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# Blue Brick' Building Brawl: Lovely Eyesore in Makeover

by Gabriel Sherman

Along an expensive and fashionable block on the northeast corner of Madison Avenue and 65th Street, a piece of New York real-estate history will soon become just that—history.

For more than four decades, the co-op at 27 East 65th Street—clad in its distinctive aqua-blue brick façade and affably known across Manhattan as the "Blue Brick Building"—cast a loud glow over the couture boutiques, storefronts and ladies lunching at outdoor cafés like La Goulue. But now, a nearly three-year-long renovation to the 17-story building to replace the glazed blue bricks with traditional red bricks is nearing completion. In a city that watches real estate with a laser-like intensity, the transformation of the blue brick building has unfolded as a uniquely New York saga shaped as much by market pressures and evolving aesthetics as by power struggles, bitter acrimony and legal wrangling. As the chromatic splash that long stood side-by-side among the 19th-century limestone façades of the Upper East Side soon disappears, real-estate watchers are now weighing in on a fading symbol of Manhattan's 1960's architecture.

"There's something innately inappropriate about a bright blue building in a neighborhood of brick and limestone," said Seri Worden, executive director of the Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts. "But it had a lot of character. It's a building we sort of loved and hated."

"It did have some distinctiveness—I always appreciate buildings that are distinctive. We have a lot of homogenization in the neighborhood, and I would like to see the distinctiveness remain," said Charles Warren, the chair of Community Board 8. Although the blue brick building falls within the Upper East Side Historic District, the Landmarks Preservation Commission classifies the colored façade as "no style," lending no protection against its alteration.

"The board didn't have problems with the proposal to change the façade," Mr. Warren said of the board's unanimous 32-0 vote in support of the co-op's renovation in June 2002.

The blue brick building was born out of the reductionist architecture of the 1950's, when glazed white brick buildings came into vogue among the city's developers seeking to lure tenants with a signature look and cachet. As the architect J. Stanley Sharp put it at the time to The New York Times: "Color and beauty are desperately needed in our communities." In 1959, the developers Thomas Frouge and John Frouge commissioned the architect Anthony M. Pavia to build a \$3 million apartment building on the northeast corner of 65th Street and Madison Avenue. His proposed design featured a blocky structure sheathed from top-to-bottom in glazed blue bricks.

"It was thought at the time that the blue represented a regal feeling, an uplifting feeling, opposed to traditional colors," said Anthony Pavia Jr., a retired real-estate developer in Stamford, Conn., and the son of the building's architect, who passed away in 2001. "At the time, there was a lot of white glazed brick around. Blue was selected to make it more distinctive."

### The Brick Thrower

The building was completed in 1962 and joined a select group of blue brick buildings scattered across Manhattan's streetscape, from the apartment house designed by Yeshayahu Eshkar at 69 West 85th Street to the Carlton at 220 East 57th built in 1964 by the architect Joseph Riggio.

But in recent years, Pavia's glazed brick design became a flash point between the co-op's board and the building's commercial tenant, Elliot Sutton, when the two parties sparred over dueling lawsuits for the past two years during the renovation. In 2002, after the city cited the building for safety violations for failing to shore up the crumbling glazed brick façade (which had been weakened by rain water), the co-op board hired contractors to erect a scaffolding over the outside of the building and sought to finance the project with a \$6.8 million mortgage. The building is operated as a 99-year land-lease, with Mr. Sutton controlling the 25,000-square-foot ground-floor commercial space that was the home of his restaurant Ferrier, and currently houses a 2,500 square-foot Fendi boutique, an Oliver Peoples eyewear store, a Citibank branch and a parking garage. Mr. Sutton objected to the proposed renovation, and as the parties jostled over the terms of the mortgage, the building languished behind scaffolding. Mr. Sutton said the prolonged construction forced him to shutter the doors of Ferrier in July; the restaurant had been open for 15 years.

"They never should have done the work. They could have repainted the bricks and spent \$400,000 and not millions," Mr. Sutton said. "The blue never bothered me. I own the retail—I don't look up. But Oliver Peoples wanted to be in the building because of the blue bricks. I don't like the orangey brick they're putting up."

In late October, Mr. Sutton and attorneys representing the 55 co-op owners appeared at Manhattan Supreme Court on Centre Street before Judge Sherry Klein Heitler in the latest round of legal hearings over how long the scaffolding should remain.

"We're waiting for Mr. Sutton to stop with his lawsuits. The Department of Buildings has ordered that scaffolding put up for safety. It's up to the contractor to remove the scaffolding. They say December 2005; we won't agree to do it any sooner than that," said Gil Feder, an attorney at Reed Smith who is representing the co-op board.

Mr. Sutton said the scaffolding was sapping his ability to operate the retail space.

"We had to close Ferrier because no one could find the restaurant. If you make it 10 years in the

restaurant business, you're an institution—and now it's over," he said. Mr. Sutton added that he now stands to lose \$400,000 a year since the restaurant went under, and another \$2 million a year in rent revenues after the Veritgo boutique closed earlier this year. "It's very difficult to rent the space with scaffolding blocking the street. It took them two and a half years thus far. How can you operate like that? It's a disaster. What kind of business can operate like that for years?"

Still, while white brick buildings today retain a patina of 1960's style, if not period character, the blue brick building on Madison Avenue never seemed at home among its monochromatic neighbors. Real-estate brokers, mindful of resale values, have championed the renovation.

"Blue was horrifying! That building, honestly, was an eyesore. Even from surrounding buildings, it wasn't pleasant to look at," said Michele Kleier, the president of Gumley Haft Kleier, who specializes in high-end Upper East Side properties. Several years ago, Ms. Kleier recalled, she had an exclusive on a three-bedroom apartment in the building that listed for \$2 million, but couldn't find a buyer because of the blue brick façade.

"The apartment was completely renovated, but every person I showed it to said if it was in any other building, the space would sell right away. With the building changing color, the owners could now sell that same apartment for \$3.5 million right away, or more.

"Replacing the façade with red brick is going to make everything in the building more sellable. When you get out of a car, there's a certain ambiance created immediately by the blue bricks. The whole feeling of Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue is prewar. The blue bricks were always out of place," Ms. Kleier said. "The truth is, it's a huge improvement not only for the building, but for the neighbors."

"I would say resale values will go up 10 percent now that they're changing colors," said Kirk Henckels, a senior vice president and director of Stribling Private Brokerage. "Prospective buyers didn't like the fact that it was blue. Everybody's happy it's changing colors. I think there's a blue brick building somewhere across the Henry Hudson Bridge—let it stay there."

And yet, the unflinching march of development that has buffed the city to a fine sheen has galvanized the guardians of the unique—albeit kitschy—buildings that once buoyed neighborhoods with their distinctive presence. From preservationists' pitched battles over Edward Durell Stone's modernist cube at 2 Columbus Circle to Greenwich Village residents resisting N.Y.U.'s concentric expansion out from Washington Square Park, some feel the passing of the blue brick building on Madison Avenue is just one more piece of New York's architecture fabric forever lost to the city's upscaling economic engine.

"I think the building was distinctive enough not to be garish; it was distinctive in that it set itself apart from the streetscape that you had in the neighborhood, and that is being lost," Mr. Pavia said of his father's design. "It'll be like any other building. But it's really inevitable—nothing lasts forever. The streetscape used to be unique, and now the block will be like anyplace else."