

HOTEL BELLECLAIRE. 2171-2179 Broadway (southwest corner of 77th Street), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1901-03; architect Emery Roth of Stein, Cohen and Roth.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1168, Lot 56.

On June 12, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Hotel Belleclaire and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing was continued to September 11, 1984 (Item No. 2) and November 13, 1984 (Item No. 3). The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation and one letter was received in favor of designation. The representative of the owners spoke in opposition.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Hotel Belleclaire, one of a number of luxury apartment hotels constructed on the Upper West Side at the turn of the century, was the first major commission awarded to Emery Roth, at the time a struggling young architect. Roth went on to specialize in apartment house design, and during a career spanning more than forty years and well over two hundred projects, was to play an important role in the shaping of the Manhattan skyline. Best known for his towered apartment buildings on Central Park West, Roth's early work has gone largely unrecognized. The Hotel Belleclaire of 1901-03 with its references to the Art Nouveau and Secessionist movements of Europe, represents not only an interesting early phase in Roth's career, but also a fascinating stylistic anomaly in the history of New York City architecture.

Development History

The Upper West Side was largely undeveloped until the 1880s. Farm patents had been granted in the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth the Bloomingdale Road was opened (later known as the Boulevard, and after 1899, as Broadway). The site on which the Belleclaire stands was included in the Somarindyck family holdings and by the early nineteenth century was located on the outskirts of Harsenville, named for one John Harsen whose house stood between 70th and 71st streets at Broadway. Although the grid plan of 1811 for New York extended to the Upper West Side, the area remained essentially rural until after the Civil War. Land speculation in the post-war years was fueled by the creation of Central Park, and despite wild vacillations in prices occasioned by the Panic of 1873, speculation continued almost unabated. Plans for Riverside Park and Drive were undertaken in 1876 (completed 1900) and transportation improvements such as the Ninth Avenue Elevated Railroad (completed 1879) further stimulated speculative interest. Serious building activity began with Edward Clark's bold venture in constructing The Dakota, the grand apartment hotel at 72nd Street and Central Park West of 1884 (designed by

architect Henry Hardenbergh, and a designated New York City Landmark.) By 1886 the New York Times was extolling the "thousands of carpenters and masons rearing substantial buildings" where there had been "huge masses of rock...crowned by rickety shanties and browsing goats."¹

In the early 1890s the West 70s and 80s had evolved into an up-and-coming neighborhood. Numerous rowhouses had been constructed on the side streets closest to Central Park, while apartment buildings had begun to line the avenues. Optimistic opinion held that the Upper West Side was destined to supplant the Upper East Side as Manhattan's most desirable residential area. The new rowhouses, executed in a variety of styles and materials seemed to many far more appealing than their older brownstone counterparts across the park. Riverside Drive was envisioned as Fifth Avenue's successor, which resulted in an anticipatory rise in land values. By the late 1890s land prices had reached such extravagant heights that developers could realize little profit on single family dwellings and those that were built were rapidly becoming too costly for any but the truly rich. At the same time, Fifth Avenue's old guard remained firmly entrenched, so that relatively few West Side mansions were erected. Thus, by the turn of the century, the stage was set for the advent of the tall West Side apartment building.²

Apartment Hotels

Apartment buildings, which had been introduced to New York in the later nineteenth century, were initially termed "French flats" when they were intended to house the middle and upper-middle classes. All multiple dwellings for three or more tenants were legally classified as tenements, but in common parlance the tenement was the habitat of the working class, often overcrowded and equipped with few amenities. Despite European precedent, Americans of means were initially skeptical of multiple dwellings. Such close proximity to neighbors, and more importantly to live-in servants and to kitchen areas--traditionally relegated to attics and basements--was thought to lack privacy and a certain decorum. A successful solution to such objections was the apartment hotel, a building type which enjoyed great popularity during the early twentieth century. Apartment hotels were intended for both permanent and transient tenants, and offered suites and single rooms, furnished or unfurnished. All were without kitchen facilities, and instead the apartment hotel operated ground floor restaurants, supplied room service, and employed full service staffs, so that tenants could dispense with personally employed servants. The appeal of the apartment hotel was three-fold, offering privacy, convenience and economy. But if the apartment hotel was regarded as a perfectly acceptable domestic arrangement by many affluent New Yorkers, the uppermost echelons of New York society apparently regarded it as rather dubious. Edith Wharton, in Custom of the Country (1913) gives the West Side, where the parvenu Spragg family reside, the distinctly unflattering name "Hotel Stentorian"³

