New York
Great Cities Vol. 3

A Sense of Place on West 90th Street

By Robert Iulo

I live on West 90th Street in Manhattan. It isn't very long, just five blocks, and a quick walk beginning and ending at a park. Running west to east based on the "One Way" arrow signs, it starts at Riverside Park, which comes up from the Hudson River over the Henry Hudson Parkway and New York Central Railroad tunnel in a series of landscaped slopes and paved terraces. This area of the park is filled with massive stonework embankments and large old trees, mostly Honey locust, with dark brown thorn-covered bark that turns black when wet with rain. The Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Monument can be seen one block south. It resembles a Greek temple with its cylindrical form and Corinthian columns.

The Riverside-West End Historic District extends from Riverside Drive across West End Avenue almost to Broadway. It begins with two old fifteen-story apartment buildings on the north and south corners of West 90th Street, with curved frontages that gracefully follow the curve of Riverside Drive. Beyond these two large buildings, the scale changes, and the rest of the block to West End Avenue is made of brownstone and limestone row houses with ornate exteriors, stoops, and some with gabled roofs. Most of these buildings are set back behind decorative iron fences and small gardens. The low scale and landscaping, along with the carved masonry, make this block seem very "Old New York", and except for the cars parked along the curb, whenever I'm there, I feel as though I'm strolling in the early 1900s.

On the next block, where I live, looking northwest from my twelfth-floor apartment window, I gaze down on a group of four- and five-story row houses on both sides of West End Avenue. Visually, their roofs are active, capped with old-fashioned vents, brick chimneys, skylights, and even a few gardens. Boston Ivy covers the backs of some of these buildings and grows over their parapets. With the higher apartment buildings for walls and the sky for a ceiling, this area seems like a grandly proportioned room with Annunciation Greek Orthodox church as its centerpiece.

The area above and below West 90th Street on Broadway is lined with a mix of pre-war and 1980s building-boom apartments with their ground floors zoned for commercial use. It's a very busy strip visually as well as commercially, and for me, convenient to be within walking distance of dry cleaners, restaurants, newsstands, and anything else I might need. What helps to counter the frenetic look and feel of the street is Broadway's great width and beautifully landscaped center islands.

The next block, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, is a short canyon with large apartment buildings on either side. One of them, the Aston Court on the corner of Broadway, resembles a Florentine palazzo but expanded to fourteen stories. It has a rusticated stone base, then dark brick with pale stone accents, topped with a copper cornice projecting more than ten feet over the sidewalk. It's the classical standard with base, shaft, and capital, which New York architects didn't give up until the 1950s. Along this block, as well as any other place else in the city, continuing with this Italian Renaissance look, I can't help noticing the fire hydrants. In most cities, they're no more than plumbing fixtures, but in New York, fire hydrants are architectural, miniature campaniles decorating the sidewalk.

Between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues, the look and feel of West 90th Street opens. The north side is almost completely lined with four large, well-kept public housing buildings. Despite their size, there's a feeling of openness because there are plazas and a playground between them. There's a schoolyard on the south side. When the school children aren't using it, it's the site of some very serious one-on-one

basketball games. Not far beyond is a community garden. They do a spectacular tulip festival every spring. There aren't any stores, but this block is always filled with people. The plazas, garden, playground, and school make it an active and attractive place to be. The low scale and open spaces keep it bright and inviting. Between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West, the street is, for the most part, filled with old row houses. There are street trees along the five-block length of West 90th Street, but on this stretch, they're older and much taller than most other street trees in the city. Some of them reach higher than the four-story buildings they front. Because of their leafy shade, in summer, it feels cooler here than anywhere else along the street.

West 90th Street ends with the El Dorado, an apartment building with a two-hundred-foot Art Deco frontage along Central Park West. Across the street is Central Park with both a pedestrian and bicycle entrance right at West 90th Street. Because the reservoir is so close to the edge of the park here, everything has a north-south orientation: the paved road with its cyclists and rollerbladers, bridle path, and then the jogging track around the reservoir. The bridle path isn't too active anymore, but police officers sometimes use it to give their mounts an early morning workout. From this side of the reservoir, you can see the Fifth Avenue skyline along the east side of Central Park.

West 90th Street is in the center of an interesting urban area with the mix that makes the city a place where people want to be. It has a wide range of architectural styles, design motifs, and a varied sense of place along its length. In a city, we have the diverse richness of what civilization is all about. Light and dark, garish and subdued, bland and balanced, the best and the worst, West 90th Street has some of everything.

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