

# Design Notebook: Street scenery: Our Madison Avenue and Palm Beach's Worth.

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## Design Notebook Ada Louise Huxtable

### Street scenery: Our Madison Avenue and Palm Beach's Worth.

**S**HOPPING centers are a lot like junk food; no matter how opulent the merchandise or spectacular the setting, they are basically the same, blandly familiar and ultimately boring, lacking in any real flavor.

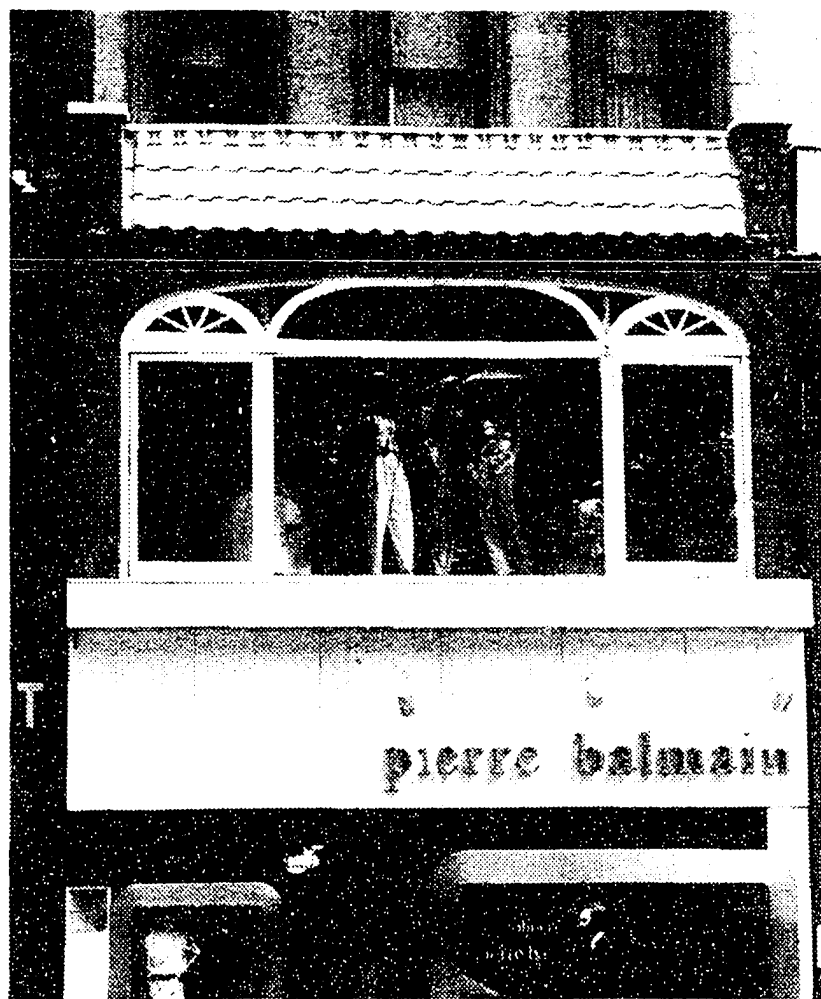
Their malls and atriums photograph dramatically, if predictably, and their shops seem to promise exciting goods and experiences. But it all turns out to be more of the same standardized formula, which is why the atriums get higher and the trees and fountains get bigger and the visual impact becomes more striking, to lure the shopping junkies from the old malls to the new ones, where similar stores and merchandise provide the same eventual ennui.

What is missing in this vacuum-packed consumer environment is a little thing called urbanity — the surprises and rewards of the special, the unexpected, the unique and the offbeat, rather than the sterile stereotype; the instructive and entertaining mixture that only a sophisticated culture can offer; the genuine context, the eternally intriguing and self-renewing aspects of a real place.

Give me the magnificent melange of New York's Madison Avenue every time, and you may have all your Chestnut and Cherry Hills and their successful facsimiles to suburban infinity. And for a change of pace, for sheer escape and nirvana, I will take Palm Beach's Worth Avenue — for a few days, at least — but I will take Madison Avenue for a lifetime.

In fact, I have spent a good deal of my lifetime on or near Madison Avenue, discovering whole different sets of pleasures from childhood to middle age. Unlike even the best of the shopping centers, Madison Avenue never palls. In the roughly 50 blocks stretching from the 40's to the 90's, its richness is extraordinarily worldly and complex, and its extremes, from humble utilitarian to grand luxe, make for a variety that never stales. If the prices get more outrageous daily, making me feel like the poor little match girl looking in windows, I still like to know that a world of outrageously beautiful things — as opposed to the merely outrageous, which are also well represented — still exists.

I grew up with an awareness of Madison Avenue as a special place, riding the street car to Sunday school, en-



The New York Times / Jack Manning

Madison Avenue: Intriguing upper floors

chanted by the view through the windows of second-story shops of shabby gentility or understated elegance (little dressmakers, domestic employment agencies, purveyors of fine linens, repairers of antiques) above the sedately stylish stores that lined the street at ground level.

Even more intriguing and memorable were the distinctive details — which I never thought of as having anything to do with architecture until much later — of those upper floors of four- and five-story brownstones, town houses and early apartment buildings that passed before my eyes.