The Belleclaire and Its Architectural Sources

The Hotel Belleclaire was constructed between 1901 and 1903 for owner Albert Saxe. He commissioned Emery Roth to design the building on the basis of their association on an earlier project, The Saxony apartments of

1899, located nearby at 250 West 82nd Street. A seven-story building executed in brick with limestone detailing, The Saxony was a workmanlike Italian Renaissance design, which invites comparison with numerous Upper West Side buildings, such as those designed by Neville & Bagge or George F. Pelham, firms which often worked for developers. Certain aspects of the Saxony's design, such as the rusticated limestone two-story base and the unification of the middle floors by continuous pilasters with crowning upper stories, bear a formal resemblance to the Belleclaire, but such comparisons seem unimportant when the mundanity of the Saxony is contrasted with the exuberance and individuality of the Belleclaire, where the compact solid block is replaced by a boldly plastic silhouette which takes full advantage of the corner site, clearly demarcating avenue, corner and side street. The Belleclaire, by far the biggest commission of Roth's young career, offered him his first opportunity to compete with such large projects as The Dakota, or The Ansonia and The Dorilton, two grand apartment hotels then under construction just a few blocks south on Broadway. 5 These were both designed in the neo-Baroque French Beaux-Arts style. Roth offered his own version of European inspired elegance, looking to the Art Nouveau of France and Belgium, and the related Secessionism of Austria and Germany.

Oddly enough it appears that Roth first came in contact with the Art Nouveau and Secessionist styles in Chicago in the early 1890s while he was working as a draftsman on the staff designing the World's Columbia Exposition of 1893. Although the fair itself was a paean to neo-classicism, it had attracted many young foreign architects with a variety of interests. Roth had a German roommate "as wholeheartedly immersed in art as I was" 6 , and as he later reminisced:

[A]...potent and lasting influence was the inspiration I received from touching elbows with enthusiastic young men of outstanding talent there at the fair; these left a permanent mark on me. There were men of all nationalities among the hundred or more draughtsmen; Frenchmen from the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Norwegian Moderns, Germans from the famous Wagner School, and above all the pick of America. 7

Roth's "Wagner School" refers to the students of Otto Wagner (1841-1918). Professor of Architecture at the Vienna Academy, he had designed a number of speculative apartment houses on Vienna's famous Ringstrasse, was interested in urban design and planning, and was associated with the Vienna Secession. Thus Roth was meeting young men who had come directly from his sphere of influence and who had first-hand acquaintance with the early phases of the Secessionist movement 8

Roth's interest in the new styles became apparent when he began independent practice in New York in 1898. Despite his self-professed predilection for neo-classicism, he employed Art Nouveau motifs for two restaurant renovations, the Cafe Boulevard on lower First Avenue and the nearby Lorber restaurant. Around 1900 he was commissioned to make improvements to the Arverne Hotel in the Rockaways, where he designed a Secessionist-influenced casino pavilion. This work introduced him to fellow Jewish-Hungarian immigrants who formed much of the Arverne's clientele, and led to a series of summer cottage commissions. At

Fleischmanns, New York, in the Catskill Mountains, Roth designed two houses which were essentially relatively modest-sized examples of the Shingle Style, onto which he rather whimsically, but quite successfully, grafted Art Nouveau motifs. The Art Nouveau elements were confined to details, such as veranda supports, balustrades and window shapes. 9

In designing the Hotel Belleclaire, Roth's approach was similar; the massing, materials and plan of the building conform to academic Beaux-Arts principles which equally inform such buildings as The Ansonia and The Dorilton. It is in the decorative detailing of its elevations that the Belleclaire displays Art Nouveau-Secessionist influence. The Art Nouveau and Secessionist movement, generally, was concerned with decorative art and applied ornament. In some cases its architectural expression was a matter of surface application rather than of plan and articulation of form. The United States as a whole was unreceptive to Art Nouveau architecture, perhaps viewing it as too 'bohemian'. Roth's version palliated conservative mistrust of the avant-garde, at the same time offering a fillip of Continental panache. Despite the success of the Belleclaire, its Art Nouveau-Secessionist inclinations were not emulated. 10 It remains a singular evocation in New York of an architectural current which swept Europe but only brushed American shores.

