

Landmarks Preservation Commission
Sept. 15, 1987; Designation List 191
IP-1520

THE BERESFORD APARTMENTS, 211 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1928-29; architect Emery Roth.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1195, Lot 29.

On September 11, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Beresford Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was continued to November 13, 1984 (Item No. 5). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Beresford Apartments, completed in 1929 and designed by Emery Roth, then at the pinnacle of his career as a specialist in apartment house design, is one of the largest and grandest of the apartment buildings along Central Park West. Prominently located at the corner of 81st Street across from the American Museum of Natural History, it takes full advantage of its site, with two monumental facades crowned by corner towers. Executed in brick with limestone and terra-cotta detailing, the Beresford is distinctively ornamented with a sculptural program of Late Renaissance inspiration which features winged cherubs, angels, dolphins and rams' heads, along with elaborate cartouches, festoons, rosettes and finials. Its vast scale and dramatic profile make the Beresford one of the most important elements on the Central Park West skyline, as well as a reminder of the heyday of luxury apartment building in New York.

Development of Central Park West

Central Park West, the northern continuation of Eighth Avenue bordering on the park, is today one of New York's finest residential streets, but in the mid-nineteenth century it was a rural and inhospitable outpost, notable for its rocky terrain, browsing goats and ramshackle shanties. With the creation of Central Park in the 1860s, followed by Riverside Park (begun 1876), as well as a series of transportation improvements such as the Ninth Avenue Elevated Railroad (1879), the Upper West Side in general experienced a period of intense real estate speculation. The 1880s were the first decade of major development, and set the pattern for the Upper West Side, where rowhouses line the side streets, and multiple dwellings, commercial and institutional structures are sited on the avenues.

Not surprisingly, those avenues closest to the parks, Central Park West and Riverside Drive, were immediately considered the most desirable. (Ninth Avenue, rechristened Columbus in 1890, Tenth Avenue, renamed Amsterdam in the same year, and Broadway--the Boulevard before 1899--were all, in varying degrees marred by cable car and elevated railway lines.) The potential of the parkside avenues for development as prime locations led to an anticipatory increase in land values; prices rose to such extravagant heights that many speculative builders shied away from row house and tenement construction, from which they would realize relatively meager returns, while the very wealthy, who could afford to build mansions, for the most part remained on the more fashionable East Side. As a result, the development of Central Park West lagged behind the general development of the Upper West Side. It was not until the turn of the century that Central Park West's construction boom began and it emerged as a boulevard of elegant tall apartments punctuated by impressive institutional buildings--a kind of grand proscenium to the architectural variety show of the Upper West Side.

The stage had been set by two great monuments, the American Museum of Natural History between 77th and 81st Streets, (begun 1874, architects Vaux & Mould, and a designated New York City Landmark), and the Dakota, the pioneering luxury apartments at 72nd Street (1880-84, architect Henry Hardenbergh, and a designated New York City Landmark). Yet a survey of roughly a decade later revealed that more than half the block fronts along the park from 60th to 96th Streets remained vacant or contained only old, modest frame houses.¹ A few apartment hotels had been constructed by the early 1890s, including the Hotel Beresford at the northwest corner of 81st Street across from the museum on Manhattan Square. Opened in late 1889, this original Beresford was described as the first apartment hotel to be constructed on the Upper West Side. The property, already considered at that date, "one of the choicest and most costly on the west side of the city," had gone through a number of real estate speculators' hands.² The six-story hotel was constructed by Alva S. Walker, who also owned the northern portion of the Central Park West blockfront which he intended to turn into a small park "with two tennis courts in the centre, with seats around for the use of the guests." Apparently the success of the Beresford and ever rising land values prescribed a change of course, and a ten-story wing was added instead.³

Among the other early apartments on Central Park West were the Majestic at 71st Street, the San Remo at 75th Street, and the El Dorado at 90th Street, which, like the Beresford, have all been replaced by their towered namesakes of the late 1920s and early 1930s. A few grand apartment buildings were constructed prior to World War I, including the Prasada at 65th, the Langham at 73rd, and the Kenilworth at 75th Street. This phase in Central Park West's development was interrupted by the war, when construction ground to a halt. The second major phase of development began with the great prosperity of the '20s, producing the Art Deco towered buildings, and Roth's Beresford and San Remo Apartments, which now define the skyline.

