

Adam Brodheim
Studio I: South Harlem
Andrew Dolkart, Claudia Kavenagh, & Kate Reggev
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Schomburg Plaza



Introduction:

Arthur A. Schomburg Plaza is an early 1970s housing development opposite the northeast corner of Central Park. Spanning a full block from 110th Street to 111th Street, east of Fifth Avenue, it was developed by the New York State Urban Development Corporation to provide approximately 600 units of middle-income housing, as well as community and commercial spaces. The site consists of three primary residential structures: two 35 story octagonal towers, on the corner of Central Park, and a lower slab building along Madison Avenue separated by a raised plaza above a parking garage (*see figure 1*). Schomburg Plaza's site, at the corner of Central Park, was identified as a potential urban renewal development site for nearly a decade before the eventual construction of the complex.¹ Initial community activism sought New York City or Federal funding for the site, but this was unavailable. It would take the eventual involvement of New York State to develop the site on what was then known as Frawley Circle. The development of the site was a complex undertaking that involved navigating tension between the largely Puerto Rican community of East Harlem, and the Black population of Central Harlem, that had initially proposed the project. While the ultimate development did not meet the full expectations of the community, it became one of the most obvious physical symbols of a changing Harlem.

As an aesthetic object Schomburg Plaza has been very successful. The two towers of Schomburg Plaza are some of the tallest buildings in Harlem and are exceedingly visible and prominent (*see figure 2*). This distinction has given the buildings their colloquial name "Towers at the Park."² Their imposing presence marks the entrance to Harlem from the Southeast. They are a significant landmark in the area: one tower for 110th Street, one tower for Fifth Avenue; one tower for South Harlem, and one tower for

¹ The circle was re-named for Duke Ellington in 1995. See: Hilary Ballon, "Schomburg Plaza," in *Affordable Housing in New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 221.

² Interview with Faheem Abdur-Razzaq, Schomburg Plaza Residents Council, December 10, 2021.

East Harlem. Even as the building has undergone demographic changes and name changes, the towers and their presence have been enduring. Today, as exterior modifications are planned for the building that would change the character of the building, they would not alter its significance—two towers overlooking Central Park and Harlem (*see figure 3*).

History and Construction:

As with most buildings in New York City, Schomburg Plaza did not rise out of vacant land. Prior to construction the block had a gas station located on Frawley Circle and old law tenements lining 110th and 111th Streets (*see appendix*).³ As early as 1964 the site had been seen as one with strong potential. Mammie and Kenneth Clark, two prominent psychologists who ran a childhood development center in Harlem, organized a group of local citizens to advocate for the revitalization and development of the area between 107th Street to 112th Street between Fifth Avenue and Lexington Avenue.⁴ This desire was heavily influenced by seeing the vast changes in Harlem as a result of the tremendous number of government housing projects that were built in the preceding decades in East Harlem.⁵ The group hired Edgar Tafel, a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, who drew up preliminary plans for the area (*see appendix*). Despite vocal support from the city, including the designation of the site as part of the larger Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal Area in 1966, City and Federal funding was not allocated for the project.⁶ The Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal Area no longer focused on just Frawley circle and the area just south,

³ Frawley Plaza was named after Democratic State Senator James J. Frawley, a Tammany Hall politician whose construction company built the Manhattan and Queensboro bridges. See: Sanna Feirstein, *Naming New York : Manhattan Places & How They Got Their Names* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 155.

