Architecture: Bending the Rules
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

Bending the Rules

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ON the bulletin board at Westbeth artists' housing, there are notices for karate, kittens, baby sitters, tenants' meetings, day care petitions and announcements ranging from temperate to militant of the need for more work space for all. There are moving and settling-in pains, unfinished construction and delays in the provision of promised studios and storage. But because it is an artists' community, the pangs and problems have already been documented in an allegory by a resident writer, Robert Paget.

"In the year omnipresent, one nocturnal spring day," Mr. Paget records, "a group of travelers in the land of Wow, where everything was plentiful, but where plenty was hard to come by, if not impossible," left "Zoo City and all that it represented. False reforms. Unkept promises. Squalid living conditions." They went to "Wowriver—to acquire new and better habitats." Each was promised his own tree to live in, with extra branches. The karma of their lives changed. "The hierarchy lived in big trees and walked with expensive footwear" . . . 3,000 petitions and complaints appeared on the administrator's tree trunks and "the time for the Bow Wow City hierarchy to inaugurate Wowriver was pushed back many times."

Well, the time has finally come. On May 19, a group of Bow Wow City delegates, possibly led by Mayor Lindsay will "officially open" Westbeth, the newest and largest artist's housing facility in the world, and the only one of its kind in the United States.

It is notable on many counts. It covers a full square block at the edge of the West Village, across from the Hudson River piers, bounded by West, Bank, Washington and Bethune Streets. A conglomerate of plain, sturdy, 13-story, solid concrete and steel commercial structures faced in buff brick that housed the Bell Telephone Laboratories (the first talking pictures, the first public television demonstration, the discovery of the transistor) has been transformed into 383 loft-type living and working units. Two structures have been demolished for a paved and planted small park for neighborhood use.

Westbeth is non-profit, middle-income housing built under section 221(d)(3) of the Federal Housing Act, which gives low-interest loans to reduce housing costs and rents. It bent (but did not break) almost every FHA regulation in the book. It sparked New York's special district zoning —in this case, an area for artists' housing. And it is an experiment and prototype in the provision of the kind of loft accommodations needed by artists, legislated against by most city codes, and rapidly disappearing from the commercial market. The artist, in a city that thrives on his work, is almost literally out on the street.

While Roger Stevens was chairman of the National Council on the Arts, he found suitable housing to be one of the most critical needs of artists. An old real estate hand, Mr. Stevens saw the possibilities in the spring of 1967 when William Zeckendorf pointed out the Bell Lab buildings, which were for sale.

Mr. Stevens went to J. M. Kaplan, whose Kaplan Fund had essayed some smaller attempts at building rehabilitation for artists' studios in Greenwich Village. The National Council and the J. M. Kaplan Fund each gave $750,000 "seed money" (it has since escalated to $1½-million each) to get the ball rolling. In July, 1967, the Bell Labs were bought for $2.5-million.

In September, the nonprofit Westbeth Corporation was set up to remodel and operate the building. L. Dixon Bain Jr. was made the corporation's administrative officer. Richard Meier, one of the city's more conspicuously talented and stylish younger architects, was commissioned to do the conversion. Mrs. Joan Davidson, a daughter of J. M. Kaplan, took the project under her wing.