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The Architect

Emery Roth was born in 1871, in Galzecs, Hungary, to a comfortable bourgeois family, but after the death of his father when he was thirteen, the family's fortunes took a turn for the worse, and it was decided that instead of continuing his schooling, young Emery would immigrate to America. Passing through Ellis Island, Roth continued on to Chicago, where his truly Horatio Algeresque success story began.

While still a teen-ager living a hand to mouth existence in Bloomington, Illinois, Roth determined to become an architect. He worked for both a local architect and local builder. In 1889, having won a national government-sponsored contest, the Maize Competition--for which he drew a drawing room utilizing the corn plant as a decorative motif--Roth took his \$ 100 prize money and set out for Kansas City. Apparently he could not find architectural employment there, but while he was still in Bloomington he had applied to join the office of Burnham & Root as a member of the architectural staff of the World's Columbian Exposition. Offered the job by mail, Roth moved on to Chicago and worked under Charles Atwood, who succeeded John W. Root after his death in 1891. Roth helped to prepare drawings for the celebrated Palace of Fine Arts. While at the fair, Roth met Richard Morris Hunt, the recognized dean of American architects, who offered to hire him if he ever came to New York. After the fair, with true to form optimism, Roth headed for Manhattan, where Hunt's casual offer was honored. Assigned to draft interior perspectives for the Breakers, the Newport mansion of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Roth came in contact with Ogden Codman, a noted architect, interior designer and socialite. In 1895 Roth went to work for Codman, where his decorative and planning abilities were sharpened.

By 1898 Roth believed himself ready for private practice. Theodore G. Stein and E. Yancy Cohen, after involved negotiations, sold Roth their architectural practice for \$ 1000. As part of the agreement Roth was

entitled to represent himself as a partner in Stein, Cohen & Roth for one year, in order to capitalize on the good will of the existing firm. In fact, Roth was on his own.

While the Belleclaire was under construction Roth was approached by Leo and Alexander Bing, Manhattan real estate developers. The Bing brothers admired the Belleclaire and commissioned Roth to design a group of five-story apartment buildings in Washington Heights. This alliance inaugurated a lifetime association.

In the years following the Belleclaire, Roth had several commissions, among them Bancroft Hall of 1910, a student housing facility for Columbia University, and a series of religious structures, including the Congregation Ahavith Achem of 1908 in Brooklyn and the First Reformed Hungarian Church of 1916 on East 69th Street in Manhattan.

The year 1918 was a traumatic one for Roth. He lost his vision in one eye, the result of glaucoma, and nearly died in the great influenza epidemic of that year. But the prosperity of the 1920s was to carry him through to a period of great professional achievement and personal contentment. His numerous apartment building commissions, such as the Ritz Tower on Park Avenue at 57th Street of 1925, followed by the Oliver Cromwell (1928), the San Remo (1929-30), the Beresford (1928-39), the Eldorado (1929-31) and the St. Moritz Hotel, all on the West Side, reveal Roth's ability to fuse functional requirements with the aesthetic aspirations of his clients. Roth had learned from Codman the planning requirements of the affluent--rooms of "good proportions, vistas and logical communication." 12 The dramatic towers of Roth's Central Park West buildings are predicated upon interior considerations, offering abundant air, light and views. In his own way Roth was adhering to the modern philosophy "form follows function". Roth's apartments of the Depression era demonstrate that to some extent form may also be dictated by economics. Beginning with such buildings as the Southgate Apartments on East 52nd Street of 1929-31, Roth designed more modestly. Aided by his sons, he was to continue his practice until his death in 1948.