⁴ Schomburg Plaza's development and history has been covered in detail in two works, which this section largely draws on. See: Gerald E. Markowitz and David Rosner, *Children, Race, and Power: Kenneth and Mamie Clark's Northside Center* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996) and Hilary Ballon, "Schomburg Plaza," in *Affordable Housing in New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁵ For a strong account of the development of government subsidized housing projects in East Harlem see: Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ For information on the Milbank-Frawley plan see: The City of New York Department of Housing Preservation and Development, "Milbank-Frawley Circle Urban Renewal Project Third Amended Urban Renewal Plan" (Department of Housing Preservation and Development, February 1970).

but extended northward to 125th Street (*see appendix*). The increased size of the site complicated the relationship between the Black and Puerto Rican communities. Previously, the site had been relatively evenly split between the two communities, but the increase in size of the urban renewal area to the north vastly increased the population of Black residents, with the Puerto Rican community feeling disadvantaged.⁷

Ultimately it would be state level involvement that would advance the project. A new state public benefit corporation, the Urban Development Corporation (UDC), had been tasked by the State of New York with developing new residential construction in urban areas.⁸ Kenneth Clark, one of the advocates for the Frawley Circle site was a board member of the UDC and was able to interest them in a smaller site bounded just by 110th and 111th Street, the site of Schomburg Plaza. This block consisted of old law tenements primarily populated by Puerto Ricans, including a tenement with the headquarters of the Young Lords. The Puerto Rican community raised concerns that their community was being displaced in order to build a project that would primarily benefit middle-class African Americans. A last-ditch effort to stop the final evictions on the site was quickly struck down on a technicality and construction began in July of 1971.⁹ In order to ameliorate some tensions between the Puerto Rican and Black community the building was renamed Schomburg Plaza (from the previous Frawley Plaza)

⁷ For a contemporaneous account of the challenges of managing competing interests in the Milbank-Frawley Circle Urban Renewal Area see: Ellen Perry Berkeley, "Vox Populi," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 128 No. 4, May 1968; For an alternative community plan see: Roger G. Katan, *Pueblos for El Barrio: On the Rejuvenation of an Old Public Housing Site, and Its Integration with the Adjoining Urban Fabric*. (New York: Nabal Press, 1967); For a retrospective look at the planning behind Milbank-Frawley and a discussion of the first use of computer programming in urban planning at the site see: Barry Jackson, "The Legacy of the Harlem Model Cities Program," in *The Urban Experience: A People-Environment Perspective* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 223–37.

⁸ For a full accounting of the history of the Urban Development Corporations initial role in East Harlem (beginning with the State Office Building) see: Eleanor L. Brilliant, *The Urban Development Corporation: Private Interests and Public Authority* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975).

⁹ For a contemporaneous accounting of the challenges with the UDC's involvement in Harlem see: Louella Jacqueline Long and Vernon Ben Robinson, *How Much Power to the People? A Study of the New York State Urban Development Corporation's Involvement in Black Harlem* (New York: Urban Center, Columbia University, 1971), 90.

after the prominent Puerto Rican of African descent Arthur Schomburg.¹⁰ Additionally, an architecture firm with a Hispanic owner, Castro-Blanco, Piscioneri & Feder, was chosen to work with the more well established Gruzen & Partners for the design of the building. Although originally envisioned as an integrated white, Black, and Hispanic housing community the building opened in the winter of 1974-1975 with almost exclusively Black and Hispanic residents.

Building Design and Significance:

The Urban Development Corporation had a strong focus on “good design in its...developments” with a staff of architects to help advise on their projects.¹¹ At the UDC there was a concerted effort to make sure that their buildings differed heavily from the previous generations of bland brick-faced government subsidized housing from the 1950s and 1960s. The most prominent feature of the design for Schomburg Plaza consists of twin octagonal towers of a light brown hue (*see figure 2*). The buildings have alternating sides of sheer walls and those with a rhythmic repetition of four floors without balconies followed by two floors with balconies. This pattern creates a series of voids and cavities rising up the facade. The impression is as if the paired balconies are sewing the octagonal panels of the building together. Importantly, the balconies give a sense of human scale to the buildings allowing those at street level to understand the use of the structure. Despite its immense height (~350 feet) the building feels accessible and open. This is in stark contrast to the majority of housing projects of East Harlem which rise directly up from the ground to their ultimate height, with no articulation or change in massing at all—an alienating effect. In Schomburg Plaza the UDC would achieve their goal of “good

¹⁰ Brilliant, *The Urban Development Corporation*, 122.

