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# The New York Times

THE APPRAISAL

October 3, 2011

## Covered in White Brick, and Showing Their Age



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Repairs to the exterior of 2 Fifth Avenue are part of a planned \$31 million renovation there.

By **DIANE CARDWELL**

Over the decades, white brick buildings — those wedding-cake-shape stalwarts of postwar living — have fallen out of favor and in again among residents, architects and preservationists. Now some of them are falling apart.

Built in New York in the 1950s and '60s, the buildings were part of the answer to the housing shortage touched off by returning veterans of World War II; the white glazed brick was supposed to make them look like beacons of clean, shiny modernism in the midst of the dirty city.

*“Going back to the Woodstock era and the Age of Aquarius, an architect came up with this idea of a self-cleaning building where the rain would wash down this slick glazed brick and clean the facades,” said [Howard L. Zimmerman](#), an architect with experience in restoring white brick.*

In addition, the glazed bricks were supposed to keep the inner walls dry, repelling the moisture as it slid down the face.

But things have not quite worked out that way. Water inevitably seeped in — whether through the porous mortar joints between every brick or from behind — and became trapped, prevented by the glaze from quickly evaporating. Then, with the freeze-and-thaw cycles of winter, the water would expand, putting pressure on the glaze, causing cracks and overall deterioration.

“This was actually a ploy to make the buildings quote-unquote more waterproof, and it’s backfired big time,” said Jon Colatrella, the survey team leader at Rand Engineering and Architecture. “Once that moisture gets trapped in between those two materials, essentially it freezes over time and it just starts to spall and pop and crack that front face right off.”

This pattern has plagued dozens of buildings in the city — some of them subject to landmark protection, like 900 Fifth Avenue, which replaced its facade about three years ago. And it threatens many more, like 2 Fifth Avenue, which has been struggling over a renovation now estimated at almost \$31 million. That figure also includes other repairs and is resulting in an assessment of \$125 per share, or \$100,000 on average, from its shareholders.

*“You probably have a dozen or so glazed-brick buildings that have been reskinned in the past 10 years,” meaning the bricks have been entirely replaced, said Mr. Zimmerman, who oversaw the restoration of the Pavilion, a behemoth on East 77th Street with its own ZIP code. “Over the next 10 years, I’m sure you’ll have another two dozen buildings because the older an original glazed-brick building gets from the 1960s, the older, more fatigued, more porous the building gets.”*



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

At a certain point, after spending money on spot replacements and maintenance, he and other experts said, buildings are likely to decide simply to replace every brick with a more durable alternative. Mr. Colatrella estimated that such a job would run roughly \$6 million to \$8 million for a 20- to 25-story building.

There has been a recent appreciation for the white brick building — for example, the Landmarks Preservation Commission granted Manhattan House on East 66th Street, considered to be the standard-bearer of the form, individual landmark status in 2007. But mainly it has been seen as an architectural stepchild, associated with fast and cheap construction for the middle class rather than the elite, in a boxy, unadorned style.

Some see that status captured in the color of the brick itself; faced with maintenance issues, some buildings have even replaced their white bricks with red because of the perception among brokers that apartments in red brick buildings are more valuable. But Jonathan J. Miller, president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel, said that while there was generally a 12 percent to 15 percent premium for prewar over postwar, there was no appreciable difference in value between the colors of brick, whether white, red, gray, pink, yellow or blue.

*Others have chosen or been required to keep the color constant. At the Pavilion, which has needed only some of its bricks replaced, the owner, Glenwood, decided to use glazed brick to maintain the historic accuracy of its look, committing to constant vigilance over the condition of the millions of bricks there, Mr. Zimmerman said.*

At 900 Fifth Avenue, where shareholders had wanted to use a gray or buff-colored brick, the landmarks commission insisted on white, but approved a brick that was flecked with black and slip coated, which mimics the smooth face of the original facade without dooming the building to more water damage.

At 2 Fifth Avenue, a repair project has just begun. Clay-face brick is to be used to fix troubles that surfaced in 2009 and resulted in the election of a new board. Most of the shareholders are able to pay their assessments upfront, said David Piscuskas and Phil Coltoff, members of the board; others have been given three years, while about 20 families are being given 10 years.

The high cost of the renovation — which Mr. Piscuskas and Mr. Coltoff said their group had brought down to \$31 million from about \$38 million — is due in part to the need to repair terraces and internal drains, replace roofs and add supports for the brick face at every floor, in addition to other upgrades. But replacing the facade, which generally involves destroying the original brick with small hand-held hammer drills, is not an insignificant part of the budget.

And even a small job can strain a building's finances.

“Even if it's, say, a \$2.5 million job,” said Steven D. Sladkus, a real estate lawyer, “a good number of buildings just don't have that cash lying around in a capital reserve fund to plunk down to reskin a building. If the time is up for a lot of these white brick buildings, there are going to be assessments galore.”