The Belleclaire

From the New York Tribune, January 13, 1903:

Milton Roblee, the proprietor of the new Hotel Belleclaire, gave a formal opening at his hotel last evening, which was attended by a large number of specially invited guests. The hotel was handsomely decorated. The Hotel Belleclaire is the latest addition to the constantly swelling list of West Side apartment hotels. It is a structure of ten stories, luxuriously furnished with striking and original decorative effects in several of the public rooms....Although primarily designed as a place of permanent residence, the Belleclaire will also accommodate transient guests. The apartments are arranged in suites of from one to five rooms, each with private bath,.... 13

And from the Architects' and Builders' Magazine, January, 1903:

The [Belleclaire's] ground floor is devoted entirely to the hotel business, and has large and commodious offices, and a beautiful promenade hall extending the entire length, off from which you may enter the Louis XV ladies' dining room, the Italian Renaissance palm room, the Flemish cafe, the Mission library and the Moorish private dining room. Other space is devoted to flowers, cigars, news, telephone and telegraph offices, etc. two passenger elevators, freight elevator for baggage and servants, mail chutes, and in fact every modern up-to-date convenience. 14

The Belleclaire's early years were characterized by the prosperity, which these accounts augured. Under Roblee's management, modifications were soon made to the hotel, according to Roth's designs. The original bowling alley in the basement gave way to storage space, the kitchens were reorganized and a metal and glass entry was provided in the 77th Street courtyard. 15

The Belleclaire's daily routine was rather dramatically interrupted in the Spring of 1906. Maxim Gorky, the celebrated Russian author and champion of Socialist Realism, had arrived in New York on a fund-raising campaign. 16 An American socialist millionaire, Gaylord Wilshire, arranged for Gorky and his mistress, Mme. Andreyeva, to stay at the hotel. Gorky was initially lionized by New York--Mark Twain arranged a literary dinner, William Randolph Hearst took him on a tour of the city and contracted a series of newspaper articles--and impromptu receptions were the order of the day in his suite. But all too soon Gorky became enmeshed in American political intrigues and the New York press seized the moment to decry his illicit alliance with Mme. Andreyeva. Martin Roblee felt compelled to evict them: "This is not Europe; I am running a family hotel and I can't have these people in my house any longer." Roblee was not alone--the Hotel Brevoort turned them away, the Rhinelander accepted them, but when the manager learned their identity, had their luggage summarily dumped in the street.

In the 1920s, under the new management of Walter Guzzardi, alterations were again undertaken. His modernizing efforts began with the cafe and bar, in keeping with Prohibition laws, and the New York Times lamented, "Another noted relic of the pre-Volstead era will soon pass out of existence" as new office space spelled "the doom of the bar, the rail and all the other embellishments." 17 At the same time the main dining room was converted to stores (architect Louis Abramson), and among the first tenants were the millinery shop of Rosalind Lee, Isaacs & Marquis gown and dress shop, the Cash Nut Shop and Sheffield Farms Inc. Guzzardi also planned a roof garden for dining and dancing and a ten-story extension adjacent to the 77th Street elevation, but these additions were never realized.

During the Depression years the Belleclaire apparently lost many of its permanent residents, and by the time of the 1939 World's Fair, it was advertised in a brochure as a transient hotel suitable to fair visitors. 18 The nightly rate for a double room began at \$ 2.50.

Although New York City's Multiple Dwelling Law of 1929 allowed kitchens to be added to apartment hotel rooms, it was not until early 1943 that "kitchenettes" were installed in the Belleclaire. At the same time many of the larger suites were subdivided and many hotel services suspended. Luxury apartment hotels like the Belleclaire, casualties of the Depression, were forced to accede to a new regime.

Description

The Hotel Belleclaire is a ten-story building executed in red brick with limestone, terra cotta and metal detailing. Composed of three symmetrically massed pavilions with an entrance court on 77th Street and two light courts on the south elevation, the easternmost pavilion has been adjusted to conform with the angle of Broadway. From the street the building appears to be U-shaped. (See Figures 1-6)

