

CLASSIC ROCK: That's what they're getting on East 63rd Street between Fifth and Madison, as two old plain-Jane buildings are getting dressed up in limestone and classical-style fronts. The town houses on this block went up just after the Civil War, but from the 1930s to the 1950s some of them were stripped of their ornament, leaving just husks. Now, in the age of preservation, these ghostlike facades are particularly valuable. No. 3 East 63rd once had a high stoop but since 1936 has been just bare stucco. Nos. 7 and 12, too, have a pared-back look that has increased their architectural appeal as blank canvases.

Around 1900, a new generation of owners arrived on the block. In 1902, Clarence Winthrop Bowen had the architectural firm of Heins & Lafarge design a town house at 5 East 63rd in orange Roman brick with muscular Greek-style ornament over the main doorway. (Mr. Bowen led the New York Genealogical Society from 1907 to 1931 and was instrumental in building its headquarters at 122 East 58th Street, completed in 1929.)

A few doors down, at No. 15, Elias Asiel built a limestone house designed by John H. Duncan in 1901. The house at No. 17, also dating from that year, was designed by Welch, Smith & Provot with a luscious Parisian-style facade making an elegant feature of recessed French windows. One particularly nice touch is the alternating smooth and hammered treatment of the quoins, the blocks of stone that outline the edges of the window openings. The house at No. 21 was built in 1900 by Lyman G. Bloomingdale, who founded the department store with his brother, Joseph. Designed by Buchman & Fox, this is a rather tepid, mechanical work.

The last, and grandest, house built on the block during this period, the Italian renaissance palazzo of William Ziegler at 2 East 63rd, dates to 1919. For some reason Mr. Ziegler, the head of the Royal Baking Powder Company, soon left this house, and by 1925 there was a proposal to convert it to a hospital for actors and actresses. The house was later occupied by Norman Woolworth, of the dime-store family.

After 1930, not every facade suffered the kind of stripping evident on the brownstone at No. 3. When the old Bowen house, at No. 5, was expanded upward and converted to apartments in 1942, Harry Hurwit, the project's architect, carefully executed the upper floors in the same orange brick, although the design is obviously simpler.

On the other hand, the architectural firm of Wechsler & Schimenti saw no problem, in 1954, with rebuilding the brownstone at No. 7, originally identical to Nos. 3 and 9, right out to the building line in a plain red brick. James Casale, who reconstructed No. 12 in 1957, also demonstrated no wish to fit in. Rather, his white brick front stands out quite innocently, like a 4-year-old walking into a wedding in pajamas. Another noncontextual, even anticontextual, building is the Edmond J. Safra Synagogue, at No. 11. But in this case that difference is no bad thing. Designed by Thierry Despont, the classical-style synagogue was finished in 2002 but has an ancient feel, three great stories of stone quarried in Israel. Orange and yellow and beige, it looks as though it was dismantled in some far-off desert outpost, brought over stone by stone and reassembled. The intentionally rough surface of the rock provides an obvious counterpoint to the refined finish of the limestone on the adjacent mansions.

Since the facades of the intact houses are protected by landmark designations, anyone who has changes in mind is drawn to the much-altered buildings. Thus Enrique Gittes, an investor, bought the white-brick No. 12 and is working with an architect, William B. Gleckman, to rebuild the interior as a seven-unit condominium. Leaving the white brick facade would have permitted a quick review process at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, but Mr. Gittes and Mr. Gleckman have instead developed a Classical/Beaux-Arts-style facade of limestone and red brick. Work is expected to begin soon.

Similarly, the 1950s facade of No. 7 has been redesigned by Page Ayres Cowley for a surgeon who occupies the entire building, and work is under way now. Ms. Cowley has developed an all-limestone facade, very chaste, with the tight Classicism of early 19th-century London. In fact, she said, she and her associates looked closely at the squares of London in working out the plans. As she put it: if the Georgian architect Robert Adam were to appear in New York in a few months, he "would have palpitations walking down East 63rd Street."