

**CITY AND SUBURBAN HOMES COMPANY, AVENUE A (YORK AVENUE) ESTATE**, 1470 York Avenue a/k/a 501 East 78th Street, 1492 York Avenue a/k/a 502 East 79th Street, 503-509 East 78th Street, 511-517 East 78th Street, 519-523 East 78th Street, 527-531 East 78th Street, 535-539 East 78th Street, 541-555 East 78th Street, 504-508 East 79th Street, 510-512 East 79th Street, 516-520 East 79th Street, 524-528 East 79th Street, 530-534 East 79th Street, and 536-540 East 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1900-1913; architects, Harde & Short, Percy Griffin, and Philip H. Ohm.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1490, Lots 1, 9, 10, 15, 19, 23, 28, 30, 32, 36, 40, 44, and 122.

On October 6, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Fifty-eight witnesses spoke in favor of the designation including four paid representatives of the Coalition to Save City and Suburban Homes and one paid representative of the City & Suburban Housing Tenants's Association, Inc. Eight speakers, seven of whom were paid representatives of the owner, testified against the designation. The commission has received hundreds of letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation. The owner and his representatives have submitted letters and numerous other documents in opposition to the designation.

## **DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

### Summary

Built between 1901 and 1913, City and Suburban Homes Company's Avenue A Estate was the largest low-income housing project in the world at the time of its completion and remained the largest such project in Manhattan until the erection of the Amalgamated Dwellings and Knickerbocker Village in the 1930s. Its developer, the City and Suburban Homes Company was the most successful of the privately financed limited-dividend companies which attempted to address the housing problems of the nation's working poor at the turn of the century. The company's investors, led by such prominent New Yorkers as Mrs. Alfred Corning Clark (later Mrs. Henry Codman Potter), Caroline and Olivia Stokes, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Darien Ogden Mills, Isaac Seligman, R. Fulton Cutting, and Bayard Cutting agreed to voluntarily limit their profits in order to provide wage-earners with comfortable, safe, hygienic, well-maintained housing at market rates. By paying a dividend,

the company attempted to establish what its president E.R.L. Gould described as "a middle ground between pure philanthropy and pure business" and encourage others to invest in housing of an equally high caliber. City and Suburban's success in building model tenements encouraged others to enter the field, notably the industrialist Henry Phipps who established the Phipps Houses in 1905. In the 1930s when the federal government seriously began to develop a national housing policy, City and Suburban's large-scale development projects, management techniques, and financial structure were studied and used as guidance for the development of new programs.

From its inception City and Suburban Homes has been linked to the light-court tenement. This building type was first proposed by the architect Ernest Flaggy in Scribner's Magazine in 1894 as an economically viable alternative to the dark, unventilated dumbbell tenements of the period. In 1896, in preparation for the formation of City and Suburban, the Improved Housing Council, an offshoot of the prestigious Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, held a competition to solicit model designs for light-court tenements. The winners of that competition were commissioned to design City and Suburban's first three projects and the company became the first developer to build a light-court tenement. At the Avenue A Estate the light-court type was tested and improved in a series of fourteen buildings. These include two re-studies of prize-winning designs from important architectural competitions: Harde & Short's 1470 and 1492 York Avenue of 1901-03, which combine elements from Thomas Short's first-place design from the Charity Organization Society's model tenement design competition of 1900 with features from James E. Ware's initial buildings at City and Suburban's First Avenue Estate but improves on both; and Percy Griffin's 503-509 East 78th Street and 504-508 East 79th Street, a pair of U-shaped buildings, based on his third-place project from the Improved Housing Council's competition of 1896, that are situated back to back and oriented so that both their open courts face southward. The later buildings in the complex are the product of City and Suburban's own architectural department established in 1906 and headed by Philip H. Ohm. In these light-court designs, Ohm experimented with the placement of courts, stairs, halls, and apartment configurations in an effort to produce the most efficient and economical of plans; this savings of means enabled the company to increase the level of amenities offered to its tenants. Within the framework of a limited budget, all the buildings in the complex were designed in contemporary architectural styles and feature such details as quoining, rustication, patterned brickwork, and elaborately carved doorways. Ohm's projects include two buildings with courtyard entrances, 530-534 and 536-540 East 79th Street, the latter having open stairs; the Collegiate Gothic style Bishop Henry Codman Potter Memorial Buildings, at 516-520 and 524-528 East 79th Street, which won an honorable mention from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for the exterior design of an apartment house in 1911; and the Junior League Hotel for Women, at 541-555 East 78th Street, built with sleeping porches on its river front and a rooftop pergola to take full advantage of the building's riverfront site. The last building was altered in 1978-80, but has not lost its significance and remains an integral part of the complex.

In its projects City and Suburban emphasized large-scale development

likening itself to a chain store, able to offer quality goods at bargain prices because of large-scale organization. When it was completed in 1913, the Avenue A Estate comprised 1257 apartments plus a hotel for 336 women. By contrast, the next largest model tenement projects in the city were City and Suburban's First Avenue Estate with 1059 apartments and Ernest Flagg's New York Fireproof Tenements on West 42nd Street with 610 apartments. While there were other projects that covered large portions of a city block, notably Alfred T. White's Riverside Buildings (1890) in Brooklyn, nothing approached City and Suburban's large-scale high-density developments. Thus, the York Avenue project can be seen as an important achievement in the social housing movement, bracketed in time between White's English-inspired low-density developments and such post-World War I projects as the Coops and Amalgamated Houses.

#### Low-cost Housing in New York, the Progressive Movement, and the Formation of City and Suburban Homes Company

By the middle of the nineteenth century, New York had developed from a small city to a world metropolis.<sup>1</sup> Restricted by geography and by the lack of affordable public transit, its burgeoning worker population crowded into a few wards in Lower Manhattan near the major centers of employment. At first, this group's need for low-cost housing was met by partitioning existing rowhouses into one- and two-room units. By the 1840s, builders began erecting the city's first tenements. About fifty feet deep, these four- and five-story buildings were arranged in a double line of rooms with windowless bedrooms and stairs at the center of the building. Usually a second tenement was erected at the rear of the same lot, with families in both buildings sharing the same backyard pump and privy. Larger buildings, known as double-deckers or railroad flats, began appearing in the 1860s. These occupied as much as ninety percent of a standard 25 x 100 foot lot, and had twelve to sixteen rooms per floor, only four of which (two front, two back) had direct access to light and air.

Living conditions were overcrowded and unsanitary in all these buildings. Low incomes and high rents forced families to sublet a portion of their apartments or take in lodgers. Plumbing remained inadequate: water rarely reached above the first floor and was often only available from a tap in the yard; sewers and privies frequently overflowed, making these shared facilities unusable. Construction was flimsy and highly flammable; fires were a frequent occurrence, while halls and stairs were often so cramped as to make escape impossible. The streets were strewn with garbage and animal refuse; factories, slaughterhouses, and bone and fat rendering establishments operated side by side with tenements.

Under these conditions such infectious diseases as cholera, diphtheria, and typhus were rampant. While some medical experts believed that infection could be linked to specific bacteria, most subscribed to the popular notion that unsanitary conditions (poor ventilation and drainage, exposure to sewer gas) produced unhealthy vapors called "miasmatic emanations" which were the

chief source of disease. Thus, the poor ventilation and sanitary conditions in tenements were seen as a threat to public health, especially since it was realized that the diseases which originated in the slums tended to spread to wealthier districts. For many social commentators, bad housing was also a causative factor in the social degradation that led to crime, delinquency, pauperism, alcoholism, and prostitution. A report by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, a charitable organization founded in 1843 that was frequently at the forefront of the housing reform movement in nineteenth-century New York, argued that:

The tenements of the poor in this city are generally defective in size, arrangement, supplies of water, warmth, and ventilation..... The occupants consequently often suffer from sickness and premature mortality; their ability for self-maintenance is thereby impaired or destroyed, social habits and morals are debased, and a vast amount of wretchedness, pauperism and crime is produced.<sup>2</sup>

Motivated, therefore, both by fear of disease and by humanitarian concerns, reformers began organizing as early as the 1840s to attack the problems of the slums. From the first they took a two-pronged approach--lobbying for the enactment of housing and sanitary codes, and building model tenements which they hoped would demonstrate the feasibility of providing hygienic, comfortable housing for the working poor at market rates. Almost invariably, the sponsors of model tenements sought out innovative designs which would develop "better ways of utilizing the typical city lot" and improvements in "planning and equipment which speculative builders might find it profitable to follow."<sup>3</sup>

The first model tenement projects in New York were Gotham Court, at 36-38 Cherry Street (demolished) erected in 1850-51 by the philanthropist and businessman Silas Wood, and the Workingmen's Home at Mott and Elizabeth Streets (demolished) designed by architect John Ritch and erected in 1855-56 by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor.<sup>4</sup> Because of problems engendered by the plans of these buildings, they were soon abandoned by their sponsors. Interest in model tenements ceased for a time as reformers turned their attention to lobbying for minimum sanitary and fire codes which they succeeded in passing in 1867.<sup>5</sup> However, these measures proved to be inadequate and the 1870s brought renewed interest in the design of model tenements.

In Brooklyn, merchant Alfred T. White, who had studied civil engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic in Troy, began experimenting with plans for a model tenement in 1872.<sup>6</sup> A newspaper article describing a new type of tenement being used in London for Sir Sidney Waterlow's Industrial Dwellings piqued his interest and, after corresponding with Waterlow and visiting the English buildings, White commissioned Brooklyn architect William S. Field to design a similar project, called the Home Buildings, at Hicks and Baltic Streets in Cobble Hill. The Home Buildings, erected in 1876-77, and the Tower Buildings, a second project on the adjoining block erected in 1878-79, are narrow six-story buildings arranged around the perimeters of a grassy quadrangle.<sup>7</sup> In most cases the buildings are only



two rooms deep so that each room has windows facing out onto the court or onto the street. Access to the apartments is by means of open stairs and galleries -- a feature taken directly from Waterlow's buildings which recommended itself to White as a means of escape in case of fire and as a preventative for disease. White followed these early projects with the now partially demolished Riverside Buildings of 1890.<sup>8</sup> Similar in plan to the Tower and Home Buildings, the three Riverside Buildings formed a "U" around a large open space that constituted fifty-one percent of the project's half-block site.