The Broadway tower and side street elevations are horizontally divided in the traditional manner with a base, central section and crowning element. The two-story base is of smooth rusticated limestone, and now includes shopfronts at the first story replacing or obscuring the original fenestration. This consisted of elliptically depressed arched windows with curvilinear muntins and mullions which were of an Art Nouveau character as was the metal railing which surrounded the building. The main entrances to the lobby and restaurant on Broadway (the upper portions still visible above the shopfronts) are two stories in height, with depressed arches, originally flanked by engaged columns, and surmounted by carved copstones. The soffits of these entrances contain a carved leaf pattern, possibly laurel, which calls to mind the dome of the famous Vienna Secession building of 1897 by J.-M. Olbrich. This same leaf pattern appears in the bandcourse above the fourth story windows in alternation with roundels in rectilinear panels. The second story windows are square headed and contain the highly individual twelve-over-three wooden sash which Roth used at the upper stories and which calls to mind Secessionist motifs, and even the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Scottish architect whose work is related to the Secessionist and Art Nouveau movements. A balustrade once surmounted the entrances and still encircles the corner tower. In the central brick portion of the building from the third to the seventh stories, the windows have the sash described above and are square-headed at the third and fourth stories, segmentally-arched above. Stone bandcourses and spandrel panels articulate the fourth story. The eighth story has square-headed windows interspersed by paired brackets which support a decorative metal balustrade. The ninth floor is of brick with square-headed windows and the tenth contains a shallow mansard roof with square-headed dormers. At the tenth story the semicircular tower is ornamented with pendants and originally was topped by a domed cupola.

This clear horizontal organization is dramatically counterbalanced by the verticals of the tower, and monumental pilasters on the main and side elevations. On Broadway the four central bays of the facade are flanked by paired pilasters enframing single broader bays containing tri-partite metal oriel windows rising uninterruptedly from the third to the sixth stories and also appearing in the eighth through tenth stories. At the seventh story the pilasters enframe elliptically-arched windows with curvilinear mullions. The stone pilasters are ornamented with pendants and stylized Indian heads, which despite their American subject, are Secessionist

inspired in style. The pilasters on Broadway are linked at the top by stone round arches projecting above the roofline, originally surmounted by large copestones.

On the 77th Street elevation the two bays to the east of the courtyard are enframed by pilasters, while to the west the pilasters enframe three bays with a wider central bay which includes metal oriels and a seventh story elliptically-arched window like those on Broadway. A round stone arch surmounts the tenth story central bay. A handsome curvilinear metal railing tops this facade.

The courtyard now serves as the main entrance and has a modern one-story entrance addition. The courtyard has chamfered corners, forming an open sided octagonal space and is three bays wide in the southern elevation. It is articulated similarly to the facades facing the streets.

The southern elevation of the building contains a small curved bay at the Broadway corner from the third to the sixth stories, and also contains the two light courts. It is now a party wall with the adjacent apartment building.

The western elevation is visible above the adjacent townhouses, and is of brick with windows similar to those on the main elevations.

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Notes

1. New York Times, 1886, cited in Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown: An Illustrated History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1976), p.317.
2. This section excerpted and modified from; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Riverside Drive-West 80th-81st Street Historic District Designation Report (LP-1429) (New York: City of New York, 1985).
3. Wharton's novel also reflects the shift from single family residences to apartment living on the West Side. At the insistence of his social climbing daughter Undine, Mr. Spragg, originally of Apex City, "had been induced to give up the house they had bought in West End Avenue to move with his family to the Stentorian. Undine had early decided that they could not hope to get on while they 'kept house'--all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in hotels. Mrs. Spragg was easily induced to take the same view, but Mr. Spragg had resisted, being unable either to sell his house or to let it as advantageously as he had hoped." (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1913), p.15.
4. Steven Ruttenbaum, Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emery Roth (New York: Balsam Press, Inc. 1986), p. 42.
5. These three apartment buildings are all designated New York City Landmarks.
6. Emery Roth, "Autobiographical Notes," 1940-1947, photocopy of t.s., Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, p. 242.
7. "Notes", p. 239.
8. For Wagner, see Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects (New York: The Free Press, 1982), vol. 4, p.537 ff. and also Kenneth Frampton, Modern Architecture: A Critical History (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), chpt. 6.
9. See Mansions, chpt. 2.
10. Roth himself designed a small hotel at 300 West 38th Street in 1902-03 which Ruttenbaum terms "Viennese Secessionist style", Mansions, p. 46.
11. This biography is based on Steven Ruttenbaum's recent monograph, cited above. All buildings mentioned are therein discussed and illustrated.
12. "Notes", p.35.
13. "Hotel Belleclaire Opened" New York Tribune, Jan. 13, 1903, p. 2. [Included in the "Belleclaire Hotel" file, New-York Historical Society, New York.]