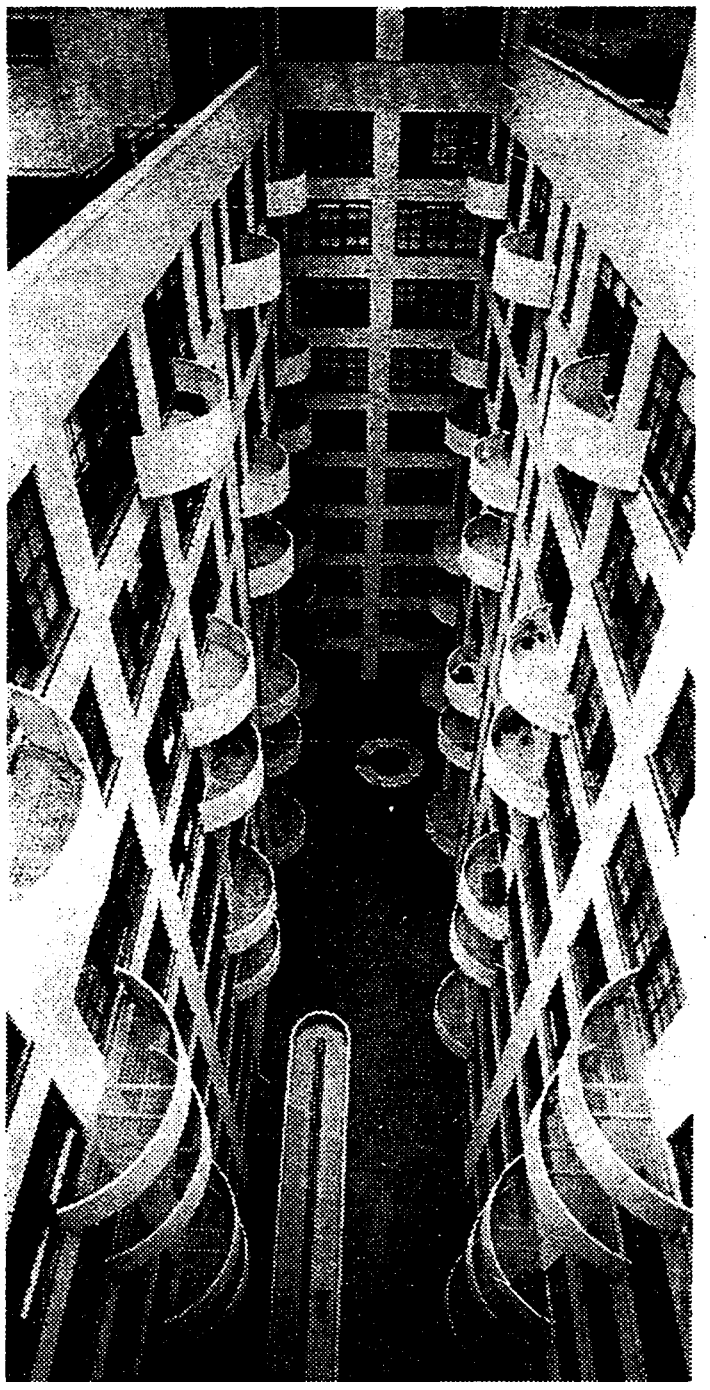
The search for mortgage funds began. An impressive list of banks turned Westbeth down. The money finally came from the Bankers Trust Company—a bank that sometimes veers from conventional bankers' wisdom, as in its role in the preservation of Olana, Frederick Church's 19th-century eyrie on the Hudson. The near-final costs of $12.5-million includes an extra $900,000 for the purchase of an unspecified leasehold. This total will be largely provided by the FHA, which currently has its needle stuck at $10.7- of its $12.5-million permissible project ceiling. Remodeling costs averaged $12,000 per unit, as opposed to about $30,000 per unit for new construction.

Seven or eight—the number becomes hazy in retrospect—city hearings were held. The project needed tax abatement and zoning changes and got both. It also got "extraordinary city cooperation in the incredibly short time of six months although it seemed like a Byzantine process at the time," Mrs. Davidson recalls. Mr. Meier compressed the equivalent of two years of design and working drawings into nine months, on swing shifts. The whole job has been completed in less than two years.

Proper FHA economics dictated that 500 units be carved out of the shell. The number was reduced to 383 to make them larger. FHA standards—consisting of minimums that builders turn into maximums —are generally for two-story, wood-framed houses and garden apartments in non-urban areas. There are required room counts and closet counts and yard setbacks and specified sizes and equipment, and the American home has been cast in this rigid mold from coast to coast. As the regulations stood, flexible, open-space lofts were impossible.

No trumpets sounded when Westbeth triumphed over the system, but they should have. There are room counts (they are also necessary for Building Department certificates of occupancy), but they are dotted lines on the plans. These lines represent walls that could be erected to make everything conform cozily to the legal formula. They could also represent a first step out of the steel trap of FHA rules, one of the most power ful and deadly implements of domestic design. HUD is currently reviewing the design effect of FHA criteria with a view to liberalization.

Mr. Meier's architectural solution is exemplary. There are, inevitably, some block-long corridors, but imaginative duplexes put them on fewer floors. There are good, and less good units, and those duplexes are a dream. There are both curious and creative tenant uses of the space, including a run on sleeping platforms. The range is from cluttered chaos to pristine, primitive simplicity. A bold and sensitive (yes, both) use of color turns hallways into abstractions that could not be bettered by the painters.



Lawrence Fried

Court view of Westbeth artists' housing
The ceilings are high and the plumbing works

Mr. Meier thinks of Westbeth as a kind of Corbusian *unité d'habitation*, or at least a step toward it.

Everyone seems to have been taken by surprise by the fact that working equipment and the scale of today's arts plus two or three children shrinks the units dramatically. Westbeth does not always equal the best of the disappearing lofts, because it can't. Due to a lot of nonesthetic factors, such as high cost of land, labor, construction, material and money, space is the greatest luxury in America today. But these are Olympian quarters compared to what is on the New York market at geometrically increasing prices, and the ceilings are high and the windows are large and the plumbing works.

An older building on the site is being renovated now for the need of supplementary studios. For surrealism *trouvé* and space *perdu*, Westbeth has a terminal spur of Penn Central track that runs right through the building at the second floor and apparently can't be dislodged. Longing glances are being cast at vacant Penn Central piers and an empty Zeckendorf building nearby.

Important ground has been broken at Westbeth and valuable lessons learned. Whether or not this is the artists' promised land, its neatly shod sponsors are showing the way.