I would look for an oriel or bay window, a bit of tiled roof, some carved Gothic trim, a plant-filled conservatory with curved glass windows at the top of a corner flight of stairs, a snatch of applied half-timber, a dash of deco, scattered through the constant rhythm of 19th-century stone lintels, sills and cornices. These are the things that created the visual touchstones that anchor me to the avenue to this day. Their survival is no small miracle in an area of fashionable real estate and merchandising.

I enjoy Worth Avenue in Palm Beach in a very different way; I value those four elegant blocks bounded by the ocean and Lake Worth for their complete and masterly artifice and single-minded luxury. For the first 24 hours, still full of urban angst, I am turned off by its expensive, elaborate, hothouse artificiality, and then, losing touch with the real world, I am totally seduced by its balmy Champagne splendor. Window after window contains feathered and sequined chiffon gowns to be worn to the next gala, and the dominant color is pink. I will never have any occasion to buy these or the trinkets to wear with them from Cartier or Van Cleef & Arpels.

What counts for me is that these indulgences are offered in an unparalleled architectural stage set. Because Worth Avenue, like the later shopping centers, was created out of whole cloth, or in this case, Florida mud, in the 1920's by an architect of dramatic inventiveness, Addison Mizner, who knew a few salient things about pleasure and environmental design that modern shopping entrepreneurs have not learned yet. What I find most re-

warding are the surprising similarities with Madison Avenue that yield timeless lessons of scale, use and character.

The difference between the two, of course, is one of design and accident; in New York, those features came about naturally and incrementally; in Palm Beach they were artfully and artificially devised. Both have an unbroken pedestrian promenade of intimate scale and rich detail, in which small things keep happening of changing architectural interest, from the charming to the eccentric, and small shops that succeed one another within just a few steps, and for just enough time, for one to savor a continuous parade of temptations and visual delights.

On Madison Avenue, this happened because city brownstones had 20-foot fronts, and when they were converted to stores at street level, the same small scale was kept. This led to a mixture of residential and commercial uses. It was an ad hoc process that made every block unique, and every part of every block different.

Succeeding waves of stylish storefront conversions were contained within the architectural context that established and maintained the street's character. The results are beyond the efforts of even the most skilled planners, accustomed to working in terms of a "well-designed" and unified total shopping concept, or the multi-block scale of the urban environment.

They were beyond any architect, that is, except Addison Mizner, whose designs were based more on the dreams and desires of the very rich, and those who aspired to be very rich, than on any principles of formal architectural teaching. Palm Beach and Boca Raton, developed during and just after World War I, were virtually his creations. They were a fanciful compendium of pastel, picturesque references to Spanish, Creole, Florentine and other "appropriate" semitropical and classical architecture, relying more on romantic details and evocative trim than on textbook correctness.

Worth Avenue is a superb act of theater and urban design, virtually unchanged after 50 years. A cloistered arcade of shops is broken only by pedestrian walkways called vias, which lead beyond the avenue through picturesque passages and fountain-dotted patios to the next street, or back to the avenue again. The vias have shops upstairs and down, reached by steps and bridges that also lead to apartments and unexpected balconies and towers. Pedestrian, commercial and residential uses make a lively mix.

Christina Orr, the art historian, described the essence of the Worth Avenue complex in an exhibition of Mizner's work held in Palm Beach in 1977: "At each turn, there is a new discovery — a garden spot with a restaurant, an



Worth Avenue: Picturesque passageways

overhanging balcony laden with bougainvillea, a tiled stairway surprisingly tucked beneath a bridge, and always, little shops that tantalize. The genius of the vias is that they not only create intimacy, but also generate movement. The buildings are tall, then low; with intricate stonework, then utterly plain; and all seem condensed and compressed."

Mizner himself described Worth Avenue and the vias in terms of the narrow streets of Granada, but he created a very personal imagery. He described its elements himself: "Light stucco walls in pastel tints, topped with tile roofs and weathered cypress woodwork, and the inevitable coconut tree with its decorative tufted shape and play of light and shade."

Madison Avenue is short on trees, palm or other, but it also has touches of Granada, as well as bits of Merrie England, proper Georgian, the Beaux Arts, the Brown Decades and plain postwar speculator brick. Except where office buildings have taken over in the 50's, or large apartment houses have disrupted the blocks above, the small, intimate and eccentric buildings remain that refute the city's overpowering scale and impersonality. Above all, there is the intriguing change of architecture detail that Mizner understood so well and worked so hard to invent.

An important part of Madison Avenue's appeal is its storefront conversions; the shifting, trendy elegance of

its merchandising design provides much of the street's stylish vitality. The latest image is the hard-edged chic of the current invasion of pricey European boutiques.

But it is the existing architectural framework within which this all takes place that really counts on Madison Avenue, that makes its modishness a form of continual renewal, rather than something episodic or destructive.

A zoning amendment of a few years ago that requires shops on the street floor of any new construction does not address the problem of how to keep what is above them. That is what makes those shops Madison Avenue rather than Third Avenue, where the shops merely trim an anonymous and characterless brick street facade. A preservation proposal for an Upper East Side Historic District to include Madison Avenue is being considered, as well as further zoning measures.

Those boutiques and bakeries, drug-stores and chocolatiers, restaurants and coffee shops, fine food and wine stores and omnipresent Gristede's, the antique shops and art galleries, delis and designers, are all mixed up with the funny and familiar facades that are still within the reach of the eye, and that are better than street signs for telling you where you are.

Madison Avenue is one of the great international shopping streets of the world. But only because it is vintage New York.