¹¹ New York State Urban Development Corporation, *Annual Report of the New York State Development Corporation*, 1973, 35.

design” as the building won the “Award of Honor for Excellence in Design” from the New York Society of Architects.¹²

Schomburg Plaza is a concrete framed project that was clad in precast textured concrete blocks. These blocks gave a similar appearance to brick in terms of color, but gave a vertical rather than horizontal emphasis. The use of these newly invented concrete blocks over bricks was not just a visual choice, but an economic one. As the UDC explained in its annual report, “the use of textured concrete block for Schomburg plaza’s exterior walls...helped hold down costs. It costs less than brick which used to be at the bottom of the price scale.” The UDC went on to tout that *Building Design & Construction* had reported that Schomburg Plaza demonstrated that “tight budgets don’t have to be synonymous with unimaginative design.”¹³

The true significance of Schomburg Plaza however, was broader than the specifics of its design or materials; it is its use of two towers to mark an important site. In an interview with Peter Samton, one of the project’s architects, he explained that there was a clear sense that the project at the corner of Central Park was a “once in a lifetime chance” to do something meaningful with the site. Initial discussions debated the use of one large building or a group of towers before coalescing on the idea of a pair of towers: “one for 110th Street and one for Fifth Avenue.”¹⁴ The usage of two towers made the buildings an instant landmark and defined its location in space. The two buildings quickly took on significance with the UDC’s 1971 annual report stating that they were located at a “major gateway to the Harlem community.” By 1973, it was not the location that was a gateway, but the buildings

¹² New York State Urban Development Corporation, 35.

¹³ New York State Urban Development Corporation, 36.

¹⁴ Peter Samton, Interview with Peter Samton, December 6, 2021; In a 2001 article Jordan Gruzen of Gruzen & Partners stated that the inspiration for Schomburg Plaza was from “looking across Central Park at the El Dorado and the Century and all the wonderful double-towered buildings.” However, unlike the buildings mentioned Schomburg Towers do not rise from a shared base, but are instead completely independent. See: David W. Dunlap, “Even Now, A Skyline Of Twins,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2001, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/02/arts/even-now-a-skyline-of-twins.html>.

themselves, with *The New York Times* calling “the twin octagonal towers now present a new Gateway to Harlem.”¹⁵ The UDC would echo this language calling Schomburg Plaza the “tangible pillars of Harlem’s symbolic gateway.”¹⁶ Even today residents still note the buildings’ prominence and significance explaining that everyone instantly knows where they live when they give their address: “towers at the park.”¹⁷

The significance of Schomburg Plaza can clearly be seen when compared to a similar UDC project just three blocks away on Fifth Avenue and 106th Street: the Lakeview Apartments (*see figure 4*). A similar 1970s housing project for the UDC also designed by Gruzen & Partners, it lacks the monumentality or presence of Schomburg Plaza. The Lakeview Apartment are a simpler form, a series of rectangular structures, that focus more on framing an internal courtyard and maintaining the street wall, rather than asserting their presence along Fifth Avenue. The buildings, while not unsuccessful, lack a form or massing that clearly denotes their place—they could be located anywhere. This is in contrast to Schomburg Plaza, just three blocks away, which gives a sense of ownership to its site, marking the corner of Central Park as an important nexus in Harlem’s geography.

Post-Construction History:

Schomburg Plaza continues to have a complicated history even after construction. In 1987, a horrifying fire tore through the upper stories of one of the towers killing seven with a poorly maintained sprinkler system blamed for the tragedy.¹⁸ Just two years later a number of young residents would be erroneously charged and convicted of assault and rape in the infamous Central Park Jogger case. They

¹⁵ New York State Urban Development Corporation, *Annual Report of the New York State Development Corporation*, 36.

¹⁶ Charlayne Hunter, “Hopes and Fears on Rise with New Harlem Skyline,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1973.

¹⁷ Abdur-Razzaq, Schomburg Plaza Residents Council.

