

Notes on the Butterfield House by William J. Conklin

The following notes were prepared and presented by William J. Conklin in 2005 at a meeting of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects where he was awarded its Annual Housing Design Prize. Mr. Conklin was partner in charge of design for Mayer and Whittlesey Architects, 31 Union Square West, New York, NY, during the design and construction of the Butterfield House.

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I had graduated from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard and was deeply committed to the social basis of architecture. Walter Gropius, in his revised Harvard-blessed Bauhaus, was now oriented much more toward planning issues than toward his previous machine/aesthetic issues.

Through a friend in New York, I managed an interview with Lewis Mumford. He told me about this really well-intentioned architectural firm, Mayer and Whittlesey, which had recently lost their main designer and needed a new one. I was hired and was soon given design responsibility for several projects then in the office, some of which were in India. Later, Jim Rossant had been interviewed and had gotten a job in the office. He had received his architectural degree from the University of Florida in Gainesville, but had then gone on to the Graduate School of Design at Harvard for a degree in planning. That educational record does not, however, in my opinion provide clues to his talents, for at heart, he is an artist, a great artist and we instantly became allies.

But a very special client turned up with a project for an apartment house on West 12th Street not far from our Union Square office: Butterfield House.

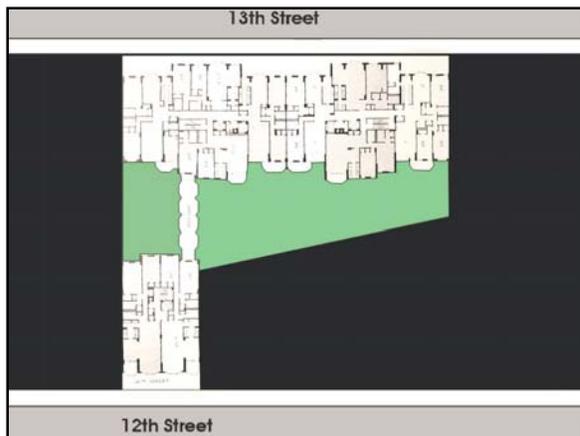


Figure 1

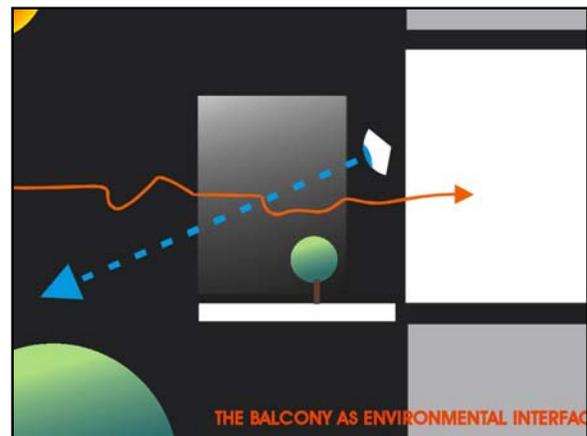


Figure 2

The 12th Street and 13th Street sites were between 5th and 6th Avenues and consisted of adjoining and back-to-back lots permitting a garden-centered project (Figure 1) like the firm's previous project at 240 Central Park South and Broadway. Milton Glass began work on possible apartment layouts and I, as their chief designer, began thinking about the general subject of the interface between apartments and their external environment, considering that interface from two points of view. (Figure 2)

The first was from the inhabitant's point of view, and surely a rigid glass-walled division between inside and outside was not the answer. Fresh air, the warmth of the sun, the sense of a garden, and the sense of the city are really as humanly important as is the view. But projecting balconies create a very hard division between the inner world of the apartment and the outer world, and are themselves, in winter time, a very harsh environment.

From the streetscape point of view, we considered that our site was in Greenwich Village whose townhouses were beloved by all, but to our embarrassment, there were new Manhattan House-influenced white brick apartment buildings appearing in the Village seeming totally incoherent with that environment.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Together with Jim, I toured the neighborhood, searching for clues from that wonderful environment, because our inherited modernist vocabulary did not, it seemed to me, provide answers to this new definition of the design problem. We saw many buildings, and then saw one that really opened our eyes. It was west of 6th and south of 12th Street and was slated to be torn down, but it was one of the most beautiful buildings I had ever seen. (Figure 3)

On the one hand it was glassier than any then existing modern building, but it also had clearly identifiable human scale and its glass and black cast iron façade created elegant ocean waves along the streetscape. (Figure 4) The building was indeed torn down shortly after my photos were taken and I do not know the name of the architect, but we went back to work with a sense of direction that had come from the city itself.

