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Streetscapes/The Bergdorf Goodman Building on Fifth Avenue

From Architectural Links to Common Ownership

Built in 1928, it replaced the Vanderbilt mansion.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE 70-year-old white marble, just cleaned last month, is soft and worn like an ancient monument, and anyone who stops in front of the Bergdorf Goodman Building on Fifth Avenue from 57th to 58th Streets will notice it. But a building is like a small ecosystem, and restoring a single element alters the balance, not always with positive results.

This summer, Bellet Construction of Manhattan cleaned the South Dover marble on the facade, revealing the complex veining and age of the stone, which is tinted with black, orange, yellow and green and has been weathered in varying patterns. Like most cleanings, this one gives the pedestrian a pause to examine the building with a fresh eye, one that reveals a complicated past.

What is now the Bergdorf Goodman Building was originally built as a group of individual, though architecturally linked, stores, in 1928. On the inside, the original construction as separate stores is evident mostly through the feet: Because Fifth Avenue slopes downward from 57th to 58th, ramps now dot the interior where the original walls have been cut through.

On the outside, the 1928 conceit of seven different store facades is rendered slightly peculiar by Bergdorf Goodman's control of the entire frontage. The store addressed this issue in the 1980's when it retained the neoclassical architect Allan Greenberg to design a unifying Fifth Avenue front.

Although handsome and convincing in an architect's drawing, after execution several problems became evident with the design. First, the coursing, or horizontal elements, in the original stonework at the 57th and 58th Street ends — retained as bookends for Mr. Greenberg's design — did not line up evenly, creating an awkward juncture near 57th Street. The cleaning of the marble emphasizes the original design and so plays up this discrepancy. Second, much of the material around the new entrance appears to be cast stone. When fresh, it gleamed in comparison to the dirty marble; now that the original stone has been renewed, the later material looks pasty and wan.

Third, the restoration of the stone highlights minor details of the facade that have not yet received comparable attention. The



Edward Keating/The New York Times

The Bergdorf Goodman Building on Fifth Avenue in 1953, right, and in a recent photo, above.

original bronze windows and trim at 58th Street are intact but neglected, covered with layers of peeling black silicone. Restored, they would be a handsome counterpoint to the marble. Likewise, a delicate light fixture in an elegant service vestibule on 58th Street hangs ignored, smashed and useless.

But the architectural pilgrim in New York is grateful for improvements, whether they occur block by block, building by building or, as in this case, material by material.

THE luxury-goods store that came to occupy the west side of the block from 57th to 58th Streets was founded when Edwin Goodman, a tailor, teamed up with Herman Bergdorf in 1901 and then took over their women's clothing business in 1903. In 1927, Mr. Goodman had plans to lease space at the northeast corner of 52d and Fifth, but a better site became available: the old Cornelius Vanderbilt mansion, on Fifth from 57th to 58th.

Alice G. Vanderbilt, widow of Cornelius Vanderbilt 2d, was tired of paying \$130,000 a year in taxes on the 45-year-old palace, and a plan to redevelop the site with a 52-story apartment hotel had fallen through in 1926.

Frederick Brown, a real estate agent, made a deal with Mrs. Vanderbilt and in 1928 erected not a skyscraper but a set of seven- and nine-story shops — a mansion-style commercial building.

Mr. Brown's architects, Kahn & Jacobs, faced the buildings with white marble, echoing the Metropolitan Club, the lower floors of the Plaza Hotel and especially Marble Row, a group of 60-year-old houses then directly across Fifth Avenue. The facades were decorated with slightly different elements of low-relief sculpture, but it is the low mass of the complex, with its green-tiled mansard roofs, that is its distinguishing characteristic.



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The shops had separate staircases, storefronts and elevators. Early tenants included Van Cleef & Arpels, the linen store Grande Maison de Blanc and, at the 57th Street corner, Dobbs the hatter.

Mr. Goodman had chosen the 58th Street corner during the early stages of construction and had arranged with Mr. Brown to convert the entire ninth floor of the Bergdorf Goodman corner into an apartment. When the store opened in 1928, he sold his brownstone at 320 West 71st Street and moved in.

A 1928 ad in the magazine *Country Life* in America laid out Mr. Goodman's ideals for his store: "Here women of critical taste may observe clothes of the highest fashion. ... One may judge, before purchasing, how such clothes will look when worn in one's own drawing room."

The French Renaissance interiors were almost bare of display cases and racks. Instead, customers were met by saleswomen who brought out individual pieces for inspection, like high-end art dealers.

Mr. Brown was one of the most active

dealers in New York real estate — through his hands passed the sites of not only Bergdorf Goodman but also the Majestic, Beresford, El Dorado Sherry-Netherland, Squibb and Park Row buildings. But Mr. Brown declared bankruptcy in 1932 and the Fifth Avenue block went into foreclosure in 1934. Mr. Goodman bought his own section in 1935 and the rest of the structure gradually, owning it all by 1948.

IN 1944, Mary Lewis, a dress shop, had the architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill design a bright yellow front door in a modernistic waffle pattern "smack between satiny Bergdorf Goodman and the tweedy Tailored Woman," as the magazine *Architectural Forum* put it. Other stores denounced the door and the shop was gone within a few years.

In 1952, *Time* magazine called Bergdorf Goodman "Fifth Avenue's finest" store and noted that customers did not pick through racks but were accompanied by a "vendeur."

The vendeuses included Kay Summersby,

Dwight D. Eisenhower's wartime aide, or the Grand Duchess Marie of Russia. *Time* recounted a story about the industrialist Henry Kaiser, who, protesting a three-week wait for his wife's mink coat, exclaimed, "I can build an oceangoing ship in a week."

"Mr. Kaiser," Mr. Goodman replied, "you are a great man. I am only a furrier." *Time* said Bergdorf Goodman grossed \$11 million a year.

Mr. Goodman died in his penthouse in 1953, and was succeeded by his son Andrew. Andrew Goodman died in 1993 and Bergdorf's is now a part of the Neiman Marcus Group.

Mallory Andrews, a spokeswoman, says the store's gross is now more than \$250 million a year. It occupies the entire west side of the block, except for the jeweler Van Cleef & Arpels at the 57th Street corner. Van Cleef was one of the building's first tenants and has leased different spaces over the years.

The apartment is now retail space occupied by the John Barrett Beauty Salon. ■