

Seeing White Brick Buildings in a New Light



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

Imperial House, center, on East 69th Street, is one of about 140 white-brick apartment buildings in the city.

By JOANNE KAUFMAN

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WHEN Lori Berger began looking for a [Manhattan](#) pied-à-terre three years ago, she came armed with a list of priorities. The West Side was preferable to the East because it would simplify the drive into the city from her family's primary residence in Fairfield, Conn. She wanted outdoor space, which took most prewar buildings off the table. And because she and her husband had lived through kitchen and bathroom renovations at home, they wanted an apartment that they could move into right away.

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Interactive Feature

[Love 'em or Hate 'em, New York's White Brick Buildings](#)

It wasn't unbridled love when Ms. Berger first saw 165 West 66th Street. But then she remembered her father's pet saying: "You live inside the house, not outside."

Which is how Ms. Berger came to buy a one-bedroom in a white glazed-brick building. Long seen as a consolation prize in the real estate sweepstakes, with neither the time-burnished details of prewar nor the sparkling newness of the latest glass-walled condo, boxy white-brick structures were built for the striving middle class in the '50s and '60s, when about 140 inserted themselves into the brick and brownstone fabric of the city. But these days, their more-for-less prices are attracting wallet-watching buyers, and their less-is-more-aesthetic is drawing fans of midcentury design.

"I knew it didn't have the allure of a prewar or a modern glass building, and it kind of harked back to the days of harvest gold and avocado kitchens," Ms. Berger said. "But I kept thinking about my father's advice."

And the apartment itself had what she wanted: closet space and a small balcony where she could sit comfortably with a cup of coffee and the Sunday paper.

Oh, yes, and because of moisture issues with the white-bricks, the building is in the process of swapping them for a taupe facade.

"I'm going to like it a lot better now that it doesn't look so 1960s," Ms. Berger said. "I think for resale it's an asset as well."

Pity the poor white-brick buildings. With a few exceptions, notably Manhattan House, Gordon Bunshaft's sleek, tidy slab at Third Avenue and 66th Street, they don't get a lot of respect. Ms. Berger's co-op board is far from the first to have gone for a facade lift as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

In the past decade when moisture afflicted 35 East 85th Street and 400 East 85th, both buildings elected to ditch their white bricks, choosing red-brick facades that alluded to Georgian architecture.

"As we went through the design process, the boards got unanimous feedback from brokers that a change to red would increase the value of their apartments," said Craig Tooman, a partner at Cutsogeorge Tooman & Allen, the architectural firm that handled the two projects as well as the recladding work at 900 Fifth Avenue, another white-brick, that was finished last year.

“We explored going with taupe there,” Mr. Tooman said of 900 Fifth. “But it’s on a landmark block, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission objected.”

Proponents of white brick — and they do exist — find the redos disheartening.

“When buildings replace white brick with red brick and a full historical limestone base, I see people who are defeated and don’t believe in the future,” said Françoise Bollack, an architect and an associate professor at [Columbia University](#). “They want something that looks historic because they think it’s classy. In 20 years, they’ll regret it.”

Like other fans of white brick, Ms. Bollack and Chris Fogarty, also an architect, talk approvingly of the buildings’ simple lines and unadorned exteriors, the trim gray window frames, the rooftop towers enclosed with decorative brick, the setbacks lined with terraces, the glazing that was supposed to have made the buildings self-cleaning.

“White brick is such a nice simple material,” said Mr. Fogarty, a partner in the architectural firm Fogarty Finger, who has incorporated some of that “simple material” into his design for a largely glass condominium tower that is to be built at First Avenue and 51st Street in the next two years.

“White-brick buildings have gotten so maligned,” Mr. Fogarty said. “People say — aside from Manhattan House — how awful they are, and it’s true that a lot of them are sloppy copies. You’ve got a lot of that happening today with sloppy copies of the glass structures that [Richard Meier](#) built.”

In fact, white glazed-brick buildings have been dividing opinion ever since the mortar began drying on their shiny facades 60 years ago.

“They were kind of a fresh start after two decades of hell,” said Fredric M. Bell, the executive director of the New York chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#). “White brick represented the new the way massive amounts of glass are now seen as progressive. It was welcoming, light and a reaction against the limestone piles on Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue. It spoke to the future of New York.”

