

# New Crown for an Upper Broadway Wedding Cake

Mansard roof is being rebuilt as building faces landmarking.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

It seems like a huge wedding cake, with multiple layers rising to a rich crown. Now the Manhasset, on the west side of Broadway from 108th to 109th Street, is in the middle of both a landmark-designation process and a major project to rebuild its huge mansard roof — added as an afterthought, six years after construction began.

A century ago Upper Broadway was in the doldrums. Everyone expected it to emerge as some kind of grand thoroughfare, but it had only a few five-story apartment houses.

It was the construction of the Interborough Rapid Transit line, New York's first subway, begun in 1900 and opened for business in 1904, that set things in motion.

In 1898 and 1899 the entire west front of Broadway from 108th to 109th Street traded four times, finally ending up in the hands of the builders John W. and William Noble. The brothers hired the architect Joseph Wolf to build an apartment house eight stories high — the effective limit for multiple-dwelling construction under existing law.

The height and especially the breadth made the new building the biggest thing on upper Broadway; only the now-demolished, 10-year-old Nevada, from 69th to 70th Street

on the thoroughfare, was comparable. A photograph at the New-York Historical Society taken in May 1901 shows the Nobles' building with banners offering "superb apartments" for rent, though the building was obviously empty.

ONE problem was that William Noble went bankrupt. As part of a real estate swap he had acquired The Mercury, a New York newspaper.

Some people advised him to close down the operation — it was losing money — but he tried to revive it.

When the dust cleared William Noble was \$1 million in debt and his big Broadway project was taken over by Jacob D. Butler, the real estate investor who had sold it to him in 1899.

Correspondence at New York City's Department of Buildings describes it as "nearly completed".

Butler right away hired Janes & Leo, then at work on the florid Dorilton, at 71st Street and Broadway. Also in 1901 new construction laws for apartment houses came into effect, effectively opening the field for the 10- to 15-story apartment houses that soon became the standard.

Janes & Leo received permission to add three floors to Joseph Wolf's building and the name Manhasset was used in connection with the building by 1903.

The building was completed no later than early 1905, with apartments of six to nine rooms renting for \$1,800 to \$3,500 per year. The mansard addition looks like part of the original design, as do the limestone entryways on 108th and 109th Streets; the Nobles' original building had open courts in these



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areas. The big new apartment houses had advantages that private houses could not offer — central vacuum cleaning, supervised staff and elevators. But they also had to present the refined character of a "good house," and so were careful to avoid stores on the ground floors, even if stores brought in more rent.

None of the big, early apartment houses on Broadway had stores, but the pressure of commerce eventually gave owners a different perspective: buildings after 1906 — like the Belnord, between 86th and 87th Streets — were designed with ground floor stores. The Butler family sold the Manhasset in 1909 and in 1910 a new owner installed

stores, although they were carefully kept away from the sidewalk corners.

In the 1930's the Mutual Life Insurance Company foreclosed on the Manhasset and in 1939 their architect, Archibald Anstey, filed plans for a \$180,000 alteration, subdividing all the apartments.

At the same time the lobbies were redecorated in the moderne style, although Janes & Leo's iron doorways were kept intact. Joanne Sliker, an architect who lives in the building, says that the apartment interiors were completely changed, in some cases with glass-block walls and similar finishes.

In recent years the Manhasset has been owned by the Heller family, but they converted it to a "cond-op" in 1993, retaining ownership of the stores as condominiums. According to Ms. Sliker, who is also president of the co-op corporation, the Hellers still own about half the apartments.

The Manhasset in 1910, about five years after completion. Mansard roof was added as afterthought six years after construction began.

In May the Landmarks Preservation Commission held hearings on the possible landmark designation of the Manhasset, which seems likely, given its prominence and the co-op's endorsement of the proposal. A few days later the co-op's architect, Kevin Bone, also filed plans for a \$750,000 project to repair the mansard roof.

Mr. Bone says that scaffolding will go up this month to replace most of the cornice, slate and ironwork on the upper section.

The present cornice has large holes and the architect says that when his company was inspecting it "the pigeon population was so heavy we were carrying fleas back to the office."



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Scaffolding will soon go up for a major project to rebuild the apartment house's huge mansard roof.