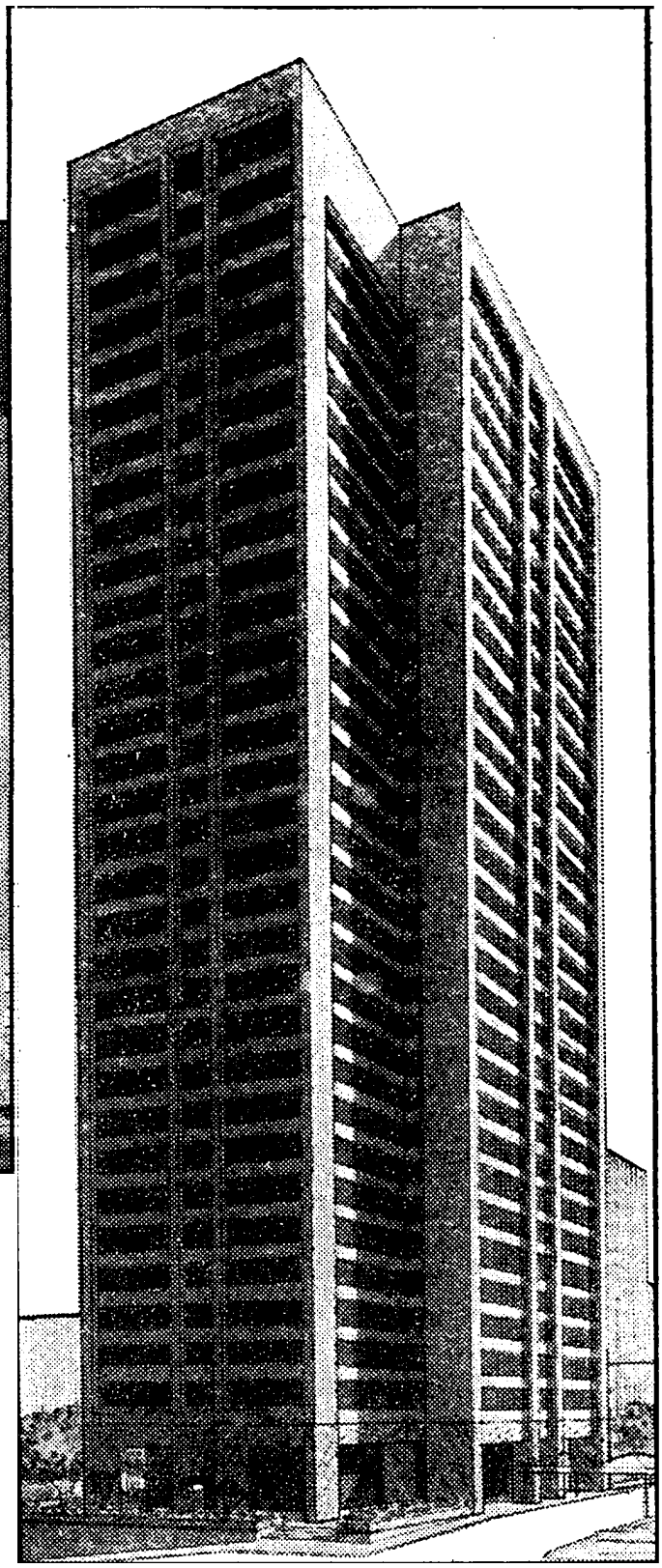
The Battle of Murray Hill: The Battle of Murray Hill
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 12, 1970; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 220



Renderings show progress of apartment and office tower design for west side of Third Avenue from 37th to 38th Streets, from first design, left, through stages to final plan acceptable to Murray Hill residents, right.

The Battle of Murray Hill

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Can a large investing real estate company and a local community find happiness together? Yes, but it takes 14 months of mutual negotiation, the exercise of rational expertise on the part of the community and enlightened self-interest from the developer. Can it happen in New York? It has, with the Murray Hill Association and Planning Board No. 6 and Laird Properties, Inc.

In the spring of 1969, Murray Hill residents woke up in their snug little brownstones to find the threat of a new blockbuster looming over them.

Laird Properties, Inc., a division of Laird, Incorporated, investment bankers, in a joint venture with Independence Associates had acquired the full block on the west side of Third Avenue from 37th to 38th Street. They proposed to put up a 32-story, combined commercial and residential building with five levels of garages, including commercial parking.

