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Stern's Brompton Is Pre-War Elegance, Newly Minted

By James Gardner

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The Brompton, which is approaching completion on the southeast corner of Third Avenue and 86th Street, may very well be a better building than its neighborhood deserves. If this is not the case, it is only because the area is getting decidedly better, thanks to this new arrival, designed by Robert Stern, and to the Lucida, also nearing completion one block west on Lexington Avenue.

Heuichul Kim

Pluralism: The 22-story Brompton occupies its corner lot with complete and commanding authority.

For the longest time (that is to say, living memory), 86th Street between Lexington Avenue and Second Avenue has been one of the more dispiriting stretches of Manhattan. To understand the complete fortuity of this fact, compare the area with similar stretches of East 72nd Street or even West 86th Street. On those streets you find stately pre-war buildings, with a tasteful minimum of storefronts. Here, by contrast, an overwhelming commercial presence of second-tier mom-and-pop stores has been replaced over the past decade by chain stores, which are actually something of a step up. Meanwhile, the building stock is a mess of insipid Modernist structures from the 1970s that compete with a few straggling remnants of row

houses, inexplicable survivals from a century earlier, and that combine with these to create a jagged and generally low-lying skyline.

Suddenly into their dreary midst the Brompton descends like Lady Astor, bedizened in pearls and furbelows, among a bevy of scullery maids. As its name suggests and as its design bears out, this development has aristocratic pretensions that are strikingly at odds with the far more demotic facts on the ground. To invoke a term I coined a few years back, the Brompton is a dramatic example of the Neo-Preo style, a thoroughly new structure whose entire aesthetic mission is to resemble a pre-war Manhattan building, and to do so with such conviction that inattentive pedestrians might just imagine it to have been standing there for the past eight decades.

The Brompton looks every bit like a Park Avenue building that has floated illogically over to Third Avenue. It is clad overwhelmingly in red brick, with a few masonry accents, as though the invocation of an entirely masonry building, such as Mr. Stern's 15 Central Park West, would have seemed, on Third Avenue, too much of a stretch even for a determined fantasist like Mr. Stern. Unlike that tower, or the Chatham on Third Avenue and 65th Street, a high-rise that was also designed by his firm, the 22-story Brompton is a far more cubic affair that occupies its corner lot with complete and commanding authority.

The most striking and fundamental aesthetic fact about the Brompton is its blockish multitude of red brick. So strong is the presence of that material that one could be excused for overlooking just how pluralistic and ad hoc its design really is, with regard both to its detailing and to its massing. Mr. Stern feels entitled to switch from brick to sustained passages of masonry from one moment to the next, and each side of the building is of a very different configuration from the others.

The vantage point from which to view the building is surely at the corner of 86th and Third Avenue. From here, the Brompton, like the earlier Chatham, reads as a study in the so-called Queen Anne style, rising as it does from a masonry base of limestone cladding up to the fourth floor, after which the large midsection of the building is all red brick. But even here, the façade is punctuated by bays, three windows wide, in which the masonry shoots all the way up to the roof in the form of vaguely Gothic flanges that spring from diminutive and vaguely Renaissance arches.

Unlike most buildings in New York that date from before the war or that invoke a similar aesthetic, the Brompton is not cleanly tripartite. Its base is legibly divided from its midsection, but as this largely regular midsection continues on into the summit, it fractures into an inconsistent assortment of setbacks whose design would seem to have been dictated more by the demands of real estate than of fine art. It is interesting to consider that the clean, angular pavilions that result from these setbacks, though they are clad in masonry, have a Modernist clarity to

them that is not unpleasant and that recalls the largely Modernist idiom that Mr. Stern successfully deployed at the Seville, on Second Avenue and 77th Street. Something resembling Modernist modularity can also be found in one of the more unusual and successful elements of the design, the masonry-clad window work that covers the upper portion of the south-facing façade.

Despite these Modernist passages, and despite the fact that a number of pre-war buildings along Park Avenue have been designed in a similarly ad hoc and asymmetrical fashion, it is easy to imagine that the pluralistic license of the Postmodern style and the combinatory reflexes of the Deconstructivist style have played a major conceptual role in the formal development of the Brompton.

Yes, the building strongly smacks of pastiche, especially in the somewhat heavy-handed Gothic and Renaissance stonework. And yes, there is something less than uplifting in the mid-market aristocratic airs that the developer has sought and that Mr. Stern has supplied. But when you come upon the Brompton as you walk east along 86th Street, it is surprisingly easy to surrender to the grand fiction that has informed it.