White's projects proved to be the first financial and architectural successes of the model tenement movement in New York. The money for the projects had largely come from White and his relatives using the financial mechanism of a limited-dividend company. Such companies, which financed most privately funded model housing projects in Britain and America prior to World War I, raised capital from philanthropically-minded investors who agreed to accept a fixed dividend normally set at three to seven percent with the understanding that any higher profits would be reserved for additional construction. With the White projects, careful tenant selection, good management, and ample space for commercial tenants all contributed to the financial success of the company which paid about a five percent dividend. However, the lower cost of Brooklyn real estate must have also been an important factor in its success. Some idea of the difference in the value of Manhattan and Brooklyn real estate can be obtained by contrasting the \$81,892 purchase price for the 200 x 300 foot site of the Riverside Buildings in 1889 with the \$210,000 purchase price for the 200 x 513 foot site of the City and Suburban First Avenue Estate in 1897 (about \$1.30 a square foot versus \$2.00 a square foot, the latter purchase made during a depression when land prices had been steadily falling).<sup>9</sup>

It was in Manhattan, of course, that the problems of overcrowding were gravest. Here the vast majority of tenements continued to be erected by individual developers on standard 25 x 100 foot lots. In December 1878, a new publication, The Plumber and Sanitary Engineer, sponsored a competition aimed at improving the standard of planning for such buildings, calling for plans which would eliminate windowless inner rooms. One-hundred-ninety entries were received, with the first prize going to architect James E. Ware for what would become known as a dumbbell plan. Such plans narrowed at the center to create side courts which provided light and air to inner bedrooms and a center hall. Amendments to the housing code passed in 1879 favored the dumbbell plan which was widely adopted. But in practice it provided little improvement over existing conditions. The rear yards between buildings were frequently no more than ten feet deep and the side courts were nothing more than airshafts only two feet wide. Too narrow to admit much light or air, these shafts proved to be convenient receptacles for trash and cooking odors. Unfireproofed, they tended to act as flues in case of fire.

In 1894 Ernest Flagg published an article in Scribner's Magazine calling attention to the defects of the dumbbell plan which he felt stemmed from its adherence to the standard 25 x 100 foot lot. Flagg observed that tenements were seldom put up singly but in "blocks of from two, three, and

four, up to twenty or more," with no attempt made "to depart from the stereotyped plan."<sup>10</sup> He argued that by combining four lots to create a 100 x 100 foot plot, one could build a square building with an ample central court and corner stairs. Such a building, he said, would employ less wall enclosure, corridors, and partitions than four conventional buildings while providing greater room space, light, ventilation, and fire protection with each cluster of apartments set off by firewalls.

Light-court plans had been used in Europe for some time for middle-class apartment buildings and subsidized workers' housing and had appeared in New York for such luxury and upper middle class-apartment buildings and apartment hotels as Richard Morris Hunt's Stuyvesant Apartments (1869-70, demolished), Henry J. Hardenbergh's Dakota (1880-84), and James E. Ware's Osborne Apartments (1883-85). While Alfred T. White had succeeded in employing a perimeter scheme for his Brooklyn projects, his one imitator in Manhattan, the Improved Dwellings Association's complex on First Avenue between East 71st and 72nd Streets designed by Vaux & Radford and George Da Cunha in 1879-82, had to employ a much denser plan incorporating several modified dumbbells and by 1899 Elgin Gould doubted a similar project could be erected in Manhattan at prevailing land prices.<sup>11</sup> Flagg's contribution was to demonstrate that the courtyard type could be adapted to meet the needs of speculative tenement builders in Manhattan, producing a prototype with "properly lighted and well-ventilated apartments"<sup>12</sup> that had the same amount of rentable space as four conventional tenements and could be erected at the same or lower cost.

While Flagg's arguments had little immediate impact on speculative builders, they caused a revolution in the thinking of housing reformers and became in the words of I.N. Phelps Stokes "the starting point of model tenement-house planning in New York."<sup>13</sup>

The 1890s were, of course, a period ripe for reform.<sup>14</sup> Immigration and industrialization were bringing new people to American cities in unprecedented numbers. Cleveland, Buffalo, Washington, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and every other major city were experiencing problems with housing. In New York, where immigration was most intense, more than two-thirds of the 3,500,000 inhabitants lived in 90,000 tenement houses. A protracted depression and the increasing power of big business, led to social unrest and labor strife. Traditional values, whether dealing with the family or the role of government, were called into question. Reform was the watchword of the day, be it concerned with good government, public health, women's rights, temperance, the City Beautiful, or tenement reform. Settlement houses, such as the Neighborhood Guild of New York (1886) and the New York College Settlement (1887) on Rivington Street, were among the first in the nation, and did much to publicize conditions in the slums, though the words and photographs of Jacob Riis' How the Other Half Lives of 1890 may have been the most influential vehicle in awakening the American public to conditions among New York's immigrant poor.

In 1894, newspaper accounts of conditions in the slums prompted the New York state legislature to appoint a committee headed by Century Magazine editor Richard Watson Gilder to investigate the tenement-house problem. The

interest aroused by the work of the commission led the venerable Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor to sponsor a two-day conference in March 1896 on housing. Here, according to Jacob Riis, the reformers set up a plan of action "to deal with the matter of housing the people... ."

To the Good Government Clubs fell the task ... of compelling the enforcement of existing tenement-house laws. D.O. Mills, the philanthropic banker, declared his purpose to build hotels which should prove that a bed and lodging as good as any could be furnished to a great army of homeless men.... On the behalf of a number of capitalists, who had been identified with the cause of tenement-house reform for years, Robert Fulton Cutting, the president of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, offered to build homes for working people that should be worthy of the name, on a large scale.<sup>15</sup>

Following the conference, it was decided to form the Improved Housing Council which, working independently of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, would sponsor an architectural competition to solicit designs for model tenements. The program for the competition took as a given the ideas put forth in Ernest Flagg's Scribner's article and called for 100-foot square light-court buildings to be erected on a 200 x 400 foot plot. Only seventy percent of the lot was to be covered, with fifty-five percent in clear rentable space; buildings were to be divided into separate quadrants with each unit containing its own fireproof stair; apartments were to be only two rooms deep with cross ventilation in all the rooms; minimum sizes were set for the light courts, bedrooms and living rooms; and it was suggested that each family be provided with as many amenities as possible including its own toilet. The architects were also required to demonstrate that their buildings could earn a five percent return on invested capital at prevailing rentals for tenement apartments.<sup>16</sup> Twenty-eight entries were received, three of which were recommended for prizes. In July 1896, the City and Suburban Homes Company, the model housing company Cutting had promised, was established and pledged to build the prize-winning designs from that competition.

For its board, the company assembled a group of wealthy philanthropists, many of whom were already leaders in the field of model housing.<sup>17</sup> These included Samuel D. Babcock, president of the International Bell Telephone Company, financiers R. Fulton Cutting and Bayard Cutting, banker Darius Ogden Mills, and railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt -- all of whom were major shareholders in the Improved Dwellings Association, builder of the model tenement at First Avenue and East 71st Street. Also lending their expertise, were Alfred T. White, developer of the Home, Tower, and Riverside buildings in Brooklyn, banker Isaac N. Seligman and builder John D. Crimmins, shareholders in the Tenement Dwellings Company, builders of a small tenement on the Lower East Side, and financier Adrian Iselin, Jr., who had privately built a number of subsidized small cottages in New Rochelle. For its president, the board selected Elgin R. L. Gould, a political scientist and expert on municipal affairs who had written the landmark study, The Housing of the Working People, "a detailed, scholarly analysis of housing reform in Europe and America which concentrated upon the

financing and achievements of all model tenements in operation."<sup>18</sup> It was Gould's contention that with proper management, decent housing for the working poor could "be furnished on a satisfactory commercial basis."<sup>19</sup>

Like most of the other model housing companies, City and Suburban was established as a limited-dividend corporation, paying its investors a fixed five percent dividend. The philosophical basis for such endeavors was in Gould's words, the "recognition that the housing problem can only be solved by economic methods" and that philanthropy was "powerless to do much because the field is altogether too vast." By paying a dividend it was hoped that the company would establish a "middle ground between pure philanthropy and pure business"<sup>20</sup> and so encourage speculative investors to follow its lead. City and Suburban tried to attract a far greater amount of capital than was usually available to limited-dividend housing companies. The company's original stock offering was for \$1 million, set at \$10 a share so that, as E.R.L. Gould put it, it could establish "a clientage recruited from the thrifty masses as well as the large-hearted rich." Thus, City and Suburban hoped to appeal to all those who wished to "invest their means for useful ends" but required "a sound security."<sup>21</sup> Apparently it was successful in that endeavor -- for in 1902 when Jacob Riis wrote The Battle of the Slums, the company had an invested capital of \$2,300,000, with 250 of the 400 stockholders, holding ten shares or less, "a healthy sign" Riis said "that the company is holding the confidence of the community."<sup>22</sup>

This philosophic and practical need to earn a profit on its investment set City and Suburban apart from some of the other model tenement companies of the period which were completely philanthropic in intent. In particular, the handsome Shively Sanitary Tenements (East River Homes) at 507-515 and 517-523 East 77th Street and 508-514 and 516-522 East 78th Street (built 1910-11) which provided housing for poor tuberculosis victims and their families during their recovery period, were completely underwritten by Mr. and Mrs. William Kissam Vanderbilt at cost of \$1 million for the buildings and \$81,000 for the land. All profits from rental of the apartments were placed in trust, with the proceeds split between subsidies for the families of residents too sick to work and endowments for the care of indigents at Presbyterian Hospital and the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

#### City and Suburban Homes Company

In its first year of operation City and Suburban began work on three projects, commissioning designs from the prize winners of the Improved Housing Council's competition. The first prize winner, Ernest Flagg, seems to have been instrumental in getting Mrs. Alfred Corning Clark to underwrite the company's initial project, a group of six model tenements at 217-233 West 68th Street and 214-220 West 69th Street (demolished). Mrs. Clark, heir to the Clark family's vast Upper West Side real estate holdings, donated the land for the project and \$100,000 in cash in exchange for stock. The buildings were constructed in 1896-98 and were described by the New York Times as being as perfect "as science to date can make them."<sup>23</sup> The company also acquired a half-block site at First Avenue, East 64th, and East 65th Streets early in 1897, though the land did not become available for



development until 1898. Second prize winner James E. Ware was commissioned to design a pair of buildings fronting on First Avenue which were completed in December 1899. City and Suburban eventually acquired the rest of the block, and between 1900 and 1906 Ware's firm designed eleven additional buildings for the First Avenue Estate. The block was completed in 1915 with two buildings designed by Philip H. Ohm, who had headed City and Suburban's architectural department since 1906. Third prize winner Percy Griffin was commissioned to design small brick and half-timber cottages for Homewood, the company's suburban development between Sixteenth and Eighteenth Avenues, 67th to 74th Streets in Brooklyn.<sup>24</sup> These were offered for sale with payments over a twenty-year period to such wage earners as mechanics, letter-carriers, policemen, firemen, and bookkeepers, following the model of a program which had proven successful in Belgium.