¹⁸ Sam Howe Verhovek, “3 Jump to Death and 4 Others Die in Harlem Apartment Tower Blaze,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1987.

would spend a combined thirty-eight years in prison before eventually having the convictions vacated.¹⁹ In 2005, Schomburg Plaza was removed from the Mitchell-Lama program, which had kept rents affordable to middle-income tenants, as its thirty-year protections had been exhausted.²⁰ Tenants' rents increased dramatically as the new owner sought market-rents resulting in the City of New York having to step in and provide enhanced vouchers to preserve affordability. Recently, the buildings were renamed "The Heritage" in a likely play towards a wealthier and whiter demographic.

Despite these changes, some longtime residents have been supportive of the improvements to the building including upgraded elevators and security systems.²¹ A current proposal involves adding insulated cladding to the exterior of the building (*see figure 5*). This would be similar to the process at the Metro North Riverview Apartments which covered the brown pre-cast concrete building with insulated panels (*see figure 6*). The President of the Schomburg Plaza Residents Council was supportive of the change explaining that tenants have long struggled with poorly insulated apartments. He noted that this was the next major exterior facade change the new owners were making after upgrading all of the windows in the 2010s (*see figure 7*).²² However other elements of the original construction have not been fixed, including the original plaza at the center of the site which has been denuded of plantings and closed to tenants via a locked gate for a number of years.

The rendering for the new design shows alternating silver and brown panels covering up the original cast concrete blocks. While previously the horizontal articulation of Schomburg Towers was defined solely by the rhythmic voids produced by the balconies, the new design attempts to use color to emphasize the alternating floors. This is likely a detriment to the overall design of Schomburg Towers,

¹⁹ For a full history of the "Exonerated Five" (formerly Central Park Five) see: Sarah Burns, *The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

²⁰ Ballon, "Schomburg Plaza," 223.

²¹ Abdur-Razzaq, Schomburg Plaza Residents Council.

²² Abdur-Razzaq.

but ultimately does not impact Schomburg Plaza's most important character defining feature: the bold two tower octagonal massing rising high above Harlem. Although the buildings may be aesthetically diminished by the new cladding, their presence and significance will not be diminished by the change.

Conclusion:

The story of Schomburg Plaza has been well documented over the last fifty years. Throughout it all, Schomburg Plaza has stood tall, with two towers overlooking Central Park—the symbolic gateway to Harlem. Its narrative is an important one in what it can teach about community involvement, urban renewal, and modern changes to mid-century affordable housing. These of course are not unique experiences known only to Schomburg Plaza, but are well documented through New York City. What is most significant then is Schomburg Plaza's presence: the way that the two towers so perfectly represent the site at the nexus of South Harlem, East Harlem, and Central Park.

Figures:

Figure 1: Site and floor plan of Schomburg Plaza in "Another Chance for Cities"