The 1920s provided a generation of aspiring immigrants with the opportunity to move up in the world, both economically and geographically. Many Jewish immigrants, refugees from Czarist pogroms, had achieved prosperity in New York by the late 1920s, and looked from the Lower East

Side to the Upper West Side as a cultural and architectural haven. By the mid-1930s more than half the residents of the Upper West Side from 72nd to 96th Streets were Jewish, and more than a third of these families were headed by a parent born in Europe.⁴ Emery Roth was himself a Jewish immigrant of Horatio Algeresque stamina and optimism, a family man and Upper West Sider, although he arrived by a more circuitous route than most of his neighbors.

The Architect⁵

Emery Roth was born in 1871 in the town of Galzecs, Hungary, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When he was thirteen the family's fortunes took a turn for the worse, and it was decided that young Emery, alone, would immigrate to America. Passing through Ellis Island, he continued on to Chicago where his success story began.

When still a teenager living a hand to mouth existence in Bloomington, Illinois, Roth determined to become an architect. He worked for both a local builder and a local architect. In 1889, having won a national-government sponsored contest, the Maize Competition--for which he drew a living room utilizing the corn plant as a decorative motif--Roth took his \$100 prize money and set out for Kansas City. Apparently he could not find architectural employment there, but while he was still in Bloomington, had applied to join the office of Burnham & Root. Offered the job by mail, Roth moved on to Chicago and worked under Charles Atwood (who had succeeded John W. Root after his death in 1891.) Roth helped to prepare drawings for the celebrated Palace of Fine Arts. While at the fair, he met Richard Morris Hunt, the recognized dean of American architects, who offered to hire him if he ever came to New York. After the fair, with true to form optimism, Roth made his way to New York, where Hunt's casual offer was honored. Assigned to draft interior perspectives for The Breakers, the Newport mansion of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Roth came in contact with Ogden Codman, a noted architect, interior designer and socialite. In 1895 Roth went to work for Codman, where his decorative and planning abilities were sharpened.

By 1898 Roth believed himself ready for private practice. Two young architects, Theodore G. Stein and E. Yancy Cohen, after involved negotiations, sold Roth their architectural practice for \$1000. As part of the agreement, Roth was entitled to represent himself as a partner in Stein, Cohen & Roth in order to capitalize on the good will of the existing firm. In fact, Roth was on his own.

Roth's first major commission was the Hotel Belleclaire of 1901-03 on upper Broadway, a designated New York City Landmark. While it was under construction Roth was approached by Leo and Alexander Bing, Manhattan real estate developers. The Bing brothers admired the Belleclaire and commissioned Roth to design a group of five-story apartment buildings in Washington Heights. This alliance inaugurated a lifelong association.

In the following years, Roth had several commissions, among them Bancroft Hall of 1910--a student housing facility for Columbia University, and a series of religious structures, including the Congregation Ahavith Achem of 1908 in Brooklyn and the First Reformed Hungarian Church of 1916 on East 69th Street in Manhattan.

The year 1918 was a traumatic one for Roth. He lost his vision in one eye, the result of glaucoma, and nearly died in the great influenza epidemic. But the prosperity of the 1920s was to carry him into a period of great achievement. After the hiatus in construction caused by the First World War, building was again undertaken. In New York City, a 1921 ordinance exempting new residential construction from real estate taxes for the next decade, opened the door to a building boom. The Bing brothers commissioned a series of apartment buildings and hotels from Roth, many of which Ruttenbaum aptly terms "fine background buildings,"⁶ while two other developers, Samuel Minskoff and Harris H. Uris commissioned Roth to design a number of handsome medium height apartment houses which the architect dubbed "skyscratchers."⁷ In 1926 Roth in association with Thomas Hastings, the surviving partner of the eminent firm of Carrere & Hastings, designed the Ritz Tower at Park Avenue and 57th Street, a 41-story apartment hotel in a neo-Renaissance style, its extreme height making it "a symbol of a new way to live for wealthy New Yorkers."⁸ After the Ritz Tower, Roth went on to design a host of luxury residential skyscrapers, among them the Oliver Cromwell Hotel on West 72nd Street (1928), the San Remo Apartments (1929-30 and a designated New York City Landmark) on Central Park West, and as a consultant to Margon & Holder, the Art Deco style Eldorado Apartments also on Central Park West (1929-31, and a designated New York City Landmark). From the mid-1920s on, the signature of a major Roth apartment house was its tower(s). Initially designed to conceal water tanks, they evolved into a major element of the design. In the San Remo, among Roth's finest works, the towers become an integral component of this residential skyscraper. This fusing of the functional with the aesthetic was equally characteristic of his apartment plans. Roth's sons credit their father with the creation of the foyer plan, and if not the originator he was certainly a refiner of this type. Roth's best apartments seem effortlessly interlocked, wasteful corridor space reduced to a minimum, with spacious, well-lit rooms in their stead.

