

A Hot Property in The Bronx: Art Deco

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Brooklyn has its brownstone neighborhoods. Manhattan has some too, along with its cast-iron districts, like SoHo.

The Bronx has its Art Deco apartment "palaces," built in the 1920s and '30s with style and amenities that have not been matched in apartment construction since.

But The Bronx, specifically the West Bronx along the Grand Concourse, Jerome, Morris and University Avenues, has not been "discovered" yet. Discovered, that is, by the young middle-class families and small investors looking for structurally sound, uniquely styled, spa-

cially laid out housing stock at manageable prices.

The concentration of West Bronx Art Deco — more than 300 buildings already have been identified — is reportedly the world's largest and the subject of a modest exhibit at the Larcada Gallery, 23 East 67th St. Including original renderings, drawings and photographs, the show highlights this unique architectural species that is endangered — as the brownstones once were — by urban decay.

Although only a two-week show (it opened last week), the exhibit has generated great interest and enthusiasm among political, real estate, banking and cultural circles

in The Bronx and is expected to circulate the home borough.

"It's a great opportunity to generate attention to what is a quality housing stock," says Bronx Borough President Robert Abrams. "The artistic value is a new dimension and, who knows, it could be a catalyst for bringing forces together for a housing renewal program."

Art Deco was one of this century's early periods of modern design, reflecting the '20s & '30s romance with the streamlined machine-made look and geometric designs reminiscent of Aztec and Egyptian motifs. While primarily recognized for design

achievements — carved tiling, colorful mosaics and sleek metal work — the Art Deco period brought structural innovations that quickly became fashionable for middle-class apartment dwellers.

There were sunken living rooms, multiple building setbacks, large corner windows, spacious layouts, park-like courtyards, elegant entrances and elaborate architectural detailing. Now more than ever such amenities are rare but in the West Bronx, despite the ravages of time, neglect, and vandalism, they remain plentiful.

The exhibit was the brainchild of Bronx-born Donald Sullivan, who had long ago

taken an architectural editor friend on a tour of the area, only to be "shocked by the amount of disintegration that had taken place."

Sullivan, director of the graduate program in urban planning at Hunter College, was determined to do something. He was joined by Brian Danforth, an urban planner and researcher, and a growing group of enthusiastic students, urbanologists and architecture buffs.

"When we asked building superintendents and owners for any early drawings or advertising brochures, they thought we were crazy," says Sullivan, noting that the rapidly shifting population and economics of the housing market have jeopardized owner interest in many of the properties.

But Sullivan notes, "When we started pointing out some of the unique architectural attractions, suddenly there were sparks of new interest."

It's the "sparks of new interest" that Sullivan hopes to build on, to "celebrate a treasure too good to let be destroyed."

Along with the exhibit, Sullivan has put together a catalog that contains interesting historical background and sound plans for the future. The establishment of a West Bronx Restoration Committee is already in the works and a growing number of experts are volunteering free time and advice.

The banking and real estate community remains skeptical but not uninterested. They want the exhibit to circulate among their people, too.

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