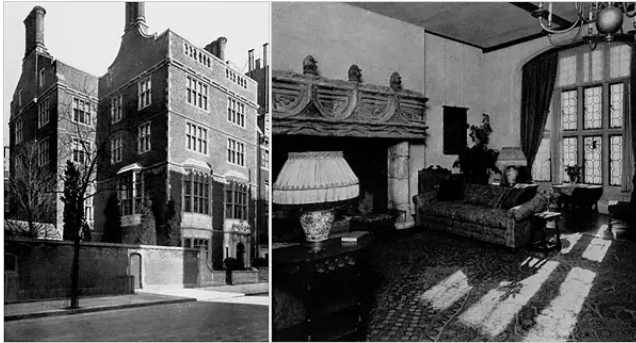


STREETSCAPES | 107 EAST 70TH STREET

The Best House on the Best Block



The Thomas Lamont mansion, built in 1922 at 107 East 70th Street, is the most impressive house on a block often considered the best in New York.

Left, Office for Metropolitan History; Architectural Record/Office for Metropolitan History

By Christopher Gray

July 9, 2009

THE Thomas Lamont mansion, built in 1922 at 107 East 70th Street, is the most impressive house on a block often considered the best in New York. But it has gone missing under an opaque white safety netting, as the Visiting Nurse Service, which took over the house in 1954, has vacated it for a renovation campaign.

This block owes at least part of its reputation to the foresight of property owners in 1859 who agreed that all future development on the north side would be set back 10 feet, leaving that extra space "forever free and unoccupied." Brownstone row houses first went up in the 1860s, and in the early 1900s the railroad running underneath Park Avenue was converted from coal to electric power. This block benefited correspondingly: a dozen town houses went up in the next decade.

Thomas W. Lamont, a partner at J. P. Morgan & Company, acquired the 63-foot-

wide plot at 103-105-107 East 70th Street, where he began building in 1920.

His architects, Walker & Gillette, created a Tudor-revival-style house with a picturesque roof line of grouped chimney flues, irregular masonry work and large screens of leaded-glass windows, particularly at the extra-tall second floor. Mr. Lamont was able to purchase for his house that most precious commodity space. In addition to the 10-foot setback from the building line, the architects placed the house away from the lot line on the west, creating a large side garden with a cloister, all hidden behind a street wall.



The front door may be a clever forgery.

John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times

At the cornice line, the architects designed a series of figures in the character of Renaissance-period England: a scholar in spectacles inspecting a book; a husband and wife, arguing; a menacing demon with a trident; two turkeys in conversation. Charming details like these impressed the critic Matlack Price. Writing in *Arts and Decoration* in 1922, he praised its “very agreeable relief from the pompous formality of the usual large city house.”

Mr. Lamont and his wife, Florence, used some verifiably antique elements in their interior, like a Gothic fireplace in the living room. The provenance of the front door is a puzzle. It has the honeyed, aged character of the worn casework of an English Renaissance chest. But the transom, which matches it perfectly, is surely a sham: it bears the address No. 107. In that light, the door is a little too perfect.

Born in 1870, Mr. Lamont started out as a reporter with The New York Tribune, but was soon recruited as the first treasurer of the new Bankers Trust Company, a Morgan-related enterprise. By 1910, age 41, he was a partner in the Morgan firm, where he was particularly active in international finance.

In 1920, when a terrorist's bomb exploded outside the company's building at Broad and Wall Streets, Mr. Lamont was meeting with other partners in a conference room. He was not injured, and the next day he invited reporters to tour the damaged structure.

Mr. and Mrs. Lamont were interested in politics and literature, and people like H. G. Wells and the poet John Masefield were often guests. Mr. Lamont also backed the original Saturday Review of Literature, and Mrs. Lamont was an advocate for trade unions, poetry and the League of Nations.

A house the size of the Lamonts' was dependent on the efforts of a large work force. In April 1930 the census taker recorded 15 servants in occupancy, including a Swedish laundress and a Scottish footman. The English-born second butler, Arthur Eldridge, 46. had arrived in 1911 and become a naturalized citizen. Like 12 others of his cohort he was single; the average age was 35. Marriage and domestic service often presented problems for employers.

The Lamonts were not at home when the census taker came calling; the census found them in their house in Englewood, N.J., with four more servants.

Mr. Lamont died in 1948, by then chairman of J. P. Morgan & Company, and Mrs. Lamont in 1952. In her will she left amounts from \$250,000 to \$1.2 million to what used to be known as the Seven Sisters: Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar and Wellesley Colleges.

She also left the 70th Street house to the Visiting Nurse Service and it took possession in 1954, when The New York Times noted that “fluorescent lighting has replaced unbusinesslike chandeliers.”

The architects Beyer Blinder Belle are now renovating the interior. Michael Bernstein, the chief marketing officer of the nursing service, said that the organization considered selling but decided to move back in.

Edward Lee Cave, the veteran real estate broker, said the mansion’s architecture, location and garden would make it a magnificent single-family residence. If the place were to come to market, he believes it would fetch \$40 million to \$50 million. “In New York, the rich are always with us,” he said.