Roth's last great work was the Normandy Apartments on Riverside Drive of 1938-39 (a designated New York City Landmark), by which time his sons had joined the firm. The majority of his later buildings in concession to the Depression had smaller apartments and fewer amenities, while still maintaining high standards.⁹ Roth died in 1947, and his sons continued the firm, which has been prosperous and prolific.

The Beresford

Officially completed on September 13, 1929, just a few weeks before the Black Friday stock market crash, the Beresford had been planned during the most halcyon days of the 1920s. It was constructed by the H.R.H. Construction Company, which also built the San Remo. In an article in the New Yorker magazine, Penthouse [Marcia Clarke Davenport] remarks that the Beresford demonstrates that one can still find "really large rooms, really high ceilings; and you can pay--very very well for them."¹⁰ She further admires the windows "by far the most triumphant feature," affording unobstructed views, and the "hung" ceilings without visible beams.

The plans for the Beresford reflect the luxurious standard of living envisioned for its tenants. A number of apartments contained not only the usual maids' rooms, but "servants' halls." Other amenities were provided,

such as dressing rooms, large cedar storage closets, breakfast rooms, sun porches and numerous bathrooms. Some of the large duplex apartments were virtually the equivalent of a large townhouse, both in size and arrangement.

But the economic mayhem of the Depression years resulted in serious financial difficulties for the Beresford. In 1940, it was sold along with Roth's other grand Central Park West apartment, the San Remo, which had suffered a similar plight, for a mere \$25,000 over existing mortgages, despite the fact that the combined value of these two structures has been estimated at a pre-Depression value of ten million dollars.¹¹

The Beresford has long been associated with famous tenants in the arts and show business.¹² It was converted to co-operative ownership in 1962.

Architectural Style

The Beresford has been compared to a medieval fortress and to a grand country villa,¹³ both allusions to its commanding presence and traditional style. Although in fact a huge 20-story skyscraper with three surmounting water tanks, the blocky massive proportions of the building emphasize its Renaissance allusions. Emery Roth had a life-long predilection for classicism and eclecticism, both clearly revealed in the Beresford design. Late Renaissance and vaguely Baroque details are used relatively sparingly but are key elements. Roth's aesthetic treatment of watertanks, on many buildings merely a functional eyesore, is the salient example of the architect's ability to combine traditional architectural values and modern functional requirements. At the Beresford, the watertanks--originally planned with three "observation rooms" beneath--are transformed into elegant pavilions, and integral components of the overall design. This solution, with setbacks below, allows the corners of the facade to be perceived as tower pavilions. With Roth's next major commission, the San Remo, Roth took this concept even further, resulting in its grand twin towered profile.

The sculptural program of the Beresford deserves special note. Few buildings of its type and date have figural ornament in such profusion. Winged cherub heads adorn keystones, angels flank doorways, and high above the street and well beyond the range of the naked eye, half-figures of cherubs support cartouches and urns, while rams' heads and skulls support festoons. Best appreciated from the terraces, this detailing is a potent symbol of the architectural extravagance of the '20s.

Description

The Beresford Apartments is a 20-story skyscraper occupying the Central Park West block front between 81st and 82nd streets, with two principal elevations facing the avenue and the south. The north elevation is similarly detailed, but secondary owing to its placement. The rear elevation with a central courtyard is not ornamented. The building is constructed in buff brick with a limestone base, with sculptural detailing in limestone at the lower four stories, and in terra cotta at the upper stories, and with mission tile roofs, metal railings and grilles, and copper lanterns. There are four main entrances, two on the south, one on the north and one on the avenue. These lead to separate elevator banks,

each elevator opening to only one or two apartments per floor. Apartments originally ranged in size from 4 to 16 rooms, both simplex and duplex. One of the last of the grand apartments built prior to the Depression, the building is luxuriously detailed, both on the exterior and interior. The detail is in the style of the Late Italian Renaissance. Setbacks appear at the 14th, 16th, 18th and 20th stories, providing terraces. Three watertanks in towers at the principal corners of the building are the crowning elements of the corner pavilions.

On the three street elevations, the first three stories are faced in limestone above a granite watertable. The first story is separated by a bandcourse from the two above and has bush-hammered rustication. The upper two stories have smooth rustication. A broad bandcourse separates the limestone base from the main brick portion of the building. Bandcourses comprised of two terra-cotta moldings appear between the 9th and 10th stories, the 12th and 13th, and the 13th and 14th.

The fenestration on these three elevations is of one basic type with two metal casement windows, beneath a single-paned transom. (Narrower windows are interspersed on the first story between some of the bays, casement windows with three lights and a tripartite transom appear at the 19th story, while the rear elevation has a variety of broader casement windows.)

