Village, one of the first tower-in-the-park projects in America. The idea of building apartment-house towers in parklike settings was an idea that came to America from the philosophy of the great French architect and theorist Le Corbusier, who envisioned cities of great towers in parklike green settings.

And although Le Corbusier's influence really appears mostly after World War II, Castle Village was a pioneer in the design of middle-class apartment houses in tower-in-the-park-like settings.

This is also in Fort Washington. In fact it partially blocked the views of people who lived in Hudson View Gardens. And it was built by the same developer, a man named Charles Paterno. Paterno had built Hudson View Gardens because his estate was located up here along the water, and he wanted to look at something nice. When he decided to move out of the city, he built Castle Village on his estate property, but he used the tower-in-the-park idea to protect the views, I think, of the people who lived in Hudson View Gardens. So he took this novel planning approach of these cross-shaped apartments with nine apartments on each floor, eight of which had a river view from at least one room. So he uses a plan that gives you parks, like in the suburbs, maximizes light and air and views in almost every apartment.

What's especially interesting about these apartments, and which a number of contemporary critics commented on, was the fact that their planning was revolutionary and their design could not have been more conservative. They're



basically this radical new tower-in-the-park idea in colonial garb. And in fact originally the bottom three or four floors had shutters on the windows, just to add to the colonial form. So they use a kind of red-brick colonial design with a very interesting new kind of planning. But again, it was a compromise to try to get people to move into this complex who might otherwise have moved out of the city.

### **Manhattan House**

After World War II when construction begins again, just as with office-building design, European modernism comes to the fore for apartment houses of the 1950s and early 1960s. And in fact white brick becomes, at least early in this period, a progressive kind of material.

And this is Manhattan House, one of the first large-scale apartment-house projects that was begun after World War II. It was designed in the late 1940s by Mayer and Whittlesey—a firm that specialized in apartment—house construction—working with Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, who a few years later go on to design Lever House and some of the other really important early-modern office buildings.

White brick was chosen here because it was clean and modern and healthy. Light bounced off of white brick. The brick was glazed so that it would be easy to clean, and so it was all about light and health issues, which were important concerns of modern designers.

This complex is an entire square block, but instead of building at the perimeter of the block and having bleak, dark courts in-between, the entire complex is placed in the middle of the block with large gardens in the front and in the rear so that there would be a tremendous amount of light and air. It incorporates balconies, it's a relatively early balcony project, so that people could come out and breathe the fresh air that was maximized by all the light that would be coming in from the gardens that were around it. And you can see the effect of the gardens and the light in the lobby. The lobby walls are all glass, which allowed a tremendous amount of light to come in.

### **White Bricks**

This establishes the idea of modernism for apartment-house construction. Unfortunately, as with office-building construction, you have a series of early and really brilliant solutions to using modern architecture for new urban needs, but it was so easily debased. And so hundreds of white-brick apartment houses with very little concern for design begin to appear. These are buildings that follow the letter of the zoning law exactly. The zoning law told you you could rise to a certain level and then you had to set the building back, and they do exactly that. And so that you get hundreds of these excruciatingly banal offspring of these great complexes like Manhattan House.

### **Chatham Towers**

In the 1960s—which is a period of very poor-quality apartment-house construction, for the most part—there were a few efforts at designing apartment houses that were more distinguished. And to me the most spectacular of these is Chatham Towers between the courthouses of Foley Square and Chinatown.

These are two concrete buildings that rise like a pair of minimalist pieces of sculpture. They're beautifully shaped in a sculptural way, and they use concrete in a very dramatic and dynamic manner, both on the lower floors and on the form of the building itself. And at the top where the water tower for the buildings is, it's encased in a concrete frame with little cutouts on it to give you a sort of playful look on the top of these massive sculptural apartment houses.

## **BUILDINGS THAT STAND OUT**

### **Glitz**

By the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a lot of criticism of the typical New York apartment house, the typical white-brick apartment house. And there were experiments by the speculative developers of apartment buildings to come up with a response to this, to come up with buildings that would be more interesting than the typical apartment house. And this was of course a way of marketing the building. If you had a building that stood out, it was more likely to attract people who might either rent or buy the apartments.

So one method of having your building stand out was to make it glitzier than all the buildings around it. And that's quite evident at this building built on Third Avenue by Donald Trump, who was the first to use this idea of lots of shiny gold and other glitzy materials on the exterior of a building to attract attention, and then placing his name on the building so that it would be a stamp of assurance that this was a quality building for a certain type of clientele. Another way of making your building stand out was to hire an architect who specialized in speculative construction for the planning of your building and the main mass of your building, but then hire another architectural firm to design the base and the top to make your building stand out.

And this is a building, which was built in the early 1980s, doing exactly that. A typical apartment-house architect designed the main mass of the building, and the young and at that time very hot Miami architectural firm of Arquitectonia was hired to design the top, and they provided the fins at the top and also the base of the building to make this building stand out from all of its neighbors.

