

Streetscapes/157 and 159 West 88th Street

Revamping a Pair of 1891 Low-Stoop Brownstones

The families have adapted their houses in different ways.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE two soft red brownstones at 157 and 159 West 88th Street are peculiar little structures, two low-stoop row houses on a block of traditional high-stoop buildings. Designed by the thoughtful and inventive architect Clarence True, one was almost completely intact when bought in the 1970's but, in the other, a growing family is struggling with an earlier gut job.

Critics and professional architects had been complaining about the conventional, speculatively built brownstone almost within a decade of its appearance around 1860. The uniform, chocolate stone facades got the most criticism, but the peculiar high stoop was also derided — it allowed a separate service entrance at grade for the servants but required the owners to walk up a flight of stairs to get inside.

Despite such criticism, developers continued to build what they thought the market wanted, although facades became more varied in the late 1880's. Around 1890, the developer Charles G. Judson hired a newly established architect, Clarence True, who had some different ideas about row house design. True, the son of an Episcopal clergyman in College Point, Queens, moved to Manhattan and by 1890 was in the same office building as Judson at 88th Street and Broadway.

Around 1890, he planned the first of his low-stoop row houses on the West Side and in 1891 designed 157 and 159 West 88th Street, which appear to be the earliest surviving examples. Only 13 feet wide, the houses, between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues, were built for \$12,000 apiece.

Their rich red sandstone, with the low stoops set off by the flanking high-stoop brownstones, must have been eye-catching when completed in 1892. The house at No. 157 has a projecting roof, originally with tile; No. 159 has a peaked gable with griffin figures on each side. In an 1893 brochure of his work, True said he was trying to overcome "the wearisome sameness and unattractiveness" of New York's houses "so that the home life in the city shall be rendered enjoyable rather than passably endurable."

Judson sold both houses within a few months of completion. The census return for 1900 shows the head of households in No. 157 as Jessie Taylor, a 56-year-old widow, and, in No. 159, Henry F. Quackenbos, a doctor.



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

At 159 West 88th Street, left, are Ronny Diamond, Dr. Tom Levin and dog, Hadley. At 157 are, standing, Paul S. Gleicher and Lisa Sharkey, with daughter, Casey. Sitting are sons Greg, 10, and Douglas, 8.

The Taylor household included three daughters, ages 16 to 26, and Annie Ward, 18, an Irish-born servant.

In an 1893 article in the *Real Estate Record & Guide*, Clarence True proclaimed his low-stoop entrance a success, saying that since 1890 "I have designed over 50 houses with what I may call a low-basement entrance and every one of them has sold almost immediately after completion; the

high stoop, that is absolutely useless, costs one-half of what is spent on the entire front elevation." True's idea did not sweep New York by storm — in 1894 the developer James B. Gillie had Neville & Bagge design a row of standard high-stoop houses across the street at 136-156 West 88th — but the high stoop did disappear by the late 1890's.

As the row houses of the 1890's were surpassed by more modern apartment



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The two houses in about 1910.

buildings, the character of their occupancy changed. The 1920 census shows the family of Cosmond Hammerslough, a stockbroker, at No. 157, with three servants, but the house at No. 159 has been split in two. One family was that of Leonard Major, a design engineer with a railroad, and the other was Joseph Volz, an automobile tire salesman, who shared his part of the house (probably the upper floors) with his wife, son and six lodgers. Representative of these was Hammond Nicholson, 39, born in Canada to French-speaking parents, a department store floorwalker.

BY the 1960's, both had been broken up into furnished rooms or tiny apartments, according to Dr. Tom Levin, who bought No. 159 in the early 1970's. Dr. Levin, 77, a psychologist in private practice who also works at the United Nations, has raised two children there with his wife, Ronny Diamond, a social worker and family therapist. He is enthusiastic about his house; when he found out more than 20 years ago that it was designed by Clarence True, he put up a plaque.

Dr. Levin had always wanted a brownstone. "Houses are the destination for someone who grew up in tenements, like I did; I want a place that's my turf" he said. He has enthusiastically restored the woodwork, hardware and other elements in the building, which is miraculously intact for one

that fell into multiple occupancy. True's plan is still quite evident: in the entryway, a small gemlike vestibule with a delicate spindle screen and behind that, the original kitchen, reached by a separate service hall. The hall has its original oak trim and even a small cabinet used as a pie safe. Dr. Levin rebuilt the kitchen into a group therapy room, with a shag rug and black canvas director's chairs. "I'm a 60's guy" he said.

The tight vestibule forces a visitor immediately up the stairs to the second floor, where True originally positioned the living room in front and the dining room at the rear. Dr. Levin and Ms. Diamond created an office in the center, a parlor in front and a consulting room in the old oval dining room at the rear. They moved the kitchen up to the middle of the third floor, with a new dining room at the rear — they wanted to zone it away from the office on the second floor.

On the top floor are their bedrooms, with two bathrooms separated by a single tub, entered from either bathroom, with sliding glass doors on both sides. "You have to be a close family," Dr. Levin said. The house is filled throughout with Clarence True's original details: delicate, colonial-style trim, an astounding onyx and brass fireplace, and an original bathroom (now a laundry), minus its original fixtures but with its original marble slab flooring and large glazed tile walls. "When I moved in, everybody told me to rip it out and start over, but how could you throw that out?" Dr. Levin said.

Next door, an architect, Paul S. Gleicher, and his wife, Lisa Sharkey, a senior producer on "Good Morning America," are almost finished with their own renovation project; they bought the house last year. It was gutted in an earlier apartment conversion, and only scraps remain of the original house — some stairway paneling, the same onyx and brass fireplace as next door and a few other details.

"We planned to make it minimalist," Ms. Sharkey said, "but once we felt the spirit of the place, we had to go traditional." They are putting in large classical-style moldings and other trim. "We just couldn't afford a real restoration," Mr. Gleicher said.

With a free hand, they planned the spaces in a different way from Dr. Levin, with a guest room on the ground floor — with easy access for visitors — and the parlor, dining room and kitchen on the second floor, running from front to rear. One floor up they have a nursery and master bedroom, with rooms for their two boys on the top floor.

Mr. Gleicher is sold on Clarence True's unusual low-stoop design. "Because the ground floor is slightly raised, the cellar has a higher ceiling, and the parlor floor is higher up," he said. "And, you can come right off the street with groceries."