The building rises to the 14th story in an uninterrupted block, constructed to the building line. The setbacks above articulate the corner pavilions which are surmounted by two-story penthouses and the watertank towers. Chimneys, beginning at the 18th story are centrally located, and a large chimney appears at the west end of the southern elevation.

Central Park West Elevation

This elevation is 29 bays wide with windows in groupings to the 14th story: 3-3-5-3-3-5-3-4. At the 14th story a balustraded terrace 16 bays wide is located between corner pavilions, 6 (south) and 7 (north) bays wide. The central 16 bay-portion continues to the 17th story above which are two further setbacks at the 19th and 20th stories. The corner pavilions on this elevation are 6 bays wide (south) and 7 bays wide (north) at the 14th and 15th stories; 5 bays wide each up to the 18th story and 3 larger bays each at the 19th. The two penthouse stories appear above these corner pavilions under the observation rooms and watertank coverings.

A. Main Entrance: located between 15th and 16th bays.

A canopy on bronze supports, flanked by ground level plantings behind low simple metal guard rails. Double doors glazed with plain bronze muntins and mullions. Bronze and glass lanterns flanking the doorway. Doorway with limestone enframement with scrolled keystone and carved relief panels to each side, depicting Renaissance-style stands composed of acanthus leaves, symmetrically disposed and supporting a winged frontal figure of an angel playing a horn. Above, a broken lintel with a central large scrolled cartouche, with floral festoon. At second-story level a yellow marble panel with limestone enframement, with a winged cherub head in relief above a festoon suspended from rosettes, all beneath a lintel.

B. Office entrances: 2, located between 15th and 16th bays.

Set within reveals, single doors of bronze with glazed upper panel and glazed transom.

C. Balustrade: above 3rd story, 13th to 18th bays.

Carved in limestone relief, centered above main entrance, on modillions.

D. Plaque and cartouches: above 4th story, at 13th and 18th, 6th and 25th bays.

Four scrolled cartouches enliven facade, 2 inner ones frame plaque with festoons, guttae, scrolls and cartouche, inscribed "Erected 1929".

E. Cartouche: 14th story, between 15th and 16th bays.

Above main entrance, large scale, with scrolls, set in center of balustrade (7th to 23rd bays). Held by flanking half-figures of winged cherubs which emerge from foliate ornament. Cherub heads atop and below the cartouche scrolls.

F. Windows: 10th and 11th stories; 3 bays wide, at 5th-7th, 13th-15th, 16th-18th, and 24th-26th bays.

Two-story groupings of windows in threes enframed by terra cotta, above bandcourse with pseudo-balustrades. Between the two stories a beribboned cartouche flanked by winged cherub heads and scrolled brackets. A rosette above the central 11th-story window of each grouping.

G. Windows: 14th and 15th stories, 3 bays wide, at 5th-7th bays, and 24th-26th bays.

Located at the first setback level, groupings with rosettes beneath each window at the 14th story, a balcony projection at the central bay at this level, the rosette in an octagonal frame. The two-story composition enframed by brick pilasters supporting a triangular broken pediment. An ornamental grille at the center of the pediment. The central bays at each story with enframements. At the 14th story a curved broken pediment, with a ram's head at the center, supporting festoons, and a scroll above. The 15th story central window with cartouche and flanking festoons.

H. Windows: 19th and 20th stories, at 3rd and 27th bays.

Set in the corner pavilions, 2-story compositions with enframed windows separated by a balustrade. Pilasters at the 20th story on console brackets under a curved broken pediment, with a central segmental-arched dormer with a round-arched opening containing a grille. At the 20th story above the central window, a winged cherub head on a tablet, with festoons.

I. Cartouche: 17th story, between 15th and 16th bays.

An elaborate scrolled and beribboned cartouche, continuing central composition above the main entrance, also signaling chimneys above. A

ram's skull at the base, with festoon.

J. Finials: above the 20th story.

Set at the corners of balustrades, at the 1st story of penthouses; urn-shaped.

Watertank towers

Octagonal, with broader faces set rectilinearly and narrower faces set diagonally. Four double-height round-arched windows above a balustrade, each flanked by engaged columns on console brackets, supporting a lintel and broken triangular pediment with a central bull's-eye opening with surmounting winged cherub head. Half-figures of cherubs emerging from foliate ornament flank and hold an urn with ram's head below. Drapery swags suspended from rosettes with a central scrolled keystone.

Interspersed by 4 square-headed blind windows surmounted by triangular broken pediments with central winged cherub heads in panels above. Beneath the windows console brackets support simple obelisk shaped finials. Copper and glass lanterns surmount the roofs.