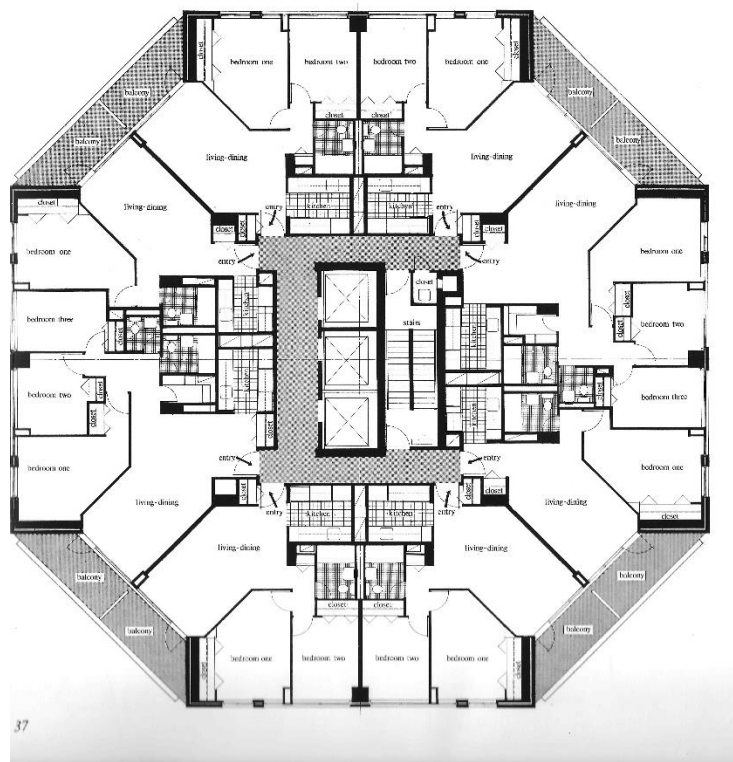
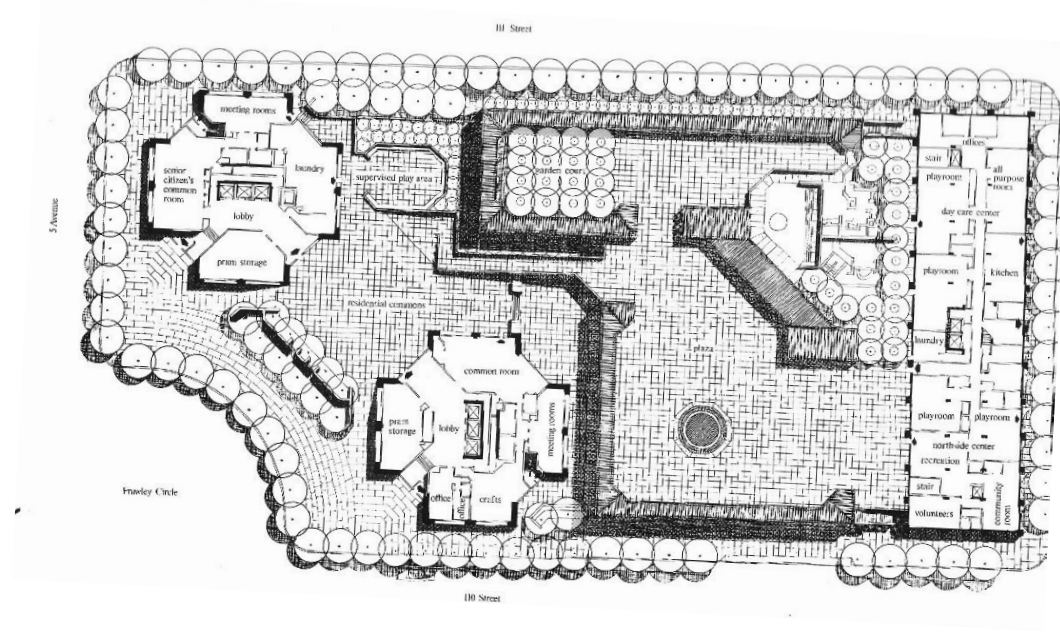


Figure 2: Schomburg Tower across the Harlem Meer in Central Park (Author's photo)



Figure 3: Schomburg Tower from above, Lakeview Apartments at right (courtesy of rentberry.com listing for 1295 5th Avenue)



Figure 4: Apartment houses along upper Fifth Avenue (Author's photo)



Figure 5: Rendering of Schomburg Plaza with insulated panels (courtesy of streeteasy.com listing for 1295 5th Avenue)



Figure 6: Metro North Riverview Apartments with in progress insulation installation. Original exterior is visible at bottom. Yellow coating (at top of wall) is applied to exterior before new cladding is added (large panels at right). (Author's photo)



Figure 7: Promotional material showing before and after of Schomburg Tower's window replacement program (courtesy of AirGuard Windows)