That future didn’t seem to include families. The apartments in white-bricks were mostly studios, one- and two-bedrooms. “They would not have been places to stay permanently,” said Katherine Husband, a graduate student at Columbia University who is writing her master’s thesis on white-brick buildings. “One advertisement,” she added, said, “ ‘This building is perfect for young marrieds, businessmen and businesswomen.’ ”

For all those who saw the buildings as brightening the skyline, others thought they were out of place. In Greenwich Village, for example, white-bricks were seen as destroying the area's signature raffishness, Ms. Husband said.

Then, as now, the buildings had something of an identity crisis. They were trumpeted as luxury residences, but many had stripped-down layouts with small kitchens and few hallways. They did have the latest amenities (central air-conditioning!) and conveniences (many had garages). But they often had English names like Townsend House and Westminster House, which suggested a grand history. "They were trying to cover both bases," Ms. Husband said, "offering modern amenities while evoking the past."

Kathy Braddock, a real estate consultant, said: "They're not sexy, but they're functional. They're like a good, solid person. The windows are a nice size, the lobbies are clean and a nice size.

"Nobody walks in and says, 'I can't wait to buy an apartment in a white-brick building.'" she continued. "But after they see the entire marketplace, the white-bricks start to look interesting. You get more bang for your buck."

A studio at white-brick 301 East 69th Street, for example, has an asking price of \$349,000 and a monthly maintenance of \$641, said Stuart Moss, an associate broker and a vice president of Corcoran, which has the listing. A comparable studio in a prewar building at 205 East 78th Street is listed for \$389,000 with a monthly maintenance of \$879, Mr. Moss said.

On the West Side, Mr. Moss offered a two-bedroom two-bath at 150 West End Avenue, built of white brick in 1961, for \$1.199 million with maintenance of \$2,398 a month. That compares with \$1.399 million and a maintenance of \$2,569 a month, for a prewar two-bedroom two-bath at 260 West End.

It often becomes a tradeoff, say brokers. The ceilings may be lower in white-bricks than in prewars, but the bar may also be lower in getting past co-op boards. Apartments in white-bricks may not have wide hallways, dining rooms or maid's rooms, but "they have generous-sized rooms and tremendous closet space," said L. Elise Reid, the senior vice president /director of Edward Lee Cave, a division of Brown Harris Stevens. "In a prewar at the same price point, the bedrooms are sometimes minuscule."

Another selling point of white-bricks, said Tami Shaoul, a senior vice president of the Corcoran Group, is the relative ease in combining units and of renovations. “The walls are thicker in prewars,” she said. “And you don’t know where the pipes are.”

Elayne Reimer, an executive vice president of Halstead Property who has lived in three different apartments in the white-brick 303 East 57th Street, said she found prewar buildings “dark and depressing.”

“I like the happier, brighter feeling of a white-brick,” Ms. Reimer said. “This building was built with incredible foresight. It’s set back in such a way that you have views all over Manhattan.”

While Howard Weitzman and his wife, Arlene Blatt, would have preferred a prewar, what they really wanted was a view and good bones. “We were looking for an apartment we could renovate, an apartment that allowed us to create a loft feeling,” said Mr. Weitzman, a real estate developer. So in 2007 the couple bought a 1,400-square-foot apartment “with closets everywhere” at 25 Sutton Place South, a white — well, actually, pale-pink — brick building.

“My design focus is midcentury modern,” Mr. Weitzman said. “This provided me with a cleaner canvas than I would have had in a prewar building, where I would have felt I was destroying something beautiful.

“I wish we had high ceilings and bigger windows,” he added. “But life is full of compromises.”

Of course, white-bricks aren’t all created equal. There are stars like Manhattan House and Imperial House, at 69th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, an Emery Roth project, as well as more modest buildings like 250 East 65th, 201 East 66th and 200 East 74th, said Mr. Moss, adding that location often shapes the way white-bricks are perceived — and priced.

“When they’re on Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue or Central Park West,” he said, “they seem inconsistent with neighboring architecture. I think their value is significantly hurt in environments like that. But when someone is a Third Avenue buyer, you almost expect to be showing them a white-brick, and the buildings look better in that context.

“Then,” Mr. Moss said, “it’s the prewars that seem out of place.”