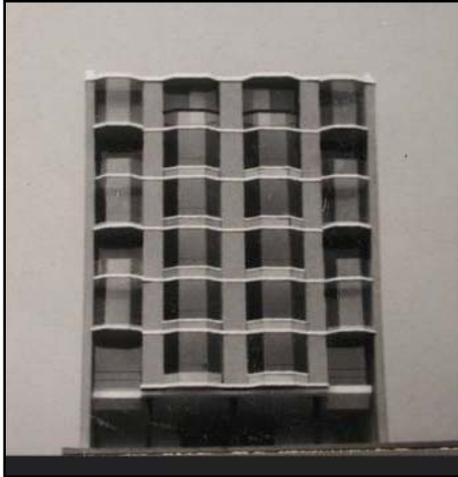


Figure 5

We decided that the 13th Street building would carry the bulk of the project permitting the 12th Street building to keep to the scale of the street permitting the Southern sun to reach the courtyard and I built a model: this 12th Street building would have only twelve apartments. (Figure 5) It was Mayer's under-envelopic concept, but he and Whittlesey now stepped back from the design process and let us work.

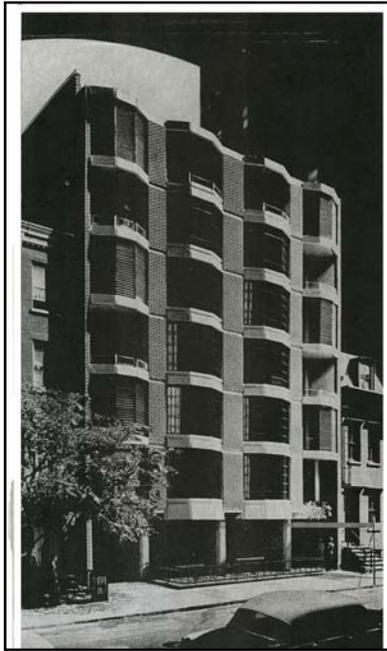


Figure 6 (*William Conklin appears to the left of the model of the building under the tree*)

We had a better model made and Lou Checkman photographed it and montaged it into a photo of the site. He posed me in the site photo so that I appear to be standing next to the finished building in his amazing photograph. (Figure 6) Everybody liked it. The 13th Street building followed the themes established on 12th Street.

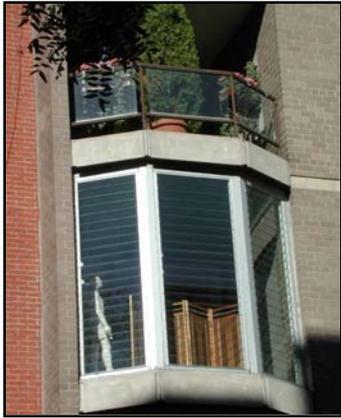


Figure 7

I struggled with the concept of the balcony, with ways to make it more useful for a longer portion of the year, and thought of a glass wall that could breathe and let nature in when desired, but could also keep it out in winter. A wall of open-able glass - a wall of jalousies - seemed like a possible answer, here as they exist today. (Figure 7)

The building was constructed in 1960. It has often been described both by critics and by neighbors as fitting well into its street. When the Village was designated an historic district, Butterfield House was cited as proof that “new” could indeed exist alongside “old.” Why is this? Certainly the next door stoop and entrance is not replicated in our architecture, nor are window types or materials. It is because the building is a good size for the street, but mostly because it has in its design solid evidence of human scale and many other humane considerations and thus does share fundamental qualities with its older neighbors.

The garden is designed as a coherent part of the architecture with the geometry of its pools and fountains coherent with that of the architecture. The mosaics and fountains echo those of the Alhambra that I had recently visited just to add complexity to its cast iron (and traces of Frank Lloyd Wright) ancestry. The glass walled walkway between the buildings has undulating glass like the street wall of that cast iron building and is raised about a foot above the mosaic garden floor so that in moving through the passage, one slightly has the sensation of floating across the garden.

We recently replaced some of the jalousie windows in the building and installed a needed reception desk. Happily, the maintenance of the building is superb and the residents take great pride in the design. Our client was primarily a single person: the imaginative and courageous Dan Gray who, with his father, were local developers. The last time I heard from Dan he was meditating in an Ashram in India. After Butterfield House, they asked us to do a building for them on the Upper East Side.

Butterfield House and two related projects, the 14th Street Painter’s Union Building and 333 East 69th Street, occurred, I believe, before the word “contextualism” was concocted, with contextualism eventually becoming essentially an imitative rather than a responsive design movement.