The company's city projects were intended for less affluent workers. Sites for these projects were selected not just on the basis of availability of land and access to public transportation, though these factors were of primary concern, but also on the basis of whether there was a demand for such apartments in the neighborhood; thus, the company sought neighborhoods which were "perhaps not the most densely populated, but at all events where a positive need exists."<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the Alfred Corning Clark Estate was located on the outskirts of a tenement house district, six blocks from the city's most densely populated block, three blocks from the second, and only 200 yards from the third, while the First Avenue Estate was located in a tenement neighborhood once known as "Battle Row."<sup>26</sup> The tenants who moved to the City and Suburban projects were primarily servants, craftsmen, cigar makers, porters, painters, factory workers, nurses, waitresses, dressmakers, and salesclerks. In the East Side projects the majority of the tenants came from the surrounding neighborhood and were chiefly native-born Americans, Germans, Bohemians, English, Swedes, Irish, Scots, Cubans, and Hungarians representing the ethnic make-up of Yorkville which then extended from 60th Street to 96th Street. It should be noted that this practice of drawing tenants from the surrounding neighborhood seems to have been standard for model tenement projects so that in Brooklyn, Alfred T. White's Riverside Buildings had a large proportion of Scandinavian tenants who were "largely sea-faring" and were attracted to the project because of its proximity to the harbor.<sup>27</sup>

City and Suburban's later development projects in Manhattan included the Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, a full block of model tenements and a residential hotel for women constructed between 1901 and 1913 to the designs of Harde & Short, Percy Griffin, and the City and Suburban architectural department. On its completion the Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate was "the largest individual low-rent housing project in the world."<sup>28</sup> Concerned that the housing available to African-Americans at the turn of the century could "only be characterized as disgraceful" and aware that "a colored man in this city on the average now pays higher rental and gets far less for his money than does the white man,"<sup>29</sup> the company erected the Tuskegee (1902) and the Hampton (1912) (Howells & Stokes, architects for both), the first model tenements in New York built expressly for African-Americans. (Located in the "San Juan Hill" section of the Upper West Side, these buildings were replaced by the Lincoln Tower Apartments in the 1960s.) It was also

responsible for James H. Jones Memorial Building, a single light-court tenement at 413-417 East 73rd Street erected in 1906 to the designs of Philip H. Ohm. Writing about these projects Jacob Riis was to say:

The company's 'city homes' come as near to being that as any can. There is light and air in abundance, steam heat in winter in the latest ones, fireproof stairs, and deadened partitions to help on the privacy that is at once the most needed and hardest to get in a tenement. The houses do not look like barracks. Anyone who has ever seen a row of factory tenements that were houses, not homes, will understand how much that means. .... All together, the company has redeemed its promise of real model tenements.<sup>30</sup>

He later adds:

The company's rents average a dollar a week per room, and are a trifle higher than those of the tenements round about; but they have so much more in the way of comfort that the money is eagerly paid.<sup>31</sup>

No one could have done a greater and better thing for the metropolis than to demonstrate that it is possible to build homes for the toilers as a business and net a business interest upon the investment.<sup>32</sup>

Described by Roy Lubove in his The Progressives and the Slums as "the 'model' model tenement company of the Progressive era,"<sup>33</sup> City and Suburban became the most successful of all the limited-dividend housing companies both here and abroad with an invested capital of \$6 million and 12,000 tenants by 1911.<sup>34</sup> In the 1930s, many years after other companies ceased operations, City and Suburban owned fourteen property complexes including the Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, the First Avenue Estate, garden apartments in Queens, and a housing development in Brooklyn.<sup>35</sup> The company attributed its success to three factors: careful, economical management that emphasized good tenant relations, scientific architectural planning that produced the largest possible rental space, and large-scale production.<sup>36</sup> Wherever possible large sites were acquired since they allowed maximum flexibility in planning while providing some measure of control over the character of a neighborhood. In addition, the cost of administration was considerably less per unit in a large development. The high cost of building in Manhattan coupled with the company's desire to provide tenants with as many amenities as possible led to high-density development. Fully eighty percent of the First Avenue and Avenue A sites were covered with buildings, "a higher proportion than that of any other American or British project. The large scale was determined not only by the high cost of land but a philosophical commitment to modifying the economics of construction."<sup>37</sup> As the company's 1924 Annual Report noted, "the low prices obtained in food distribution by chain store large-scale organization are an inspiration and incentive to accomplish similar results in housing."<sup>38</sup> In the 1930s when the federal government seriously began to develop a housing policy, City and Suburban's large-scale development projects, financial structure, and management techniques were studied and used as guidance for the development of new

programs.

### The Avenue A Estate

The City and Suburban Avenue A Estate is located on part of a large tract of land which had been left to the New York Protestant Episcopal School in the eighteenth century and remained undeveloped throughout the nineteenth century. In May 1901, City and Suburban made its first purchase of land for the estate, acquiring the entire eastern frontage of Avenue A (now York Avenue) between East 78th and East 79th Streets and extending eastward on the block for 223 feet. City and Suburban considered the site ideal for a model tenement project. In addition to being undeveloped, it was located on two broad streets, and was directly across the street from a new public school (P.S. 158) and the soon-to-be-developed John Jay Park.

A few months later, the newly established firm of Harde & Short filed plans to erect a pair of tenements at the western end of the site. Like a number of other early City and Suburban projects, the commission had its origins in an influential competition for innovative tenement designs. Sponsored by the Charity Organization Society, a consortium of philanthropic organizations, the competition had been held in February 1900, in conjunction with a conference and exhibition on the evils of tenement life organized by housing expert Lawrence Veiller as part of a lobbying effort towards the enactment of new housing legislation. Veiller's exhibit featured photographs, disease and poverty charts, and a model of a typical Lower East Side tenement block where 2,781 people were crammed into thirty-nine tenements at a density of 1,515 persons per square acre. In addition there was great deal of material on model dwellings in Europe and the United States, including several photographs of City and Suburban's First Avenue Estate.<sup>39</sup> The competition, called for designs for six-story tenements, 25, 50, 75, and 100 feet wide, arranged to cover no more than seventy percent of a 200 x 400 foot block. One-hundred-seventy entries were received, many from the most promising members of the younger generation of architects (Henry Atterbury Smith, Israels & Harder, Joseph Wolf, and R. Thomas Short). Short took first prize for an inverted U-shaped design in which small octagonal bays act as connectors between horizontally aligned front and back wings. In the months following the exhibition, Veiller, who had gained the support of Governor Theodore Roosevelt, was asked to prepare a draft for a new tenement reform bill. Short and the other finalists were then asked to rework their projects to demonstrate the feasibility of the proposed law. In 1901, Veiller's bill became law and he was appointed head of the new State Tenement House Commission. Soon thereafter, Short was awarded the commission for City and Suburban's new project on Avenue A, perhaps through the intervention of the Charity Organization Society which had promised to find investors to erect the winning designs.

Although it placed first in the competition, Short's design in comparison to the other designs had encountered criticism in the architectural press for its expensive structural features and lack of rentable space.<sup>40</sup> He, himself admitted the basic unit of design had been planned for an interior lot and "that a modification might be better for

corner buildings."<sup>41</sup> Faced with the prospect of building so important a project and adapting his design to meet his client's budgetary and programmatic requirements, Short, a Brooklyn architect who began practicing in Manhattan in 1898, formed a partnership with Herbert Spencer Styne-Harde (1873-1958), an English-trained architect who had previously worked in the offices of Ralph S. Townsend and James E. Ware. Ware & Styne-Harde are credited with the design of a flats building at 2020-2026 Broadway (1895-96) and it seems probable that Harde worked on the initial projects for City and Suburban's First Avenue Estate.

In their project for the Avenue A Estate, the architects reworked Short's revised competition design to follow the basic massing and entry configuration of Ware's initial buildings at the First Avenue Estate.<sup>42</sup> From Ware they took the idea of connecting the rear of two 100-foot square light-court units, to form a U-shaped complex. This plan greatly increased the footprint of the buildings, providing more space for apartments and stores on the avenue. It was made possible, of course, by the corner location of the site which assured free access to light and air. A version of this revised design, published when the commission was announced, incorporated frequent bay windows, but these were eliminated in the final design, perhaps because they seemed unnecessary and expensive to build. While the Harde & Short project is clearly based on Ware's First Avenue buildings, it offered greater amenities -- private halls and toilets in each apartment, slightly larger rooms -- which required adjustments in the courtyard dimensions, stair arrangement, and apartment layout.

For the facades of their six-story buildings, Harde and Short employed a restrained neo-Renaissance design that depends primarily on the use of polychromatic brickwork. The facades are organized into a tripartite composition of a two-story base, three-story midsection, and one-story attic. The lower two stories are faced with tan brick, the upper stories with tawny orange brick accented with tan brick quoins and belt courses. The windows have stone sills and lintels. Splayed lintels with console keystones give prominence to the first, second, and sixth stories; the other lintels are flush with the facade. Tuscan pilasters and a full entablature set off the entrances and bracketed wrought-iron balconies serve both a practical and aesthetic function, serving as fire escapes and providing a vertical accent on predominantly horizontal composition. The projecting cornices have been removed and the shopfronts have been modernized.

Construction of the Avenue A buildings began in February 1902 and was completed in 1903, after a delay caused by a stonemason's strike. During the time the firm was working for City and Suburban, Harde & Short was also awarded a commission for the design of an apartment building at West 84th Street and Riverside Drive.<sup>43</sup> Over the next decade the partners on to design some of the most magnificently ornamented apartment buildings in New York: these included the Red House of 1903-04 at 350 West 85th Street, 45 East 66th Street of 1906-08, and Alwyn Court of 1908-09 at 180 West 58th Street. According to the authors of *New York 1900*, Alwyn Court was also remarkable for its "generous and geometrically intricate plans."<sup>44</sup> Short also worked independently of Harde and designed a variety of buildings, including a police station (1907-08, West 30th Street) and the Moorish style



Kismet Temple Mystic Shrine (1909, Brooklyn).

In 1904, soon after the Avenue A buildings were completed, City and Suburban began making plans to erect a pair of buildings at 503-509 East 78th Street and 504-508 East 79th Street (built 1904-05) on the balance of its site.<sup>45</sup> The commission for this project was given to Percy Griffin who had been working for the company in connection with its Homewood site since 1897.<sup>46</sup> Established as an architect in New York City by 1887, Griffin had been associated with Thomas Henry Randall in the firm of Griffin & Randall from 1891 to 1895. In addition to taking part in the Improved Housing Council's competition, Griffin designed the Hotel Caribbee in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1896. In the late 1890s he was awarded the commissions for the Jefferson Davis Monument in Richmond, Virginia, and the Colored Orphan Asylum on West 114th Street. In the early years of the twentieth century Griffin designed a fire station, a loft building, and several rowhouses in Manhattan. Especially noteworthy were the row of eighteen Georgian Revival style houses extending from 18 to 52 West 74th Street. Built in 1904, these twenty-five foot wide, 17- to 19-room steel-framed houses equipped with elevators and every other modern convenience are indicative of his interest in housing innovation, for a range of economic levels. In the later part of his career Griffin became associated in the firm of Griffin & Wynkoop. That partnership produced the United Hospital in Port Chester, New York, and the Pierce Arrow Service Building in Long Island City of 1913.

Following his participation in the Improved Housing Council's competition, Griffin revised his third place design, presumably at the request of City and Suburban Homes, since it was published in the journal Municipal Affairs in 1899, with an article dealing with his work at Homewood.<sup>47</sup> It seems likely that the company had intended to go ahead with his project, but was unable to do so immediately because of commitments to Ware at the First Avenue Estate and later to the winner of the Charity Organization Society competition. As published, his plan called for a U-shaped configuration with the open end of the U facing onto the street. Griffin explained that he favored this plan over the typical enclosed court of a Flagg-type plan because: "A court thirty feet square, more or less, and six stories in height, is bound to be damp, and the circulation of air depends upon the opening of windows on its four sides, which is not desirable."<sup>48</sup> Griffin believed that his plan offered the advantages of thoroughly-lighted apartments, views of the street from each apartment, cross-ventilation, and well-lit and well-ventilated stairways. When he had the opportunity to build those designs at the Avenue A Estate, he made the decision to place his buildings back to back on the site and orient them so that their courtyards both faced south. He also opted to move his staircases to the courtyard walls improving their lighting and the circulation pattern of the corridors and stairs. The reversed orientation of his 79th Street building meant that he had to plan different stair and apartment configurations for the two buildings and the differences in plan are of course reflected in the treatment of the facades.

