

781 FIFTH AVENUE



Courtesy of
Deanna E. Kory



The Sherry Netherland Hotel, perched gracefully at the corner of 59th Street and Fifth Avenue, is a potent reminder of the opulence of 1920s New York. The building, erected between 1926 and 1927 to elegantly overlook Central Park, was one of the first luxury high-rises and became the center stage for wealthy urban life during the first half of the twentieth century.

Although referred to as a "hotel," the term did not mean in the 1920s what it means to us now - the Sherry Netherland was not designed solely to provide lodging for travelers. Instead, the building can be better classified as luxury apartment house with lush hotel amenities, truly the best of both worlds. As advertisements for the recently completed Sherry Netherland boasted, the "hotel" was much "more than a place to live;" it offered "a new way of living." The lavish apartments contained within were residential and fully functional - complete with parlors, libraries, dining rooms and serving pantries or small kitchenettes. Residents, however, could also enjoy the benefits of hotel living - meals were provided in elegant dining rooms and cafes, ballrooms and lounges supplied lavish entertainment, and a well-trained staff catered to the residents' every whim. In fact, luxury apartment-hotels like the Sherry Netherland helped to make apartment living fashionable after WW I when economic factors made it increasingly difficult for the wealthy to maintain a private residence in the style to which they were accustomed. The apartment buildings and apartment-hotels that began to replace the late-nineteenth century mansions along Fifth Avenue were designed with a style and elegance equivalent to their predecessors and thus continued the tradition of wealth and luxury synonymous with the area.

The Sherry Netherland, whose thirty-eight stories originally contained 525 rooms, was the first graceful skyscraper apartment-hotel on Fifth Avenue above 59th Street. The apartment-hotel, designed by the architectural firm Schultze & Weaver and built between 1926 and 1927, replaced the W.H. Hume & Sons Hotel Netherland of 1890-93. The earlier Hotel Netherland was a block-like structure, much shorter, but similarly luxurious to its replacement. It was demolished in 1926 to make way for the Sherry Netherland. The famous architectural firm Schultze & Weaver designed the new structure with neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic features. The base of the building exudes solidity, its stone façade respecting the urbanity of Fifth Avenue while its grand two-story round-arched windows recall the Romanesque. Four monumental piers run from the fourth to seventeenth floors where set backs begin. These set backs lead to the building's most distinctive feature, a slender tower crowned with a fleche rising from a peaked and finialed roof. The interior is as opulent as the exterior - the lobby has been referred to as an "exquisite marble box" and its café is one of the city's last examples of 1930s mirrored elegance.

The graceful and elegant design of the Sherry Netherland was very successful, hardly a surprising fact considering its architects. Schultze & Weaver were the preeminent force behind hotel design in the United States during the roaring twenties. They were responsible for many of what are now considered to be icons of hotel design - the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, the Breakers in Palm Beach, the Cliff in San Francisco, and the Pierre, another luxury apartment-hotel one block further north on Fifth Avenue from the Sherry Netherland and designed only three years later.

The Sherry Netherland was thus the first of what would become an elegant pair of apartment hotels at the southeast corner of the park, an architectural grouping that made luxury apartment-hotel living flourish. Its sumptuous details, found within and without, make it an effective reminder of the great era of luxury apartment living in 1920s New York.

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