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Although it's now camouflaged by the tussle of Broadway, the Aphthorp is one of the great apartment houses of New York, and certainly the west side, up in the tier of the Beresford, Harperley Hall and even the Dakota.

It was built in 1908 by the Astor's, who in the 1880s put their \$200 million fortune to work on a building campaign of an architectural ambition not seen before or since, including the Hotel Astor, the original Waldorf, the St. Regis, Hotel Knickerbocker, Astor Court Apartments, 120 East End Avenue and a score of other structures.

The particular Astor behind the Aphthorp was Viscount William Waldorf Astor, who departed the United States saying "America is not a fit place for a gentleman to live" - and moved to Hever Castle, outside of London, which had been the house of Anne Boleyn, later Queen of England - this gives you an idea of his standards.

The Viscount made several dry runs - buildings of 8 stories and of 20 stories - and then in 1908 produced a seriously majestic apartment building. Like the Belnord, the Ansonia and other top end buildings the Aphthorp embraced the Broadway address - Broadway was evolving, it was thought, into a chic, cosmopolitan boulevard, with expensive shops, restaurants and theaters, and it was only much later that residents began adopting the West End Avenue address. West End, indeed, was a street of substantial townhouses, not the equal of Fifth or Madison, but not far off, so the Aphthorp had exposures on two prime pieces of real estate.

The Aphthorp came at a critical turning point in apartment house design, just as important as when the Rosario Candela evolved a new ideal of luxury with his super-buildings in the late 1920s. It was around 1906-1910 that designers finally hit on the solution for the apartment house which made it acceptable to the well-to-do. Closets, long a sticking point, had to be at least three by three, at an absolute minimum. Rooms had to be big enough for twin beds, a comfortable chair and a dresser or two and not feel like a railroad compartment. There had to be a service and a passenger elevator car. Bathrooms had to be tiled, with room to turn around. There had to be a zoning of the public, sleeping and service spaces - you didn't want to tramp down the bedroom hall to get to the parlor. You needed good, very good soundproofing, because your neighbors were upstairs - this led to the cinder fill solution, where a layer of loose cinders separates the ceiling of the lower story from the floor above.



The residents of the Aphorp paid up to \$500 per month, and they got these things and more. For one thing, they got agreeable neighbors - in the 19th century nothing was more worrisome than having someone move into the next row house who was not respectable or even...worse. The early tenant roster includes at least a dozen corporate presidents: Westinghouse, Bowery Savings Bank, Casualty Insurance, Alaska Steam Ship Lines, the Cotton Exchange, and others. Occupations were things like mining, stock broker, banking, and the like. There was no fear of a loss of caste in have these as neighbors, and it was certain there were no actors, singers or similar occupations.

They got a ceremonial entry with a grand, coffered vaulting from 16th century Florence, one which also embodied safety from the outside city: through a set of elaborate gates, around a private carriageway, dropping you off by each doorway, like the Dakota.

You got an elevator vestibule with one or two other neighbors, not some hotel hallway.

You got complete freedom from all the physical aspects of running a house. There was full-time 24-7 engineer in the building, doormen, handymen, porters, and front desk staff. This brought down the in-apartment servant requirements radically and thus the troublesome matter of hiring and firing. Even in the richest households in New York, like Frick or Carnegie, census records show that the servant list turned over almost completely at least every three or four years. At that rate, half the staff of Downton Abbey would have been gone by the end of the series.

For your servants, you got extra servants' rooms on the roof, if you didn't like sharing a roof with Bridget or Helga. And they did not have to smell up the apartment on wash day - not only were there wash tubs in the basement, but each apartment had tubs reserved solely to it, the ultimate in sanitary and the type of thing you would only see in buildings like 998 Fifth Avenue and 120 East End Avenue.

Instead of ice delivery, there was a refrigerating plant in the basement - indeed, two, just in case one broke down. You got real, room-sized rooms, 250, 350 even 400 sf. You got your entertaining rooms en suite, not blocked off from each other as in other apartments. You got extra guest suites at the top level, for those rare times you wanted to put up someone.

The Aphorp went up at a time when developers were novices at apartment building - there was no such thing as "waste space" because no one yet knew what efficient was. But in just a few years, with scores of projects under their belt, they began to experiment with cutting corners, shaving off an inch here, an inch there, lowering the ceiling six inches, tightening up the bedrooms. With the Aphorp, you didn't have the sensation of your home as something managed to yield a particular return.



Indeed, most apartments were individually designed: Louis Quinze, Louis Seize, Adam style, Colonial, Elizabethan, painted wood, finished wood, individual chandeliers - just as someone would do for their own house.

Viscount Astor was attempting a multiple dwelling of townhouse quality, to make the transition from older dwellings as seamless as possible. The all limestone facade was very rarely attempted again with 740 Park Avenue and similar buildings. The scale of the transition spaces, the ease of the plan, was at the level of and even higher than, the typical high-end townhouse.

One of the critical advantages that new tenants saw in the Aphorp was the sense of how it controlled and modulated and made safe the contemporary city, which was still a dangerous and unsanitary place. It was the courtyard - in square footage, twice the coverage of a typical apartment house - that allowed truly game-changing differences, especially light and air. The cross-ventilation, high views, agreeable garden court - not that much different than Henry Frick's - were something that the residents had never experienced at this level before this time. You didn't look at the backside of a strange building, but into your own landscaped garden, and the apartments of corporation presidents. That was a long way from even the top end townhouse.

The courtyard solution was at its best when it occupied a squarish block, like the ones one either side of Broadway. It certainly seemed like the highest and best use at the time, but it was flawed. Not for the residents, but for the owner. Because apartments were developed not to hold, but to sell. And the unit of measure was not a full block apartment building, but the more usual corner-building, 100x100, model. Owners who sought to sell really large buildings found their market severely limited.

As for Viscount Astor and the Aphorp, well it was irrelevant. He was building not to sell, but for the ages. That's what made his buildings so remarkable, but it is not surprising that the full (or even half-) block, courtyard apartment model vanished within just a few years, and was rarely built again. This leaves the Aphorp at a high water mark in apartment house design, where it shall, surely, remain for many, many years to come.