Part of the site contained brownstones and was zoned for low densities; the rest, on the avenue, permitted high-density construction. The maximum square footage that could be built, under the zoning law, was 256,708 square feet. Because costs of land, construction and money in Manhattan today have risen to a point where investors feel that the permitted zoning densities do not yield sufficient profit, the investors wanted to build bigger. They also wanted more commercial use than regulations allowed.

Pleading economic hardship, they went to the Board of Standards and Appeals for variances. They wanted an increase from the permitted 256,708 square feet to 363,764 square feet, with 27 floors of apartments containing 1,024 rooms on a five-story base of offices and stores, plus garages.

Laird carried in its hand a rendering of a standard design of paralyzing bulk, later characterized by the Murray Hill group as "Miami jazzy," which looked like a lot of other commercial New York buildings, only bigger.

It was a typical New York story. The small, older, carefully preserved landmark community, jealous of its historic architecture, townhouse living and such amenities as sun, air, light, gardens and relative serenity, was threatened by the increasing pressures of surrounding commercialization and the standard operating procedures and products of New York real estate investment.

The end of the story, however, is not typical at all. As a result of the negotiations between the builder and members of the community, the Laird group will construct an apartment house of 290,720 square feet, containing 910 rooms instead of the 363,764 square feet and 1,024 rooms requested, representing a substantial cut in bulk and size. All the office space has been eliminated. There will be no commercial rentals except local retail stores. Greatly reduced parking, from five to two levels, will use Third Avenue rather than the residential side

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streets for entrances and exits. Floor areas will be smaller.

A buffer area will separate the apartment tower and the small houses to the west, and a landscaped park area on the south, contributed by the builder, will be accessible to the community. Apartments will be co-op, rather than rental, for neighborhood stability, and their sizes have been redistributed to attract families rather than transients.

Offstreet loading of apartment house visitors will ease traffic. Air-conditioning and garage exhaust outlets will be away from the brownstones and their gardens.

Architecturally, instead of what the Murray Hill residents called "tasteless bulk," there will be a tall, slender tower with a handsome, restrained exterior, carefully situated on the plot to cast the smallest shadow possible on the adjoining properties. Painstaking shadow studies were made for every time of year, for different building shapes.

An architectural consultant, Dale Booher of Harry Bates, Dale Booher Associates, hired by Laird to work with the original architect, Philip Birnbaum, has redesigned the façade, site and public areas. The results are light years away from the standard New York product in quality and appearance. Nor is this just cosmetic smooth-up. The beneficial changes are in program, function and amenities.

The changes and improvements came after the sound and fury reached Laird's top executives. An upper-echelon managerial group took over the project from its real estate developers. For the first time, extensive design specifications had been written into the plan filed with the city. Everybody feels mutually served. And both sides know that the results, even in terms of today's market realities, are superior.

The way to better building led through at least eight appearances before the Board of Standards and Appeals in 1969 and 1970, more than 50 meetings of the Murray Hill Association and a stormy open hearing before Community Planning Board No. 6. In five stages of redesign, the building was scaled down five times. There were moments, according to one Laird executive, when "everyone went home and felt like throwing bricks."

The protest was started at the Board of Standards and Appeals by those Murray Hill property owners who were entitled to enter objections to variances requested for construction within a 200-foot radius of their land. In the fall of 1969, Planning Board No. 6 voted unanimously to oppose the scheme on the basis of its bulk, commercial use and transient parking.

In November, the Department of City Planning was asked to investigate by the Murray Hill Association and came up with a negative finding on the plans. The community was encouraged to make its own determination of the issues.

After uncounted conferences among builders, residents and architects led to scheme No. 5, Planning Board No. 6 approved the changes and called the project an example of what a responsible builder could do in conscientious negotiation with the community.

The Murray Hill people settled for greater than maximum legal density because they believed that the bulk of an ordinary, conforming building, which could be constructed without consultation or variances, would be more destructive than this carefully worked-out solution. The developers settled for less density than they had wanted, and spent a good deal of money and time on revising the original plans beyond the conventional level of real estate responsibility.

"We're presumably sacrificing something economically in reaching this compromise," says Arthur Collins, president of Laird Properties, pointing out that loss of time led to a softer co-op market. "But we think generally there is an intangible but real advantage to better design. The times, and ways of doing things in New York, have changed."

In its turn, the community pointed out such practical financial facts as the possibility of putting more residential floors than office floors into the commercial space that it found objectionable. Because apartments have lower ceilings, this could help equalize the investment. It was a persuasive argument.

The Murray Hill Association, say the developers, is a sophisticated group of professionals who knew what they were doing.

Laird Properties, says the Murray Hill Association, is a sophisticated organization that cares what it is doing.

The results are good business and good urbanism.