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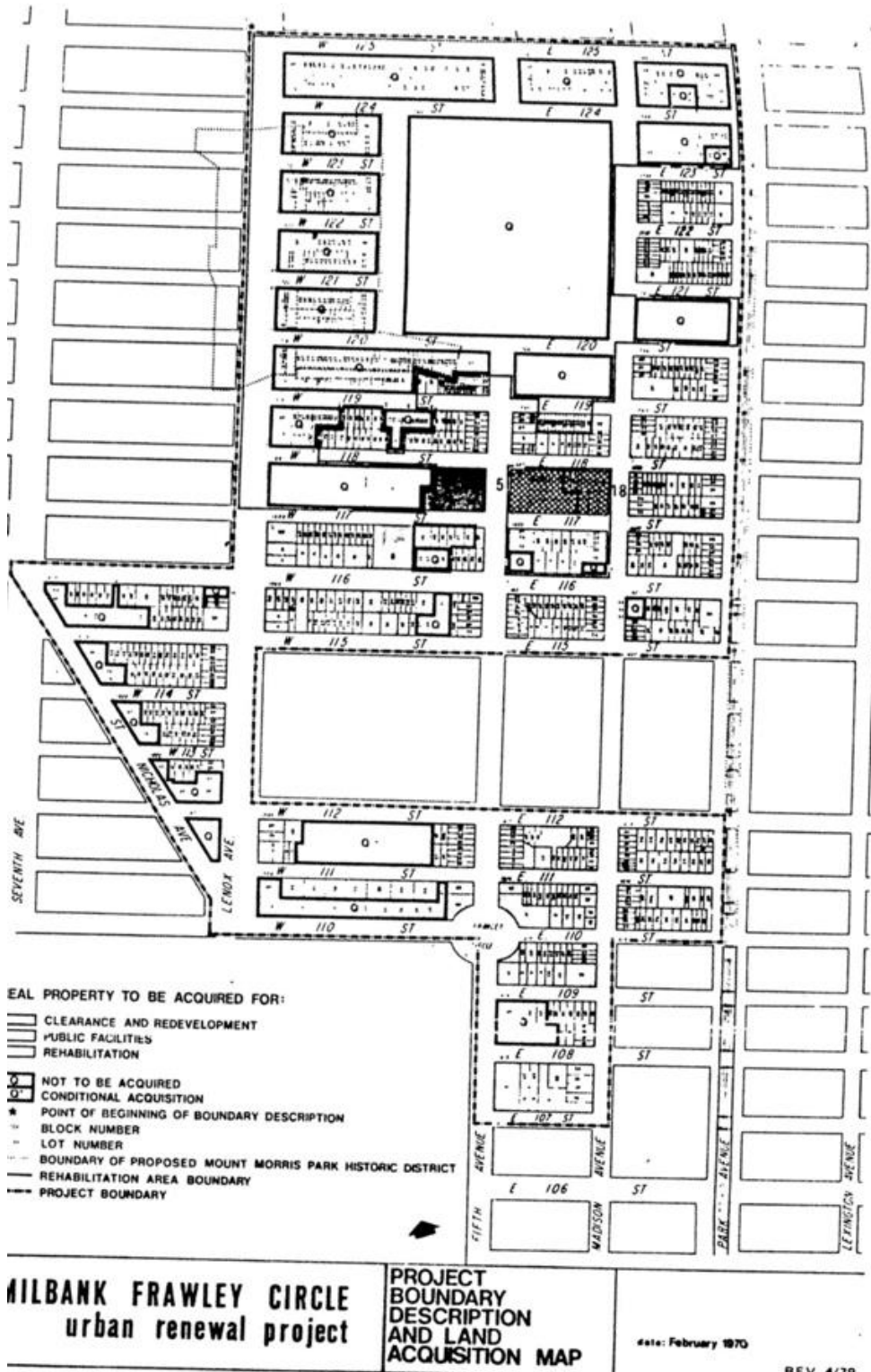
Appendix:



Frawley Circle (110th Street and 5th Avenue) from: New York City's Department of Finance Manhattan 1940s Tax Photos