For the facades of his buildings Griffin used a simple but handsome designs incorporating Georgian Revival motifs. On East 78th Street, the long rectangular court divides the building into two parts. The tan brick

facade is organized into a tripartite story grouping composed of a one-story base, four-story midsection, and one-story attic. A belt course separates the first and second stories and the windows are set within raised brick enframements with splayed orange brick lintels and stone keystones. Recessed panels are set between the windows on the sixth story and the building is crowned by a simple corbelled brick cornice. The chief features of the buildings are columned stone porticos framing the entrances. The delicate wrought-iron fire escape balconies are ornamented with neo-Classical rondels.

On East 79th Street, the basic decorative features of the East 78th Street facade are repeated, but windows are arranged in groups to break up the long horizontal facade. A similar device had been used by Ernest Flagg for his Mills House I at Bleecker and Thompson Streets of 1896-97.

In April 1905, City and Suburban purchased the balance of the block from the New York Protestant Episcopal School. Faced with the prospect of developing this large parcel the company opted to create its own constructive and architectural departments so that its projects could be built in-house. The architectural department was headed by Philip H. Ohm, who had established a private practice in 1894 and worked in Harlem until 1898 before opening an office at 35 Broadway in downtown Manhattan.<sup>49</sup>

In 1904, City and Suburban decided to set up its own construction company, and Ohm may have been hired then to supervise the construction of two buildings designed by Percy Griffin at 503-509 East 78th Street and 504-508 East 79th Street. By 1906, the responsibilities of the constructive department had expanded and Ohm had begun planning model tenements for the company's Avenue A project. He seems to have worked almost exclusively for City and Suburban between 1906 and 1915; his one major outside commission was the Phipps Houses III, a model tenement sponsored by a company closely allied with City and Suburban.

Ohm's first job at City and Suburban was to plan the development of a significant portion of the new property. In March 1906, plans were filed with the Department of Buildings to erect eight buildings situated back-to-back on East 78th and East 79th Streets.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, the plans were conceived not just in terms of the individual buildings but in terms of the overall plan of the block including the shared back alley and courts. The first two buildings, 511-515 East 78th Street and 510-512 East 79th Street, were completed by January 1907. Here, Ohm returned to the interior courtyard type but paired wide side courts between adjacent buildings to create a second set of interior courtyards for increased ventilation. The first story has long public halls which provide access to courtyard stairs leading down to the basement. Public bathrooms with tubs were set along the courtyard walls on the first story. (This was an improvement from earlier buildings in the project where the bathrooms had been in the basement and a real improvement over speculator-built tenements which frequently had no bathrooms at all.) Here a quarter of the basement area was set aside as a playroom for children; other areas contained lockers for the tenants and a large laundry room. Clothes poles were provided on the roof for drying, the clothes transported by means of dumbwaiters set at each corner of the

building.

The exteriors of these two buildings are faced with tan brick which is corbeled to form rusticated bands at the first story and quoins which frame the corner bays. The windows have simple stone sills and lintels and the entrances are framed by granite and limestone surrounds ornamented with heavy garland brackets and stylized cartouches. The wrought-iron fire escapes and areaway fences are ornamented with urn finials and curved brackets. The cornices have been removed from both buildings.

In March 1908, plans were filed for 519-523 and 525-527 East 78th Street (built 1908).<sup>51</sup> These conformed to the footprint of the 1906 buildings and shared some similarities in plan, notably in disposition of public spaces in the basement and first story. Here, however, half-turn staircases have been substituted for the quarter-turn staircases in the 1906 building, and the plans have been reconfigured in response to a demands for smaller apartments following the financial depression of 1907.<sup>52</sup>

Like the adjacent 515-517 East 78th Street, these buildings are faced with tan brick. The handsomely designed facades feature elaborate brickwork including vertical rows of raised brick panels framing the entrance and corner bays, diaperwork panels between the windows on the sixth story, and a corbelled brick and terra-cotta cornice. The windows have splayed stone keystones with molded brick and carved stone enframements set above the elaborately carved limestone and granite portals. The facade is also accented by stone string courses and keystones. The wrought-iron fire escapes are supported by curved brackets and are ornamented with rosettes and small finials. An areaway railing with urn finials runs in front of the building.

In October 1908 the Company filed plans for an additional building located at 535-539 East 78th Street which was completed in 1909.<sup>53</sup> Almost identical in plan to the two preceding buildings, it is also similar in elevation. Here the entrance bays are framed by vertical bands of rusticated brickwork capped at the rooftop parapet by corbels. The windows have splayed stone lintels, except above the entrances where crosetted stone enframements are enriched with console brackets and framed by volutes. The entrances are surrounded by granite bands set into stone enframements with large brackets and frieze ornamented with geometric motifs. Wrought-iron fire escape balconies rest on curved brackets.

The company completed the last of the buildings projected for this phase of the building program in 1909-10,<sup>54</sup> when the friends and relatives of Bishop Henry Codman Potter sought to honor his memory through the erection of a pair of model tenements at 516 and 520 East 79th Street to be known as the Bishop Henry Codman Memorial Buildings.<sup>55</sup> While the footprint and stair placement were similar to that of the buildings erected on East 78th Street in the previous year, the plans had been reworked to create additional rooms and private bathrooms. As in the earlier buildings, the basement provided a play area for children as well as storage space and laundry facilities.

The special endowment for these buildings of about \$350,000 allowed Ohm to use a more elaborate facade treatment than was typical at City and Suburban projects. Designed in the Collegiate Gothic style appropriate both to residential buildings and to the memory of a famous churchman, the buildings are treated as a single unit. They have a two-story tan brick base articulated with banded courses, above which rise four stories faced in brown brick accented with tan brick quoins and buttresses. The roofline is picturesquely massed with a crenellated tower, gables, and crenellated parapets. Gothic elements include label moldings over the second story windows, pointed arches on the tower, decorative shields below the roofline and the pointed-arched stone entryways decorated with quatrefoils. Pinnacles and quatrefoils ornament the wrought-iron fire escape balconies and quatrefoils, trefoils, pointed arches, and pinnacles adorn the areaway railing. In 1911 these buildings were awarded an honorable mention for exterior apartment building design by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The judges reported that their decision had been based on the following criteria: simplicity of design, good proportion, artistic and practical use of inexpensive materials, avoidance of imitation or sham materials, adaptability of design to site, and resolution of utilitarian problems of design such as the treatment of fire escapes, tanks, bulkheads, and awnings.<sup>56</sup>

In 1909 City and Suburban also entered into discussions with the Junior League about the possibility of erecting a hotel for working women at the Avenue A Estate. As early as 1899, the company had set aside a building for working women at the Alfred Corning Clark Estate, but found that many of the larger apartments went unlet because they were too costly for the tenants. In The Battle with the Slum Jacob Riis had raised the plea for a women's hotel comparable in price and amenities to Mills House for men. By 1909, the League was aware of "about forty-one homes, charitable institutions, and clubs for working girls,"<sup>57</sup> but noted that "these with a few notable exceptions, are by name and policy religious or charitable institutions with restrictions as to creed, hours, age or wages." Within six months the League raised \$260,000 towards the project, with Dorothy Whitney putting up the bulk of the capital. A prime site at the corner of East 78th Street and Exterior Street (now Marie Curie Place) overlooking the River and John Jay Park was selected and the commission for the project was given to City and Suburban's architectural department headed by Philip H. Ohm. Ohm's plan arranged 300 single rooms and 110 small apartments around a central court. Each story had a large iron balcony facing the river, and a garden on the roof could accommodate tennis, basketball, or "any other kind of exercise." There were also communal dining areas, sitting rooms, and plenty of baths and lavatories. The facade is faced with light tan "Milwaukee" brick trimmed with marble.<sup>58</sup> Its design is suggestive of Italian Renaissance architecture incorporating giant arches, cartouches, and quoins and originally balconies and a roof pergola. In 1978-80 the hotel was converted to an apartment building. At that time a full eighth story was added and the piazzas and original entrance on FDR Drive were filled in.

At 530-34 and 536-540 East 79th Street, Ohm made use of arched passages leading to a central courtyard with corner entrances. Plans of this type



were common for apartment buildings and had been suggested for tenements in the 1896 Improved Housing Competition, though Ernest Flagg, among others, thought them too wasteful of space and therefore inappropriate for tenements. Their use for these buildings may have been prompted by Henry Atterbury Smith's successful designs at the Shively Sanitary Tenements in the adjoining block of East 78th Street.

In the earlier of these two buildings, 530-534 East 79th Street, constructed in 1912,<sup>59</sup> Ohm used enclosed stair towers. Bathrooms are positioned off the corners of the court and each apartment has its own bathroom. The floor plans are much more compactly designed than in his earlier buildings with much less space expended for staircases and corridors. Even while providing bathrooms for each apartment, he increased rentable space. The building's facade is faced with tan brick trimmed with lighter colored brick quoins and has stone window and portal enframements. Wrought-iron fire escapes rest on angular brackets. The central fire escape is arched and has a central decorative rondel. Shaped parapets once employed above the center and corner bays have been removed. The courtyard walls are faced with brick and a pair of built-in benches creates an inviting setting. Shaped pediments call attention to the corner entrances.

The last building in the complex, located at the corner of 79th Street and the FDR Drive with its entrance at 542 East 79th, was erected in 1913 to commemorate William Bayard Cutting, one of the founders of the City and Suburban Homes Company.<sup>60</sup> Because of its long trapezoidal site, it has a different massing than the other buildings in the project with deep light courts facing the river. It is the only building among City and Suburban's Manhattan projects to employ open stairs, a feature that was much debated during this period, when some architects, notably Henry Atterbury Smith, sought to have the building code amended so that bathrooms could be vented onto open stairwells. Here the bathroom windows open onto the court but are in close proximity to the stairwells. The building's facades are faced with tan brick trimmed with stone and features such elements as rustication, recessed panels, and quoining. The portal is marked by a stone enframement, and there is a rounded pediment on the parapet over the entrance bay. The courtyard is faced with light colored brick laid in a decorative pattern. Each stairway is protected by a canopy on large iron brackets. Iron rails guard the stairs.