South Elevation

This facade with two main entrances and three office doors is 30 bays wide with windows grouped in threes except in the outermost bays where there is a single pair at the east and 2 pairs at the west, up to the 14th story, where the setbacks begin. From the 14th to 17th stories the center of the facade is 15 bays wide, flanked by 8 bays to the west and 7 to the east. Terraces appear at the 18th to 20th stories at the center. A large chimney rises from the 17th story beneath the western tower.

Main entrance: 2, at 5th-7th bays, and 23rd-25th bays.

A canopy on bronze supports, flanked by ground level plantings behind simple guard rails. Double doors with simple bronze muntins and mullions. Bronze and glass lanterns flank the doors. Doorway with limestone enframement and carved relief panels to each side, depicting Renaissance style stands of acanthus leaves, symmetrically disposed adorned with a pair of dolphins. Above, a curved broken pediment with a central scrolled cartouche, above a console bracket, ornamented with a festoon. At 2nd story level, an enframed central window with a winged cherub head beneath a lintel.

Office doors: 3, located at 14th, 19th and 28th bays.

See "B." above.

Cartouches: above 4th story, at 6th, 12th, 18th, 24th bays.

Windows: 10th and 11th stories, at the 5th-7th, 11th-13th, 17th-19th, 23rd-25th bays.

See "F." above.

Windows: 14th and 15th stories, at the 5th-7th, 23rd-25th bays.

See "H." above.

Windows: 20th story, at 15th-16th bays.

Two windows with eared enframements, surmounted by a central cartouche.

Balustrade: 14th story, from the 8th to 22nd bays.

North elevation

This elevation has 29 bays in groupings of three with two additional bays at the west. A series of graduated setback terraces with curved parapet wall and metal railings appears at the westernmost five bays beginning at the 9th story and continuing to roof level.

Main entrance: 1, at 7th bay (counting from west to east).

Single doorway, flanked by small glass and bronze lanterns. Surmounted by a cartouche set on the door enframement. A glazed transom, with metal grille, enframed, and surmounted by a garland, winged cherub head, and scroll.

Office doors: 4, at the 6th, 13th, 19th and 27th bays.

See "B." above.

Cartouches: Above the 4th story at the 10th and 23rd bays.

Windows: 10th and 11th stories,

See "F." above.

Windows: 14th and 15th stories,

See "G." above.

Balustrade: 14th story, from 12th to 23rd bays.

Service Entrances: 2, at the westerly ends of the side street elevations.

Each one story in height, with round-arched doorways in a rusticated wall, with a metal grille gate, (on the south with the word "service.") A winged cherub head keystone, (on the south, a panel above with guttae.)

Notes

1. Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, 51 (February 11, 1893).
2. "Lynx," "The Hotel Beresford," Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, September 21, 1889, p.1263. King's Handbook of New York City (Boston: Moses King, 1893) pp. 236, 243.
3. Ibid. Also see James Trager, West of Fifth, The Rise and Fall of Manhattan's West Side (New York: Atheneum, 1987) p. 81.
4. Ibid., p.5.
5. Much of this discussion is based on Steven Rutenbaum, Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emery Roth (New York: Balsam Press, Inc., 1986).
6. Rutenbaum, p. 80
7. Ibid., p. 95.
8. Ibid.
9. Rutenbaum, chapters 9 and 10
10. "Penthouse," "New Apartments," The New Yorker, Nov. 23, 1929, p. 85.
11. Rutenbaum, p. 142-3.
12. Trager, p. 183, 221.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Beresford Apartments has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Beresford with its vast size and dramatic profile is one of the most significant elements in the Central Park West skyline; that it is one of the finest apartment buildings designed by Emery Roth, a noted New York architect who specialized in apartment house design, and whose work played a key role in the creation of Central Park West -- one of New York's grandest residential avenues; that it is one of Manhattan's last great luxury apartment houses and one of the largest built in the pre-Depression era; that its design takes full advantage of its corner site; that it has especially notable sculptural ornament; and that it fuses a modern building type with traditional detailing in the Late Italian Renaissance style.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Article 25, Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Beresford Apartments, 211-219 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1125, Lot 29, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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The Beresford Apartments
211 Central Park West

Architect: Emery Roth
Built 1928-1929



The Beresford Apartments

East Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

South and East Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

North Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

Central Park West Entrance



The Beresford Apartments

Upper Stories, East Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

Upper Stories, South Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

East Elevation, Detail



The Beresford Apartments

Entrance, South Elevation



The Beresford Apartments

Southeast Tower