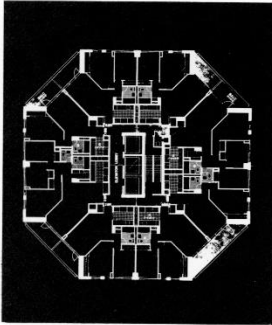


East 111th Street between 5th Avenue and Madison Avenue from: New York City's Department of Finance Manhattan 1940s Tax Photos



Milbank Frawley Circle Urban Renewal Area from: The City of New York Department of Housing Preservation and Development. "Milbank-Frawley Circle Urban Renewal Project Third Amended Urban Renewal Plan." Department of Housing Preservation and Development, February 1970.

SCHOMBURG PLAZA APARTMENTS



Arthur A. Schomburg Plaza Apartments, New York, New York: Located at the North East edge of Central Park, this moderate-income complex was designed to take maximum advantage of the panoramic view, as well as provide excellent housing. The octagonally shaped 35 story towers are constructed of poured-in-place concrete and split-rib block. Another 10 story residential building continuing along the line of Madison Avenue forms an easterly border to the garage roof recreation deck and play area for the North Side Center for children and the Day-Care Center.

Sponsor: Frawley Plaza Housing Company and the New York State Urban Development Corporation.

Year Completed: 1973

Cost: \$20,000,000

Dwelling Units: 600

Structural Engineers: Finley & Madison Associates; Mechanical Engineers: Hannaham & Johnston; Landscape Architect: Andres-Miceli-Weed; General Contractor: Douglass Urban Corporation.

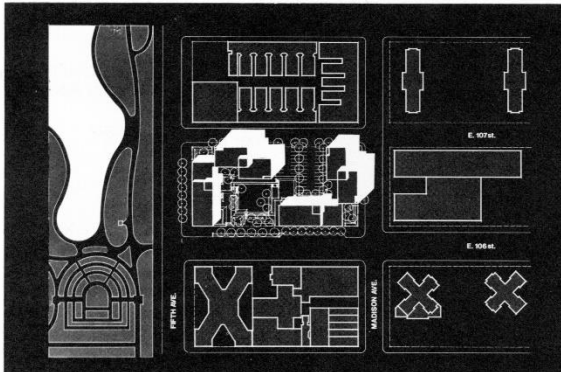
Associated Architects: Castro-Blanco, Piscioneri & Feder

Gruzen & Partners
Architects Planners Engineers



Schomburg Plaza from: Gruzen & Partners, ed. *Gruzen & Partners: Architects, Planners, Engineers*. New York: Gruzen & Partners, 1974.

106TH STREET
AND FIFTH AVENUE



106th Street and Fifth Avenue, New York, New York: This low-moderate-income complex in East Harlem which borders Central Park near Frawley Plaza is located over an underground river. The design uses the flying form system in such a way that foundation costs are minimized. Hi-rise and low-rise are combined to continue the "wall" of Fifth Avenue while creating the maximum usable open space within the block. Shopping is located on Madison Avenue to help rejuvenate its commercial nature. A 100 car garage is below ground to maximize play space for residents.

Owner: New York State Urban Development Corporation.