### Subsequent History and Influence

The years prior to World War I were the period of City and Suburban's greatest growth, though the company continued to operate housing projects including the Avenue A Estate until the 1961.<sup>61</sup> In the period between the World Wars, the company continued to build housing though its focus shifted from Manhattan to the outlying boroughs which had been made accessible to workers by the construction of the subway and elevated lines. In 1919-20, City and Suburban built its first group of garden apartments at Homewood designed by Andrew J. Thomas, a talented young architect who was perhaps the most innovative designer of this building type in New York between the wars. In the 1930s City and Suburban developed the Celtic Park Apartments in

Woodside, Queens, employing the architects Ernest Flagg (one unit, 1931-32) and Springsteen & Goldhammer (five units, 1933-38). In Manhattan, the company purchased several model tenements projects from the heirs of their original sponsors. These included the former Shively Sanitary Tenements, renamed the East River Homes, which City and Suburban bought in 1924 and ran as low-cost rental apartments, and two properties acquired from the Phelps-Stokes Fund in 1925, the Dudley Homes at 339-349 East 32nd Street (demolished) and 52-58 East 97th Street (built 1922, Sibley & Featherston, architects). In 1929-30, the company bought three "Old Law" tenements and five commercial buildings on Goerck and East Houston Streets which it renovated into modern rental apartments to serve the largely Jewish community of the Lower East Side. The Junior League Hotel, which had begun losing money in the early 1930s, was taken over entirely by City and Suburban in 1933 which continued to operate it as the East End Hotel for Women. In addition, sixty-seven houses in Cedarhurst, Nassau County, erected by Mrs. Russell Sage as a model housing project, were purchased from her estate in 1920 and sold to their occupants at cost over a five-year term. During this period, the company also made improvements to its older apartments at the First Avenue and Avenue A Estates installing electricity, baths, and modern appliances, and in some cases reconfiguring room arrangements. A 1939 Federal Housing Administration study attests to the fact that:

Although the rentals of the housing projects operated by the company increased from slightly over \$4 per room per month in 1899 to a range of from \$9 to \$11 in 1930, all of the projects in operation in 1930 were tenanted by families in the lowest quarter of the range of rentals paid in New York at that time.<sup>62</sup>

Following World War II, material and labor shortages and the imposition of rent controls which made even modest new construction for low-income tenants non-competitive with existing rental buildings discouraged the company from building new housing. However, it was still operating eight properties in 1950 -- the First Avenue Estate, the Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, including the East End Hotel for Women, the James H. Jones Memorial Building on East 73rd Street, the Homewood Garden Apartments, the East River Homes (formerly Shively Sanitary Tenements), the Dudley Homes, the East 97th Street property, and the Celtic Garden Apartments. One property, the Alfred Corning Clark Estate, had been sold in 1924 because it lacked central heating and bathrooms and was considered too costly to modernize, and two others, the Goerck-Houston Street buildings and the Tuskegee-Hampton Estate, were condemned for urban redevelopment projects (the Dudley was also later condemned as part of the site of Kips Bay Plaza). The company had paid off its mortgages and made capital improvements to its remaining buildings, and still had considerable cash in hand when in December 1951, it acquired the innovative Hillside Homes,<sup>63</sup> a multi-block low-density moderate income project, designed by Clarence Stein in 1934, located at Boston Road and Seymour Avenue in the Bronx. City and Suburban remained in operation until 1961, when the majority of its shares were acquired by the Scheuer family through the Diversified Management Corporation, a real estate holding company.<sup>64</sup> In April 1961, City and Suburban merged with Diversified and the outstanding five percent of the stock was purchased at \$50.25 per share.

The Avenue A Estate remained in the hands of the Scheuer family until 1984 when it was sold to Peter S. Kalikow, Kalikow 78/79 Associates. Today, the complex remains largely intact except for the former Junior League Hotel (East End Hotel) which received a one-story addition and had its entrance on FDR Drive and porches enclosed when the building was converted to apartments in 1978-80. However, the building has not lost its significance and it remains an integral part of the complex.

The impact of City and Suburban and of the Avenue A Estate was both immediate and long-range. In the short term the Improved Dwellings Council's and Charity Organization Society's competition which encouraged architects to explore the possibilities of the Flagg light-court plan and City and Suburban's initial success at organizing a limited-dividend company and building light-court tenements initiated a flowering of model tenement construction at the turn of the century. Among the early companies which were directly related to City and Suburban were Ernest Flagg's New York Fireproof Association, established in 1899 and originally financed by Darius Ogden Mills whom Flagg had come to know through his work with City and Suburban; the Phipps Houses, established by industrialist Henry Phipps in 1905 at the suggestion of City and Suburban's president Elgin Gould and subsequently organized with the advice of the company and managed by its staff; and the Phelps-Stokes Fund, established by Caroline and Olivia Stokes, who were early investors in City and Suburban and served on its board and who on erecting the Dudley and 52-58 East 97th Street turned over the management of these properties to City and Suburban.<sup>65</sup> Other light-court model tenement projects included the Billings at 326-330 East 35th Street of 1905 designed by Andrews & Withers, the Bishop at 56-82 Hester Street of 1901-02 and De Forest Fireproof Tenements at 203-205 East 27th Street of 1906-07 designed by Ernest Flagg, the Shively Sanitary Tenements of 1910-11 designed by Henry Atterbury Smith, the Hartley Open Stair Tenements at 521-531 West 47th Street of 1912-13 designed by Henry Atterbury Smith and William P. Miller, the Rogers Tenement at 425-427 West 44th Street of 1915 designed by Grosvenor Atterbury, and the Emerson Tenements at 746 Eleventh Avenue of 1917 designed by William Emerson. It should be noted that while several of these buildings were extremely experimental in design, the cost of their construction tended to be absorbed by their sponsors and not charged against operating expenses. Even so, only a few model tenement companies, notably Ernest Flagg's Fireproof Association, approached City and Suburban in terms of profitability or longevity and none approached it in size. In the long term, it was precisely these factors which interested the next generation of housing experts as they began to study the City and Suburban Company and its projects in the 1930s.

Thus, in 1939 the Federal Housing Administration regarded "the policies and practices evolved in the successful management ...[of] one of the oldest limited dividend housing corporations in existence" worthy of study as "a guide to more recent ventures into the field of limited dividend housing operations" and hoped that by publishing a study of City and Suburban's operations, Four Decades of Housing with a Limited Dividend Corporation, "the principles of rental housing operations gleaned from the corporation's 40-year experience would serve to further the building operation of multi-family structures for investment rather than speculation."<sup>66</sup> After

analyzing the company's operations the report concluded:

In toto, the management has pursued a course calculated to preserve its investment while doing its share toward activating better housing for low-income groups. Its financial success is illustrated by its balance sheet. Its leadership in promoting better housing has received acknowledgement from time to time by other interested groups. Its activities have been pointed out as as a model worthy of duplication by other groups interested in attacking the same problems. Its policies and practices have been followed by other similar organizations. And today, after more than four decades of unceasing activity, it is continuing its forward movement with building activity.<sup>67</sup>

For James Ford, writing in 1936, in his monumental survey Slums and Housing, the company's financial policies and architectural achievements were also of interest, but it was the sheer size of its projects that were most impressive. As detailed in an appendix to his book prepared by I.N. Phelps Stokes, the Avenue A Estate, with 1257 apartments plus a hotel for 336 guests, was the largest model tenement project in the city, surpassing both City and Suburban's First Avenue Estate with 1059 apartments and Ernest Flagg's New York Fireproof Tenements on West 42nd Street with 610 apartments, and therefore was in Ford's opinion "the most important group of model tenements erected on Manhattan Island prior to the building of the Amalgamated Dwellings on Grand Street and Knickerbocker Village."<sup>68</sup>

While there were other projects that covered large portions of city blocks, notably Alfred T. White's Riverside Buildings of 1890 in Brooklyn, the Avenue A Estate is one of only two full city block developments of light-court model tenements in the nation and is the larger of the two. It can be seen as an important achievement in the social housing movement, bracketed in time between White's English-inspired low-density developments and the post-War I projects like the Coops and Amalgamated Houses.

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## NOTES

1. This material on the development of low-income housing in New York is taken from James Ford, Slums and Housing (Cambridge, Mass., 1936); Anthony Jackson, A Place Called Home: a History of Low-cost Housing in Manhattan (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Roy Lubove, The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1907 (Pittsburgh, 1962); Jacob Riis, The Battle with the Slum (New York, 1902).
2. Quoted in Jackson, 24-25.
3. Ford, 123.
4. For these buildings see Jackson, 6-16;
5. For the tenement law of 1867 see Jackson, 35-39; and Lawrence Veiller, "Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1834-1900," in The Tenement House Problem ed. Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller (New York, 1903), 94-97.
6. Alfred T. White, "Sun-Light Tenements," National Housing Association Publications 12 (Mar. 1912); "Alfred Tredway White," Dictionary of American Biography.
7. The Home Buildings and Tower Buildings are within the Cobble Hill Historic District.
8. The Riverside Buildings are within the Brooklyn Heights Historic District.
9. White, 19; City and Suburban Homes Company, First Annual Report (1897). For real estate prices in 1897 see "The Real Estate Market," Real Estate Record, Jan.-June, 1897.
10. Ernest Flagg, "The New York Tenement-House Evil and Its Cure," Scribner's Magazine 16 (July 1894), 109.
11. Elgin R.L. Gould, "The Housing Problem," Municipal Affairs 3 (Mar. 1899), 121-22. On this building see also Jackson, 59-60; "The New York Tenement House System," Leslie's Illustrated, Dec. 30, 1882, p. 315, reproduced in "Statement with Supporting Information Concerning the Entire Block Bounded by York Avenue..." submitted on behalf of the owner of Block 1490, April 15, 1888.
12. Flagg, 109.

13. I.N. Phelps Stokes, "Appendix: Notes on Plans," in Ford, Slums and Housing, p. 883.
14. Harold U. Faulkner, Politics, Reform and Expansion (New York, 1959), 23-47; Gwendolyn Wright, Moralism and the Model Home (Chicago, 1980), 105-116.
15. Jacob Riis, 128-129.
16. This rate was comparable to the earnings on a conservative investment at the time. Eugenie Ladner Birch and Deborah S. Gardner, "The Seven-Percent Solution, A Review of Philanthropic Housing, 1870-1910," Journal of Urban History 7 (August 1981), 406.
17. See "New York's Great Movement of Housing Reform," The Review of Reviews 14 (December 1896), 693-99.
18. Lubove, 102.
19. Gould, The Housing of Working People, quoted in Lubove, 102.
20. Gould, "The Housing Problem," 122.
21. Ibid, 123.
22. Riis, 13.
23. "Health and Profit," New York Times, November 29, 1896, p. 13.
24. Percy Griffin, "Model Cottages at Homewood," Municipal Affairs 3 (Mar. 1899), 132-37.
25. "New York's Great Movement," 697.
26. This section is based on the company's Annual Reports, 1897-1907.
27. White, 16.
28. Federal Housing Administration, Four Decades of Housing with a Limited Dividend Corporation, (Washington, D.C., 1939), 59.
29. City and Suburban Homes Company, Fifth Annual Report (1901), 9.
30. Riis, 133.
31. Ibid., 136.
32. Ibid., 137.
33. Lubove, 249.
34. Birch and Gardner, 422.

