Design Notebook: A chiaroscuro city, fretted with ironwork.
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Design Notebook

Ada Louise Huxtable

A chiaroscuro city, fretted with ironwork.

Screen of sunflowers on facade of Chelsea Hotel, far left, and intricate railing at Old Merchant's House. Leaves crowned with pineapples, below left, were symbols of hospitality.

"SUNLIGHT and Shadow" was a favorite subject of the Victorian moralists; it was one of the most popular titles for books and tracts dealing with the themes and contrasts of the city, and in particular, of New York. Affluence and poverty, virtue and crime, high life and low life, mansions and slums, the beauties and inequities of the large "modern" metropolis, were the accepted polarities of the urban condition.

Descriptions of the city itself were often couched in terms of light and shade, with much emphasis on the degree of natural illumination achieved in new buildings, before the advent of artificial light and climate. The rich architectural detail so universally admired was meant for daylight viewing.

An important part of that decorative 19th-century chiaroscuro was ironwork — the wrought and cast railings and balconies, porches and grilles, fences and gates that lent themselves conspicuously to the effects of sun and shadow so much in vogue.

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Much of this delicate ornamentation has been lost as the city has been progressively stripped of the sensuous delights once considered essential to the building arts.

Decorative ironwork is one of the more vulnerable of architecture artifacts, susceptible to neglect, decay, wartime scrap drives and the perennial threat of modernization. But for those who care to look, the transient traceries that cast their lacy patterns on brick, stone and cement can still be found.

Downtown, the openwork iron basket urns and graceful scrolls on the stair rails and newels of early 19th-century town houses are reminders of more elegant and leisurely times, even in neighborhoods now more commonly identified with litter and broken glass. Anthemion finials and fretted forms mark the fashionable grafting of the Greek Revival onto Federal brick facades.

Uptown, elaborate glass and iron entrance doors are the standard finishing detail of the luxurious turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts town houses of the upper East Side. Leaves crowned with pineapples top richly worked fences to display the symbols of hospitality and home that were once universally understood.

Design and techniques changed as the century progressed. What began as the simple, handwrought elements of the colonial craftsman of the 17th and 18th centuries reached a high point of sophistication and skill by the late 1800's, when the use of iron flowered in everything from private mansions to the stairs and elevator cages of the new business skyscrapers.

The letters and journals of New York visitors from 1825 to 1830 report that there were more iron railings at that time than in the larger and wealthier city of Philadelphia.

The noted architectural historian Talbot Hamlin has suggested that New York may have produced the first and best of those filigreed balconies that we associate with the South and New Orleans. The 1898 "History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York," describes the effect of the 1811 Manhattan plan:

"In the layout for the streets of the city every lot was given an area line, and as the open area had to be enclosed by a railing and the sides of the high stoop to be protected, the demand for railings and newels became very great."