### **Using Traditional Forms**

You could also hire a façade architect for your project. This is a building across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, right next door to 998 Fifth Avenue. It's flanked by 998 Fifth Avenue and a wonderful Beaux-Arts-style townhouse from the early twentieth century. And in the middle, Philip Birnbaum, an architect who specialized in speculative apartment-house construction, was commissioned to design a building. And the neighborhood was appalled by what they saw. And the developer then went and hired Philip Johnson, one of America's most prestigious architects, to design the façade of the building.

Johnson had nothing to do with the apartments inside the building, but he was responsible for building a façade on Philip Birnbaum's plan. And on this building Johnson introduced the idea that later became known as postmodernism, that is, to take architectural forms from the architecture of the past and plaster them onto a contemporary building. So this apartment house picks up almost every molding from the buildings to either side, so that a molding from 998 Fifth Avenue continues across the façade of Philip Johnson's apartment house and then the entire thing is crowned with a faux mansard roof, just like the mansard roof on the townhouse to the north, except the townhouse has a mansard that's three-dimensional and

actually has rooms inside, whereas the mansard on Philip Johnson's apartment house is merely a façade that's propped up on the back by two struts, so it's merely an ornamental device to make the building seem to fit in more with the neighborhood.

You'll also notice that the moldings on 998 Fifth Avenue and on the townhouse actually go from one end of the building to the other, whereas the moldings, which sort of resemble Tootsie Rolls, on Philip Johnson's building don't go to the end of the building. And it's a little architectural conceit so that you'll know that they're not structural, you'll know that they're just applied on. It's almost like a child has glued the moldings onto the façade of this building.

This establishes a whole idea of designing buildings, designing apartment houses in New York, that will look like New York's earlier apartment buildings.

In fact, when the master plan was put together for Battery Park City at the southern end of Manhattan, which was landfill that was going to become a new town in New York, the master plan specifically looked at New York's most successful apartment-house streets. It looked at West End Avenue and Park Avenue and looked at what was it that made those streets such nice places to live. And they noted that these buildings had stone bases and then brick above, that they tended to be horizontal in their massing, that they tended to have something interesting at the top that projected out. And the master plan for Battery Park City required that some of these things be incorporated into the new buildings. And many different architects were commissioned to design buildings, and some were more successful than others.

And here the architect Charles Moore has taken the form of the New York apartment house with a limestone base, horizontal bands, projecting balconies, and created something new out of the basic form of the New York apartment house.

### **Downzoning**

In other cases neighborhoods campaigned to have their neighborhoods downzoned, instead of having tall apartment houses on plazas, which had become very, very popular with developers and very unpopular with neighborhoods, because it often led to vacuous windswept plazas in front of a building. So neighborhoods didn't like

it, but developers liked it because a tall, slender building meant that you could sell or rent more apartments with views.

Neighborhoods began campaigning for downzoning, to basically ban these tall apartments on plazas, and instead have lower buildings that would be at the same massing and scale as the apartment houses of the nineteen-teens and the 1920s. And these are visible all across New York, especially on Broadway on the Upper West Side.

### **Name Architects**

The issue of whether or not architecture could sell a building has been something that has been debated for hundreds of years. And in the 1990s and in the early years of the twenty-first century, many developers have come to the realization that in a competitive market architecture does give you a leg up. And in a number of cases prestigious architects have been hired now to design buildings. Michael Graves, Richard Meier, and Robert A. M. Stern have been commissioned to design very prominent luxury apartment houses. And it is hoped that they'll give something of their personal architectural style to the building.

This is the Impala on the Upper East Side, designed by Michael Graves, and finished in about the year 2000. The building has a name because by the late twentieth century even Upper East Side buildings were being given names. An address, especially if you were on Second Avenue or Third Avenue just wasn't good enough anymore. An address was great if you were on Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue, but Second and Third avenues didn't have quite the same meaning. So here you have the Impala, one of New York's newest apartment buildings, and it was advertised with pictures of its architect. So it's not only selling his architecture, it's selling the architect as well.

And a pair of New York apartment houses designed by one of the great modern architects, Richard Meier, is rising in Greenwich Village. And it, too, is being sold as "You, too, can live in a masterpiece by Richard Meier."

And the great French architect Jean Nouvelle has designed a huge, very avant-garde apartment house for the Gansevoort Market area south of Fourteenth Street. Also very, very controversial. I suspect it will not be built. But now some of the

most prestigious architects in the world are being asked to design apartment houses.

### **Conclusion**

Residential architecture is something that constantly evolves in New York despite the fears that New York would become a city of the rich and the poor, or that everybody that could would move to the suburbs. None of these things have occurred.

Single-family homes, apartment houses, are constantly being rediscovered and reevaluated. New buildings, mostly new apartment houses, are being built, but row houses have now been rediscovered over the past few decades, and hundreds and hundreds of old row houses have been restored and are looking almost as good now probably as they did when they were built, in some cases probably better than when they were built.

And so every year something new occurs. And there are debates as to what is the appropriate form for residential architecture in New York. So this remains really one of the most exciting parts of New York's architectural world.