35. FHA, 27-71.
36. Gould, "Model Tenements Not a Failure," New York Times, January 19, 1913, p. 13; City and Suburban Homes Company, Twenty-eighth Annual Report (1924), 7.
37. Birch and Gardner, 423; FHA 27-71.
38. Annual Report (1924), 7.
39. Richard Plunz, City and Suburban Homes, First Avenue Estate, testimony, Feb. 8, 1989.
40. "The Model Tenement Competition," Architecture 1 (March 1900), 105.
41. American Architect and Building News 47 (March 10, 1900), 78.
42. New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building application, 1349-1901.
43. For Harde & Short see Dennis Steadman Francis, Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900 (New York, 1979), 37, 69; Landmarks Preservation Commission, Research Files, "Architects' Appendix", Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report (LP-1051), (New York, 1981).
44. Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale, New York 1900 (New York, 1983), 290.
45. New Building application, 554-1904
46. For Percy Griffin see Landmarks Preservation Commission, Upper West Side/Central Park West Designation Report, (LP-1647) (New York, 1990); David P. Handlin, "An Analysis of the Architecture of the York Avenue Estate," in "A Report: Opposing Landmark Designation", 6:57-58.
47. Griffin, 132-37.
48. Ibid.
49. For Ohm see Francis, 58; David Handlin, "An Analysis of the York Avenue Estate," in "A Report: Opposing Landmark Designation," (Dec. 30, 1988), 56-57; David Handlin, "The Architectural Significance of the York Avenue Estate," in "Closing Argument of Kalikow 78/79 Company regarding the Proposed Designation of the York Avenue Estate....," Apr. 17, 1990.
50. New Building application, 311-1906.
51. New Building application, 99-1908.

52. This depression coupled with substantial rent increases in commercial tenements also brought forth the nation's first rent strike which was organized by Jewish housewives on the Lower East Side.
53. New Building application, 428-08.
54. New Building application, 67-1909.
55. Mrs. Corning Clark, patron of the first City and Suburban project, had married Bishop Potter in 1902; It seems likely that she was responsible for choosing to commemorate her husband through the endowment of a model tenement project. James Sheerin, Henry Codman Potter: An American Metropolitan (New York, 1933), 169. I am grateful to Commissioner Sarah Bradford Landau for bringing this information to my attention. For these buildings see also "Dedicate Splendid Potter Tenements," New York Times, April 18, 1912.
56. "Prize Winning Houses," Real Estate Record & Guide, Feb. 24, 1912, p. 386.
57. Katherine Barnes, "The Junior League House for Girls," Junior League Bulletin, January, 1911. See also "Clubhouse for Girls," New York Times, May 16, 1911.
58. "Clubhouse."
59. New Building application, 207-1912.
60. New Building Application 603-1913.
61. This section of the later development of City and Suburban is largely based on the company's Annual Reports, 1915-1949/50 and on the FHA study of 1939. For its later garden apartment projects see also Bacon, 263; Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, Thomas Mellins, New York 1930 (New York, 1987), 449, 481, 490; Richard Pluntz, "Institutionalization of Housing Form in New York City, 1920-1950," in Housing Form and Public Policy in the United States (New York, 1980), 158-61.
62. FHA, 60.
63. "Stock Control of Hillside Houses Sold by Nathan Straus and Family," New York Times, December 21, 1951, p. 41.
64. New York County, County Clerk, File 15742-1960, Certificate of Incorporation, Court and Record Division, New York County Courthouse; File 392-1896, Division of Old Records, Surrogates Courthouse.
65. For Flagg's involvement with City and Suburban and the New York Fireproof Tenement Association see Bacon, 244-53; for the company's involvement in the creation of the Phipps Houses see "The Phipps Model Tenements Again," Real Estate Record and Guide, Mar. 4, 1905, p. 460;



and Roger Starr, Phipps Houses (New York, 1980), 3 (Copy on file at the Landmarks Preservation Commission in the Phipps Houses research file); for the Stokes sisters see Franklin H. Williams to David Todd, letter dated June 22, 1989, in the Landmarks Preservation Commission, City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, LP file.

- 66. FHA, 2.
- 67. Ibid., p. 91.
- 68. Ford, fig. 120.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of these buildings, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, built between 1901 and 1913, was the largest low-income housing project in the world at the time of its completion and remained the largest such project in Manhattan until the erection of the Amalgamated Dwellings and Knickerbocker Village in the 1930s; that its developer, the City and Suburban Homes Company, was the most successful of the privately financed limited-dividend companies which attempted to address the housing problems of the nation's working poor at the turn of the century; that the company's investors included many prominent New Yorkers; that the investors voluntarily agreed to limit their profits from the company in order to provide wage-earners with comfortable, safe, hygienic, well-maintained housing at market rates; that by paying a dividend, the company attempted to establish, what its president E.R.L. Gould described as "a middle ground between pure philanthropy and pure business" and to encourage others to invest in housing of an equally high caliber; that City and Suburban's success in building model tenements encouraged others to enter the field, notably the industrialist Henry Phipps who established the Phipps Houses in 1905; that in the 1930s when the federal government began seriously to develop a national housing policy, City and Suburban's large-scale development projects, management techniques, and financial structure were studied and used as guidance for the development of new programs; that from its inception City and Suburban Homes has been linked to the light-court tenement, a building type first proposed by the architect Ernest Flagg in Scribner's Magazine in 1894 as an economically viable alternative to the dark, unventilated dumbbell tenements of the period; that in 1896, in preparation for the formation of City and Suburban, the Improved Housing Council, an offshoot of the prestigious Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, held a competition to solicit model designs for light-court tenements; that the winners of that competition were commissioned to design City and Suburban's first three projects and the company became the first developer to build a light-court tenement; that at the Avenue A Estate the light-court type was tested and improved in a series of fourteen buildings designed by the architects Harde & Short, Percy Griffin, and Philip Ohm; that Percy Griffin's buildings are adaptations of his third place project from the Improved Housing Council Competition of 1896 and Harde & Short's buildings are adaptations of Short's first-place design from the important Charity Organization Society model tenement competition of 1900; that the later buildings in the complex are the product of City and Suburban's own architectural department established c. 1906 and headed by Philip H. Ohm; that in these light-court designs, the architects experimented with the placement of courts, stairs, halls, and apartment configurations in an effort to produce the most efficient and economical of plans; that this savings of means enabled the company to increase the level

of amenities offered to tenants; that these variations in plan are reflected externally in the massing of the buildings and in the placement of doors and windows; that within the framework of a limited budget the buildings in the complex were designed in contemporary architectural styles and feature such details as quoining, rustication, patterned brickwork, and elaborately carved stone doorways; that Philip Ohm's Collegiate Gothic style Bishop Henry Codman Potter Memorial Buildings, at 516-520 and 524-528 East 79th Street, won an honorable mention from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for the exterior design of an apartment house in 1911; that the complex includes the Junior League Hotel for Women, built with sleeping porches on its river front and a rooftop pergola to take full advantage of the building's riverfront site; that although the last building was altered in 1978-80, it retains its significance and remains an integral part of the block; that in its projects City and Suburban emphasized large-scale development likening itself to a chain store, able to offer quality goods at bargain prices because of large scale organization; that when it was completed in 1913 the York Avenue Estate comprised 1257 apartments plus a hotel for 336 women; that while there were other projects that covered large portions of a city block, notably Alfred T. White's Riverside Buildings (1890) in Brooklyn, the Avenue A Estate is one of only two full city block developments of light-court model tenements in the nation; that it can be seen as an important achievement in the social housing movement, bracketed in time between White's English-inspired low-density developments and the post-World War I projects like the Coops and Amalgamated Houses.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate, 1470 York Avenue a/k/a 501 East 78th Street, 1492 York Avenue a/k/a 502 East 79th Street, 503-509 East 78th Street, 511-517 East 78th Street, 519-523 East 78th Street, 527-531 East 78th Street, 535-539 East 78th Street, 541-555 East 78th Street, 504-508 East 79th Street, 510-512 East 79th Street, 516-520 East 79th Street, 524-528 East 79th Street, 530-534 East 79th Street, and 536-540 East 79th Street, and designates Tax Map Block 1490, Lots 1, 9, 10, 15, 19, 23, 28, 30, 32, 36, 40, 44, and 122, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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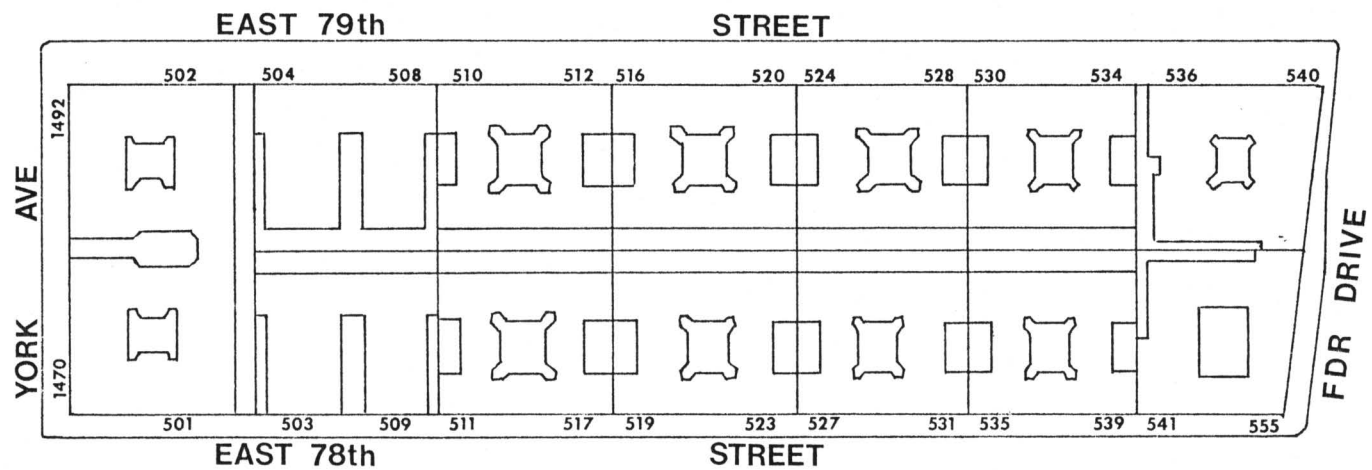
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CITY AND SUBURBAN HOMES COMPANY