Year Completed: 1975

Cost: \$14,000,000

Dwelling Units: 446

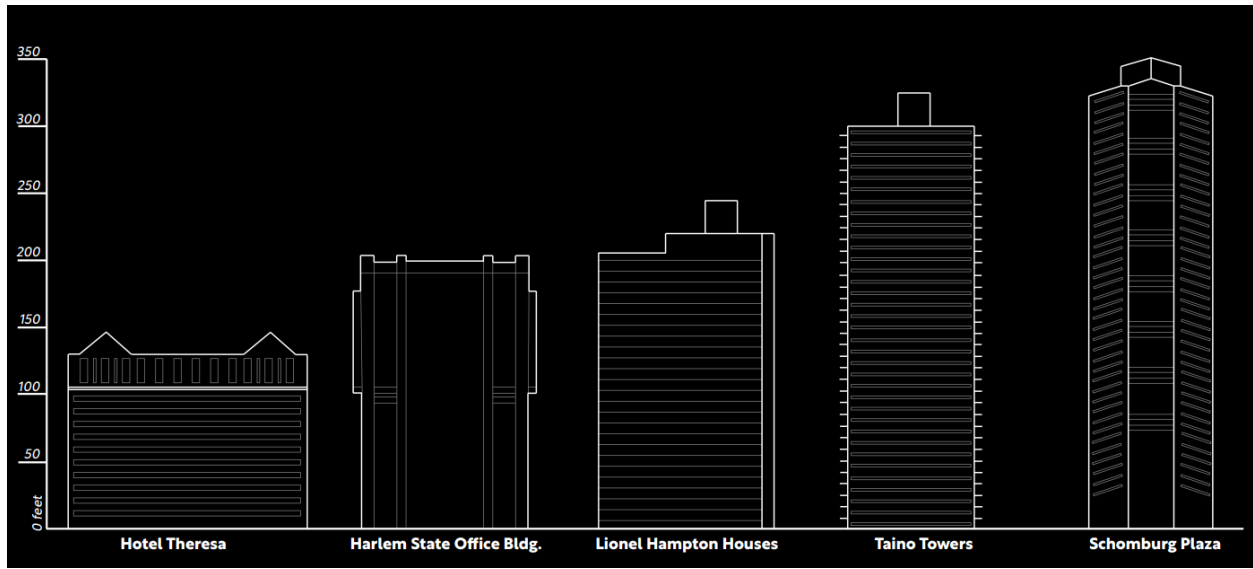
Structural Engineers: Severud-Perrone-Sturm-Bandel; Mechanical Engineers: Hannaham & Johnston; Landscape Architects: M. Paul Friedberg & Associates.

Associated Architects: Castro-Blanco, Piscioneri & Feder

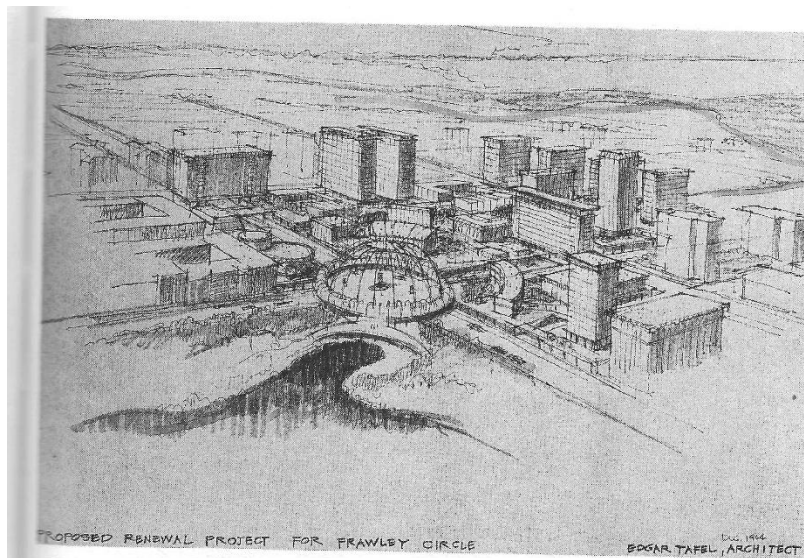
Gruzen & Partners
Architects Planners Engineers

Lakeview Apartments from: Gruzen & Partners, ed. *Gruzen & Partners: Architects, Planners, Engineers*. New York: Gruzen & Partners, 1974.

Tallest buildings in Harlem pre-2010 (author's image)



Edgar Tafel's plan for Frawley Circle. From *Children, Race, and Power*.²³



²³ Tafel's archival materials are held at Columbia University's Avery Library, but the finding aid is currently inaccurate and the author and archivists have been unable to locate additional materials from Tafel on Frawley Plaza.