

STREETSCAPES/West 54th Street

Interior Details Come Home Again to Millionaires' Row

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE restoration of the 1900 Lehman town house at 7 West 54th Street really does deserve the term "museum quality." Some of the interiors are coming back from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which removed them more than three decades ago.

Midtown has only one real strip of mansions evoking its days as a neighborhood of millionaires: 5 through 15 West 54th Street. These six houses all went up from 1896 to 1900 on land opposite the single brownstone at 4 West 54th occupied by John D. Rockefeller and its large, open plot, now the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden.

Among the original owners was Moses Allen Starr, a neurologist who had worked with Sigmund Freud. In 1897, Dr. Starr had Robert H. Robertson design a house for him at 5 West 54th in light brown brick and stone with crisp, even hard-edged, classical detailing.

At 7 West 54th, Philip Lehman, the head of Lehman Brothers, the family financial firm, had John H. Duncan design a rich Beaux-Arts-style house, completed in 1900. The deep recesses between the courses of limestone and details like the triple circular windows at the top floor — called oculi — set it apart from most Midtown mansions.

In 1898, James Junius Goodwin, a banker and a cousin of J. Pierpont Morgan, retained McKim, Mead & White for his double house at 9-11 West 54th. Although admirable, its brick and marble facade has a prim Bostonian reserve that does not rest easy on New York's jumbled streets. Mr. Goodwin needed only three-fifths of the 50-foot-lot, so he had the architects design what appears to be a single mansion five bays wide, but the eastern two bays are actually a separate house, which he rented out.

Mr. Goodwin died in 1915, with an estate estimated at \$30 million. His son Philip and Edward Durell Stone later designed the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd Street.

Last in the row are two rather clunky high-stoop limestone houses, built in 1897, designed by Henry Hardenbergh for William Murray, who appears to have been a developer who was building for sale or rental.

Russell Sturgis found the block interesting enough to make it the centerpiece for his 1900 article "The Art Gallery of the New York Streets," published in *The Architectural*



Cary Conover for The New York Times



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Record. He described the Starr house as confused, without a clear conception. And although the Goodwin house struck him as handsome, he suggested that the camouflaged door to the rental house, ingenious as it was, detracted from the integrity and candor of the finished work.

The critic reserved his real praise for the Lehman house, calling it "simple and direct," even though it was by then common to deride the fad for highly styled Beaux-Arts work. He particularly appreciated the solidity of the facade — clearly and firmly centered by the entry door and the bowed-out stone balcony on the second floor.

The young John D. Rockefeller Jr. moved into 13 West 54th in 1901, at the time of his marriage to Abby Aldrich. The 1910 census records him, his wife and three children, including little Nelson, and six servants.

The Lehmans had the highest servant ratio: seven were listed in the census of 1920, serving Philip Lehman; his wife, Carrie; and one son. That was Robert Lehman, who succeeded his father as the head of Lehman Brothers and expanded his art collection, turning it into the reservoir of European masterpieces that now forms the Lehman Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

By the 1940's, big houses, particularly those in Midtown, were going begging — a *New York Times* article in 1941 described the Goodwin house as having "boarded up windows and a generally unoccupied appearance." It became the Rhodes School,



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and the neighboring buildings drifted into commercial occupancy. The Rockefellers retained No. 13 as an office; it was where Nelson Rockefeller died of a heart attack in 1979.

JUST OFF THE AVENUE

Midtown has only one real strip of mansions evoking its days as a neighborhood of millionaires, 5-15 West 54th Street, above left. The Beaux-Arts Lehman house at 7 West 54th, left, is notable for its second-floor balcony and circular windows on the top floor, above right.

Robert Lehman held onto 7 West 54th Street — not to live in, but as a private gallery — until he died in 1969. In exchange for his collection, Mr. Lehman had dearly wanted the Metropolitan to dismantle and rebuild his entire house at the museum. The Met worked out a compromise in which the rooms were stripped of much of their paneling and other architectural elements, then taken apart and rebuilt in the Lehman Wing, which opened in 1975.

Since Mr. Lehman's death, the house has had a succession of owners and has received indifferent care. Now a hedge fund and real estate investment group, Zimmer Lucas Partners, is restoring it as an office building, and the Met has agreed to deaccession some of the original elements so that they can be reinstalled: stained-glass windows, fireplace surrounds, doors and other items that the museum never had any hopes of using.

The architect for the renovation, Belmont Freeman, said that technicians have been allowed to make molds and patterns for crown moldings, door frames and other details at the museum.

In most places, the interior of the Lehman house has been taken down to the bare brick. But some large elements remain, like a projecting Gothic-style window bay — a bank of leaded-glass casement windows in Gothic surrounds framed by small spiral-fluted columns.

The second floor has the highest ceilings, perhaps 18 feet, which gave the architect room enough to wrap the stairway around a second time before sending it up to the third floor, thus creating a small projecting balcony. The roof of the stair hall is pushed up two stories high into a theatrical dome, another novel touch.

Mr. Freeman says the work will be finished next year — a "museum quality" job, for a house that was once going to be part of a museum.