AVENUE A (YORK AVENUE) ESTATE



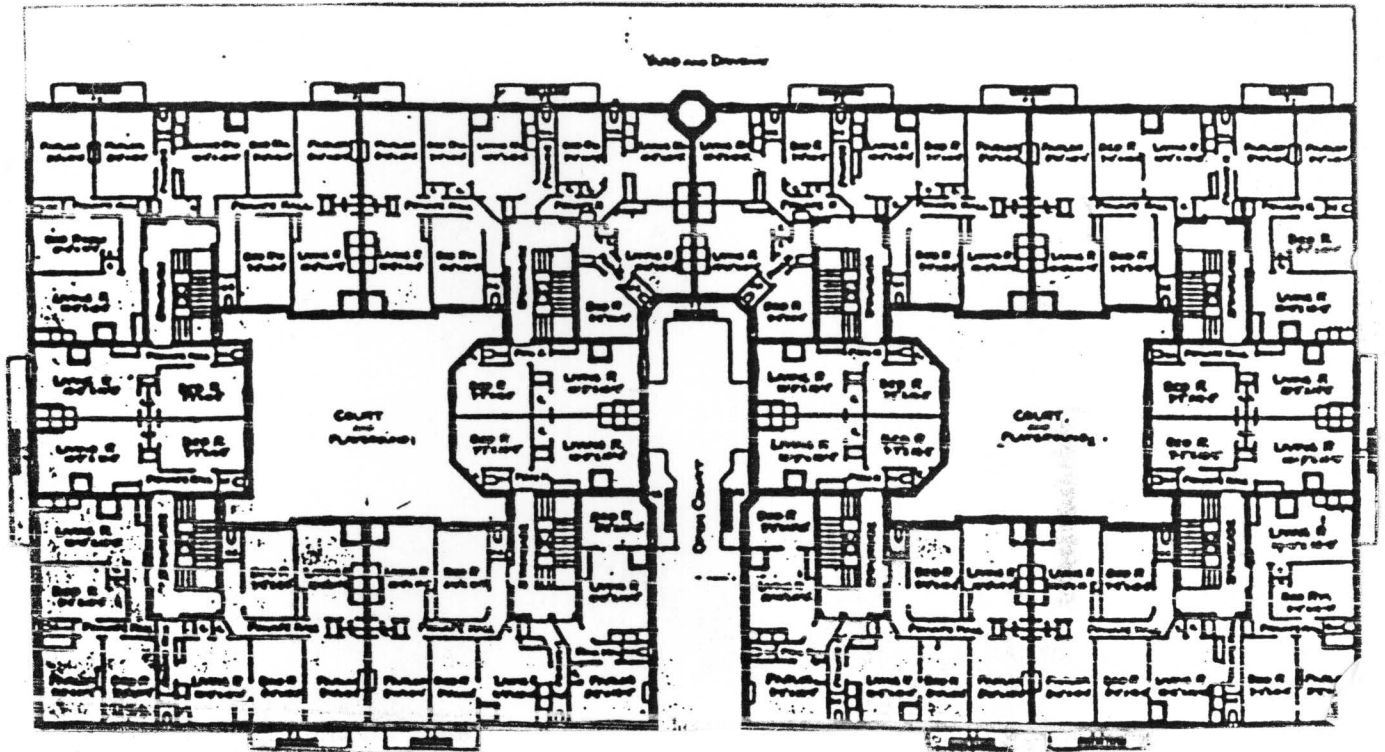
LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DESIGNATED - APRIL 24, 1990



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 1470-1492 York Avenue  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 1470-1492 York Avenue (plan of upper floors)



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 503-509 East 78 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 503 East 78 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster

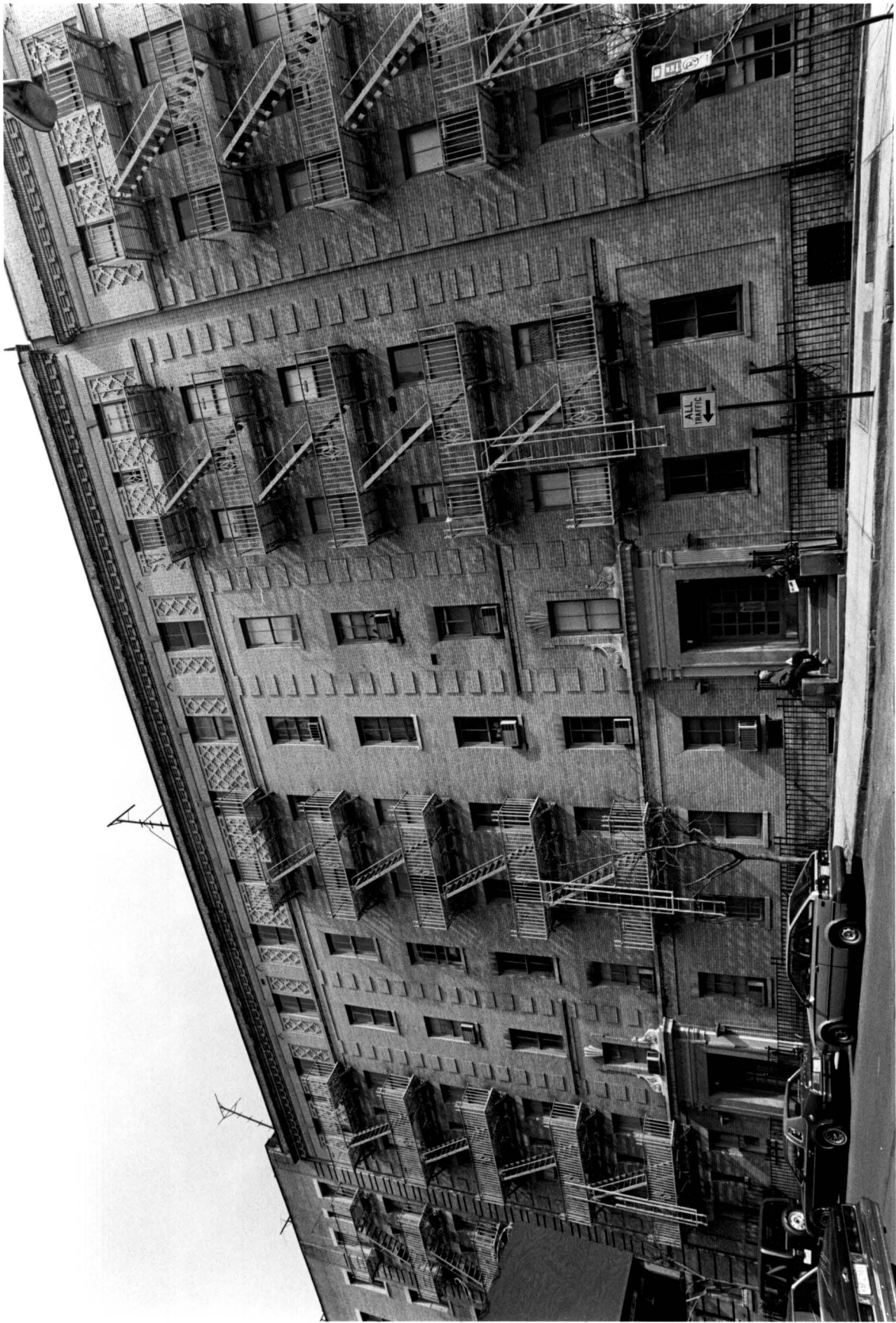


City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 511-517 East 78 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 511-517 East 78 Street  
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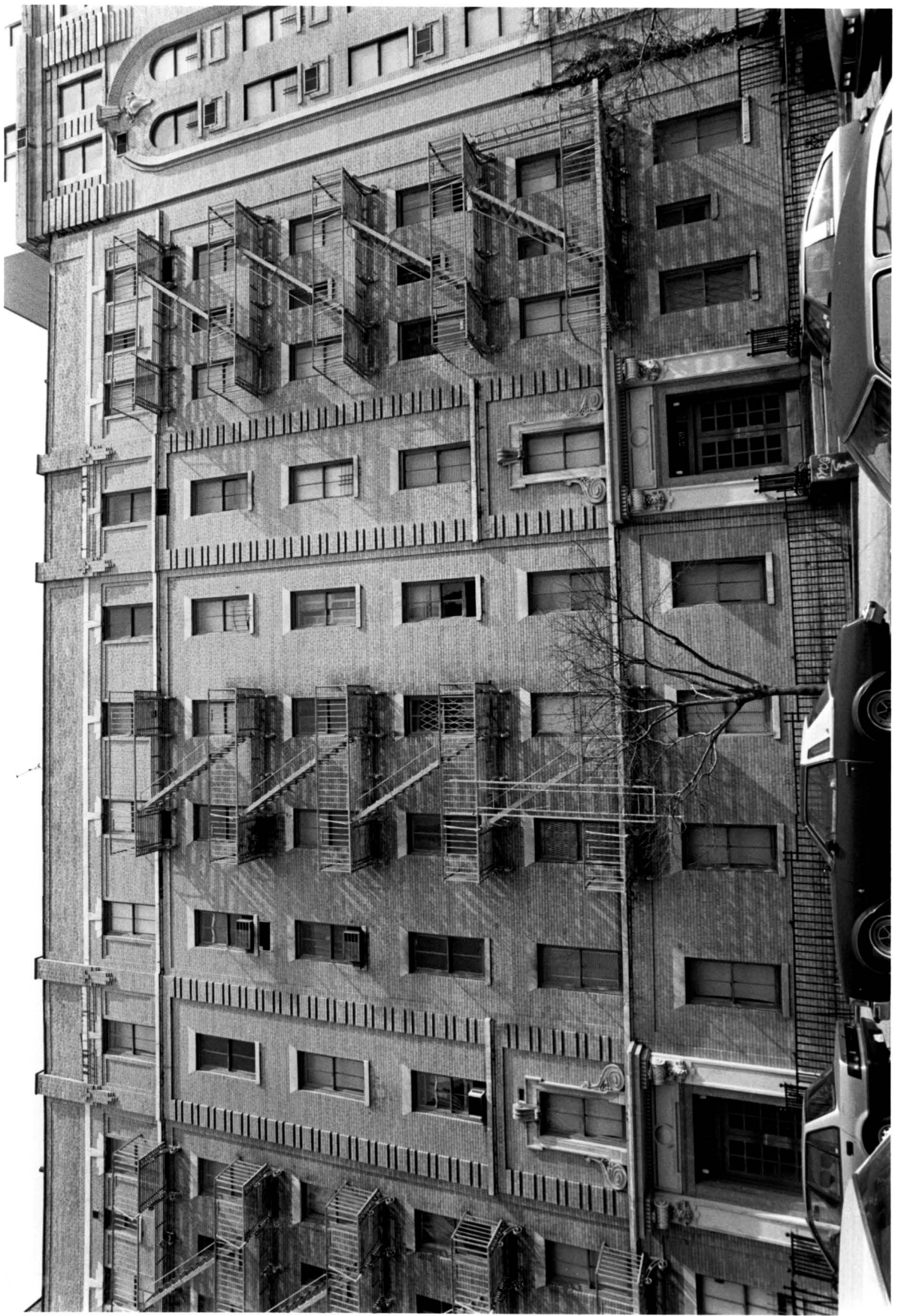
City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 519-523 East 78 Street  
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City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 527-531 East 78 Street  
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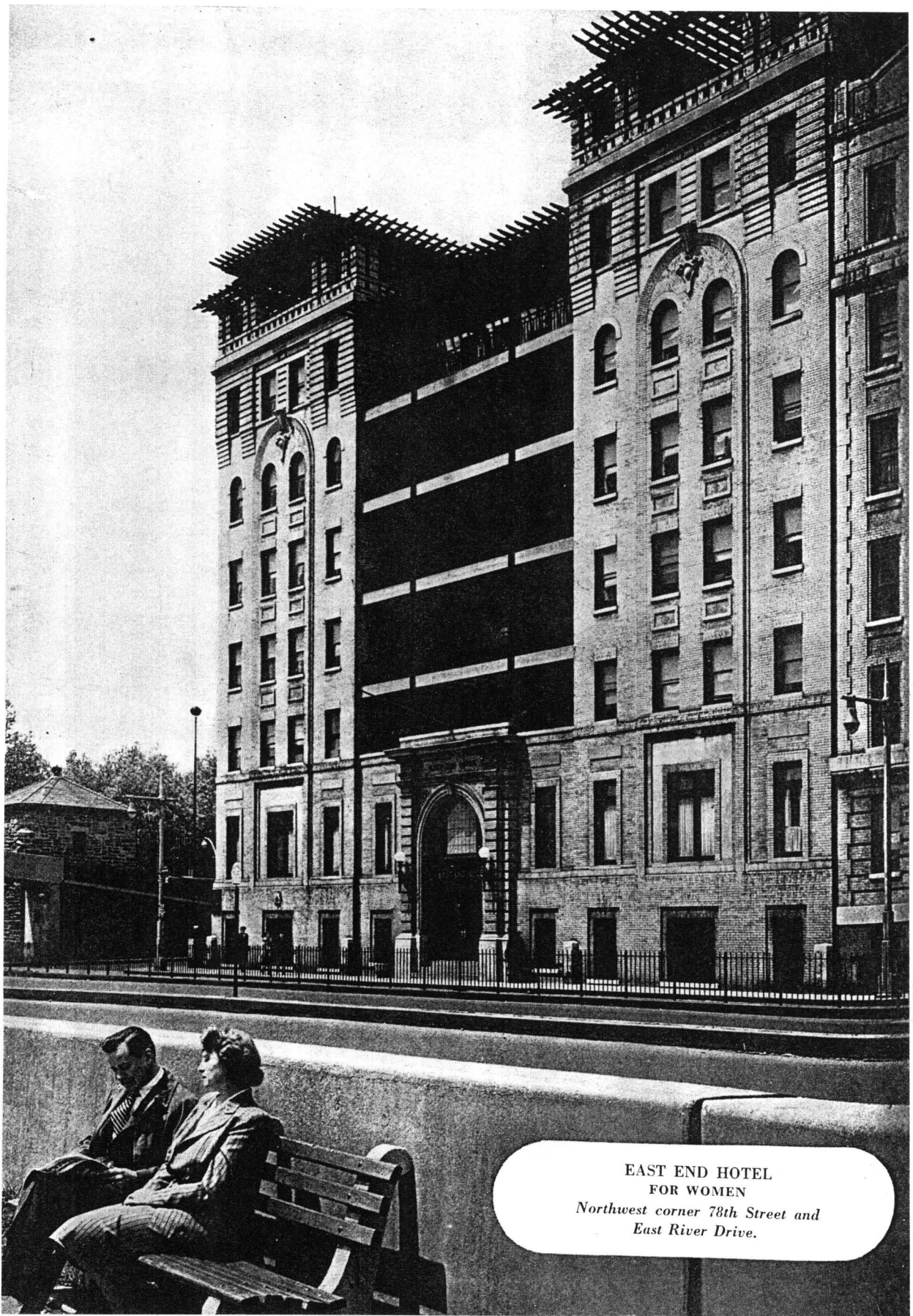