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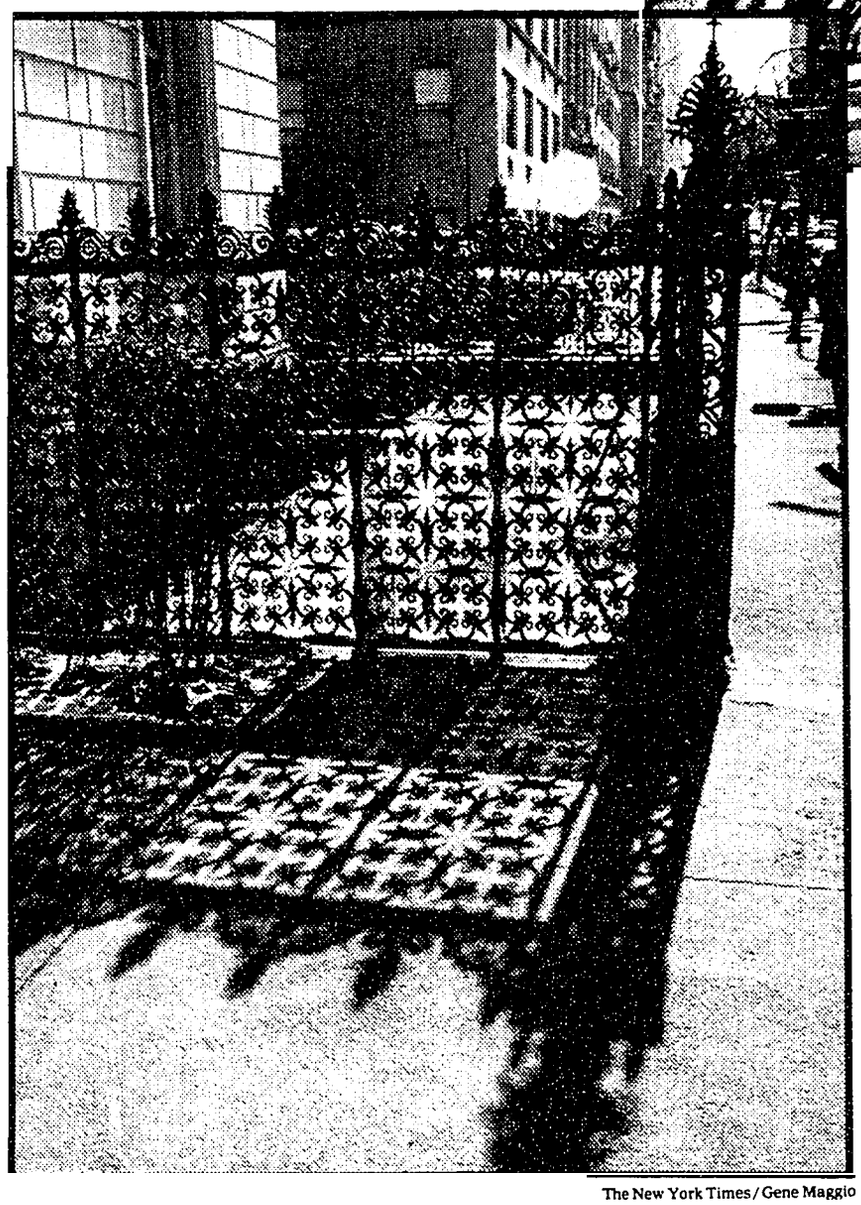
One of the best preserved, or more accurately, most carefully and lovingly restored examples, can be found today at the Old Merchant's House on East Fourth Street, the home of the Seabury Tredwell family from its construction in 1832 until 1934, now maintained privately as a house museum.

Much of the extensive decoration of the basket urn of the newel post and parts of the railing had been eaten away by weather and neglect. Leaves, rosettes and spindles were missing. In the recent restoration, those missing elements have been molded from the old ones by Lawrence Majewski, and the intricate ironwork has been executed by Hermann Wiermann of Montvale, N.J. About 300 rosettes have been replaced and even the veining of the leaves has been painstakingly reproduced.



The New York Times / Gene Maggio

Wrought iron was soon mixed with cast iron, and even lead and steel were used for applied motifs; by mid-century the cheaper, easier to produce and much showier cast iron took over. The more elaborate designs in fashion after 1850 could be manufactured in quantity by casting, and factory-made fencing was produced in generous amounts in New York, New England, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

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Stock patterns of ornate scrolls, naturalistic leafwork and machine-turned spindles were increasingly popular. The taste for the Gothic soon followed the taste for the Greek, and a profusion of arches, trefoils and pinnacles appeared, with an embroidery-like richness of shapes and shadows.

One of the most pleasing early examples of this type is the fence that fronts Grace Church at Broadway and 10th Street, James Renwick's trend-setting Gothic Revival building of 1846. As styles became increasingly eclectic, the range of decorative motifs broadened to include French Second Empire, Eastlake and a potpourri of "Renaissance" inspiration. By 1884, the facade of the Chelsea Hotel on West 23d Street was screened by openwork patterns of sunflowers.

Iron artifacts like these have their special enthusiasts. A group called the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture has come to the rescue of innumerable fences, fountains, statues, and even complete buildings, in and out of New York. (They sponsor walking tours, in sun and shadow, for members and guests; information can be obtained by calling 427-2488.)

The Friends, and their friends, recognize that decorative work has been only one part of the American architectural-iron story. Elaborate cast-iron facades, modeled after Renaissance palazzi and painted a dazzling white or cream, created instant, prefabricated "palaces of trade" for the new merchant aristocracy.

Developments in structural iron led to the metal frame that ultimately created the skyscraper. This most characteristic of American building materials was used innovatively and elegantly, and wherever possible.

Certainly the most curious event in the history of American ironwork was the forging of 180 tons of chains made to span the Hudson River to keep Lord Howe's fleet from passing West Point. (They failed.)

And probably the most notable event was the smallest, the invention of the machine-cut nail in the early 19th century. That simple device revolutionized building to bring reality to the radical, new world idea of homes for all. Ingenuity, novelty and beauty were never far apart in the American dream.