14. "The Hotel Belleclaire," Architects and Builders Magazine 14 (Jan. 1903), 164.
15. See Emery Roth, Hotel Belleclaire, Nineteen drawings in the Drawings and Archives Collection, Avery Library.
16. L. Jay Oliva, "Maxim Gorky Discovers America", New York Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 51 (Jan. 1967), 45-60.
17. "Bar Leased for Broker's Office," New York Times, June 9, 1925; included in the "Belleclaire Hotel" file, New-York Historical Society.
18. Included in the "Belleclaire Hotel" file, New-York Historical Society.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Hotel Belleclaire has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Hotel Belleclaire was constructed at the turn of the century as a luxury apartment hotel, that it was the first major commission of Emery Roth who was later to specialize in apartment buildings and to design many of New York's most notable towered apartment buildings, that it is stylistically influenced by the European Art Nouveau and Secessionist styles, that it is a fascinating stylistic anomaly in New York, that it was intended as an apartment hotel primarily for permanent tenants, that among its notable transient guests was Maxim Gorky, Russian author and champion of Socialist Realism, and that Emery Roth produced an individual, exuberant and interesting design, which is one of his earliest works.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Hotel Belleclaire, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1168, Lot 56, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Fig. 3

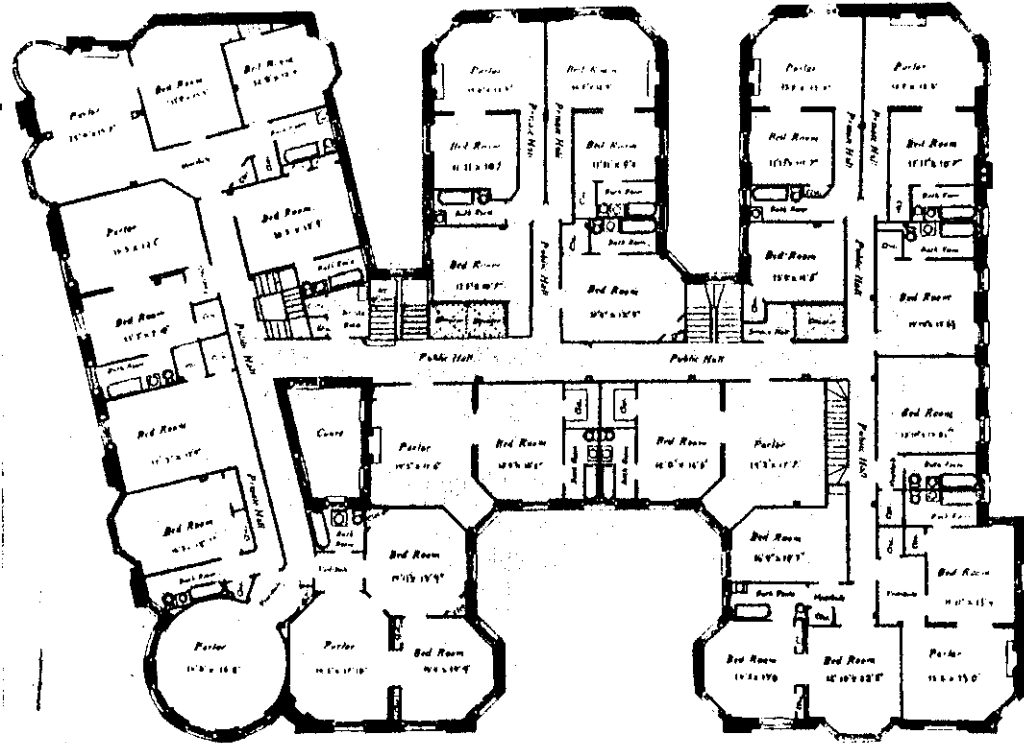


Photo credit: Ruttenbaum,
Mansions, p. 45.

FLOOR PLAN, HOTEL BELLECLAIRE