City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 535-539 East 78 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 541-555 East 78 Street (former Junior League Hotel)  
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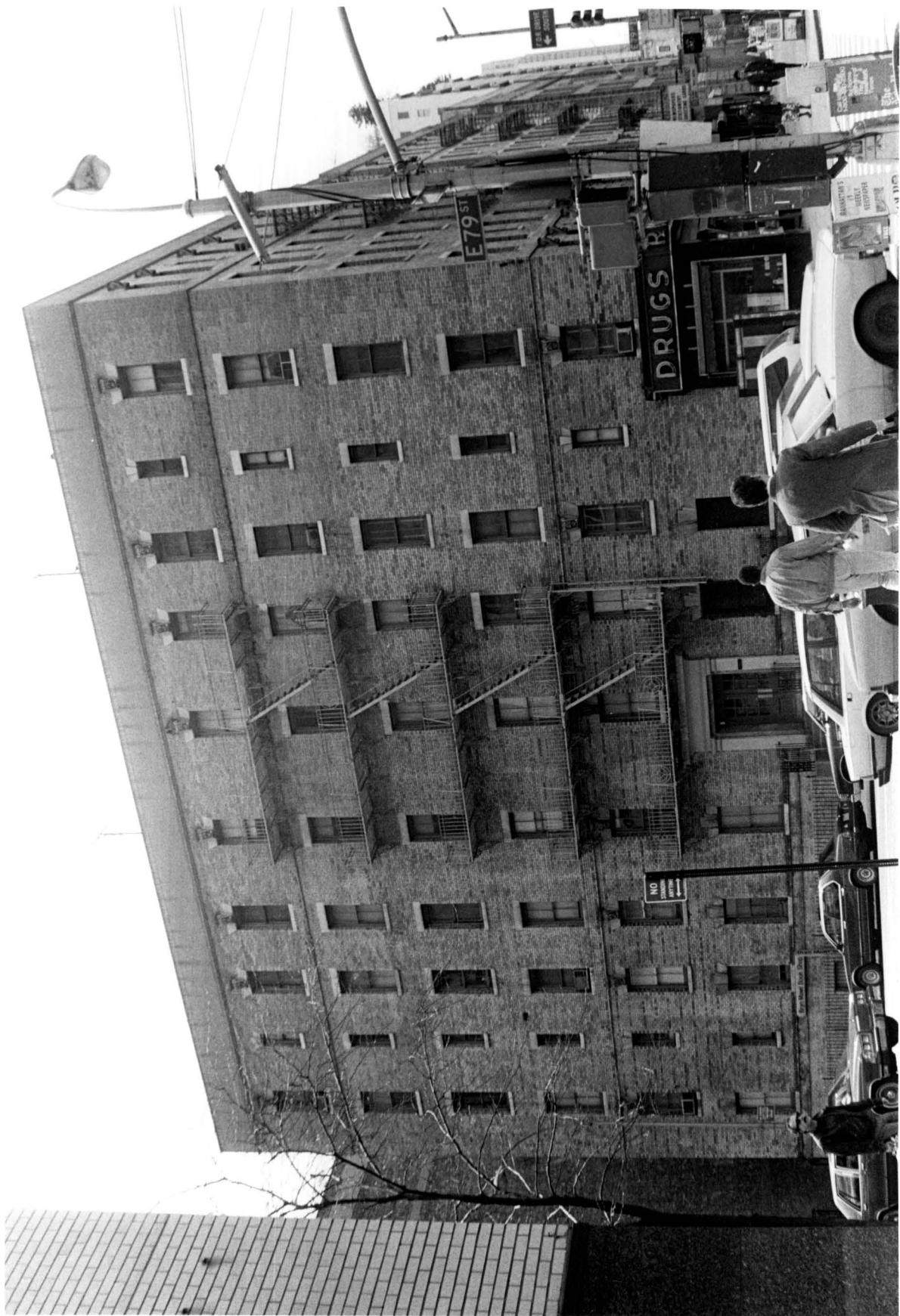


EAST END HOTEL  
FOR WOMEN  
*Northwest corner 78th Street and  
East River Drive.*



City and Suburban Homes Co., Avenue A (York Ave.) Estate: 541-555 E. 78 St. (former Junior League Hotel, FDR Dr. facade)  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 502 East 79 Street a/k/a 1492 York Avenue  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 504-508 East 79 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 510-512 East 79 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 516-520, 524-528 East 79 Street  
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City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 528 East 79 Street  
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City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 530-534 East 79 Street  
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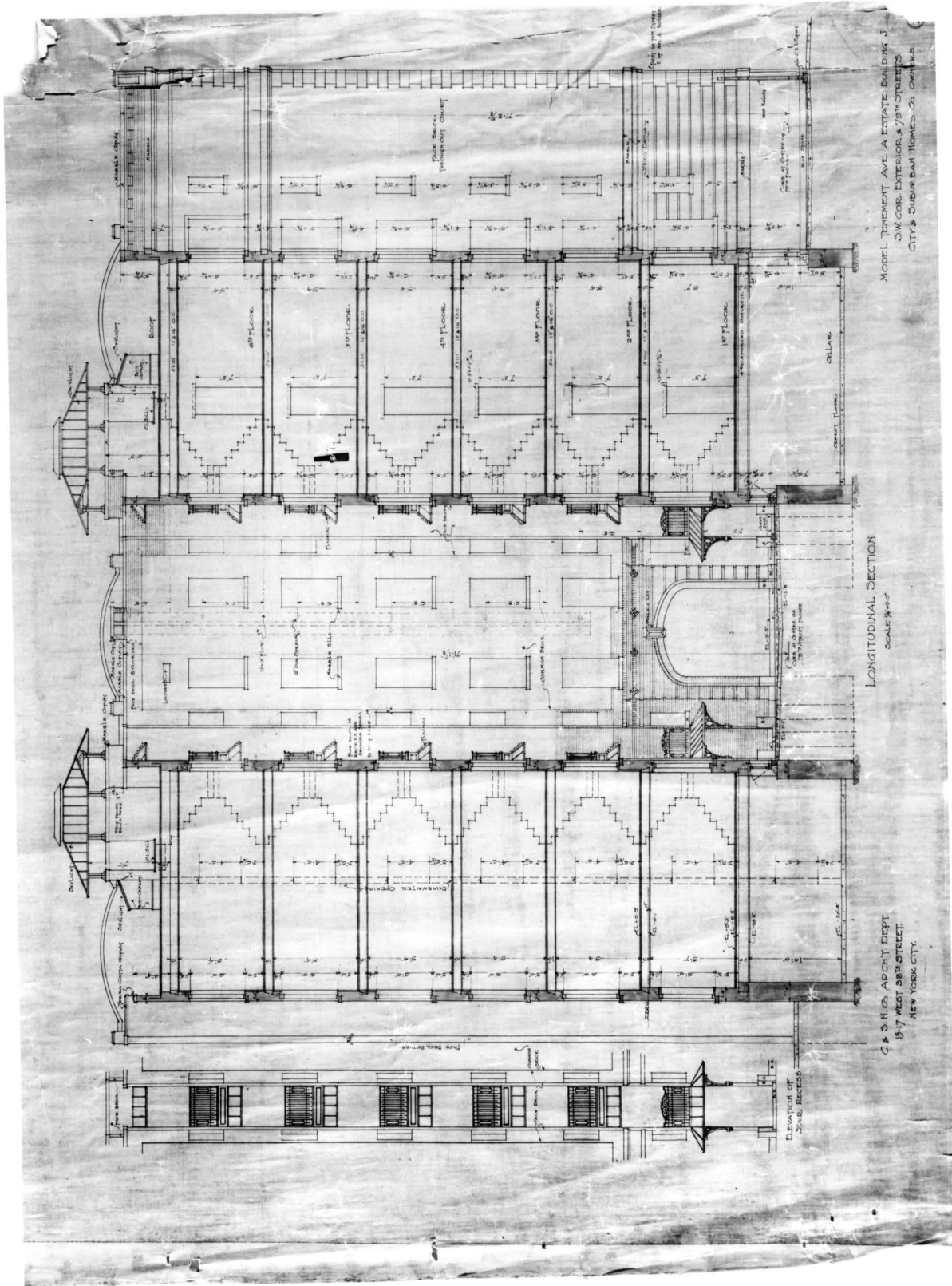


City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 530-534 East 79 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 536-540 East 79 Street  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: S.W. corner of 79 St. and FDR Dr. (longitudinal section)  
Credit: New York City Department of Buildings



City and Suburban Homes Company, Avenue A (York Avenue) Estate: 536-540 East 79 Street (F.D.R. Drive facade)  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster