

TURF

To Be New and True to Harlem

By TRACIE ROZHON

THOSE unfamiliar with Harlem and its architecture may think of its streets as a maze of magnificent brownstones, interspersed with boarded-up storefronts, tenements and down-home restaurants.

This stereotype of Harlem is both true and untrue. Harlem certainly has its share of vacant buildings and empty lots. And over the last decade, elaborate — and often costly — restorations of town houses have been undertaken along Convent Avenue, in Hamilton Heights and along Mount Morris Park — enclaves of fine brick and limestone, and terra-cotta trim.

But a growing number of modernist architects are working in Harlem these days, struggling to carry out bold projects. These architects, many of them black, most in their 40's, say they must wage constant battles with developers and city officials, who tell them their work is too contemporary and too daringly out of context. Occasionally, the architects prevail — and a bank branch, a restaurant or a loft moves forward, designed and built in a no-holds-barred modernist style.

They argue that modernism has deep roots in Harlem, especially in the fields of music, dance and poetry. They say that the only reason more modernist buildings were not built in the 1920's and 1930's — when Langston Hughes was writing and

Bold proposals often run up against a row house aesthetic.

Duke Ellington was composing — is that there were almost no black architects. They point out that many of the treasured brownstones were built for 19th-century European immigrants, not African-Americans. They are frustrated by the suggestion that there is no place for forward-looking buildings in Harlem.

"There's room for every approach, every style," said Victor Body-Lawson, 46, a Manhattan architect who teaches at the Yale School of Architecture. "A lot of Harlem was built at the turn of the century and that's set in stone," he said, "but there are also a lot of missing teeth: burnt-out buildings and empty lots. 'They could be filled with apartments and houses and other kinds of uses that can represent the time in which they are being built.'"

It is difficult to get new designs built anywhere in New

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Can New Be True to Harlem?

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York City. But in Harlem, the architects say, it is even harder: any break from the neighborhood's building styles provokes a strenuous debate among community boards, clients and other architects over whether modernism is true to Harlem's past, present and future.

"You wind up fighting," said Tony Crusor, 44, a Harlem architect. Mr. Crusor was chosen by a developer to redesign a group of abandoned row houses owned by the city. Last fall, the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave him an award for his design for renovating the buildings. But his plans remain unrealized.

"I keep hearing my work is too 'down-town,'" Mr. Crusor said. (Meanwhile, Ilan Weisbrod, who designed Jimmy's Uptown restaurant, said he chose a modernist style for Harlem exactly because it had "down-town cool.")

Roberta Washington, 52, an architect best known for town house renovations, will break ground next month on her biggest project yet: a 128-condominium project on Fifth Avenue and 116th Street. Nevertheless, she argued, "It's an uphill battle trying to convince people here that they can't save every tenement building."

"A while back, we had a tough time convincing people who only wanted 'new' to value 100-year-old buildings," she said. Now the pendulum has swung: "What we really need now is balance."

That balancing act — between old and new, between reminiscences of an African

The here and now is represented by Afrocentric modernism.

past and faith in an American future — may be seen in some of the buildings that have been built in Harlem in the last two years. The facade of the Heritage Health and Housing building, designed two years ago by Sara Caples and Everardo Jefferson of Caples Jefferson Architects, combines modernism and Caribbean influences. The one-story building, at 201 West 127th Street, is known as "the patchwork building" because of its painted metal patches. The interior, by contrast, is cleanly modernist with crisp white walls and corrugated plastic panels.

Ana Pereira, the corporation's executive director, said the architects' first plans arrived with "muted colors, dark green and dark reds." Ms. Pereira rejected the design outright, saying: "Get out of here! This is Harlem! This is a place for people with special needs. We want it to look bright."

Jack Travis, another Harlem modernist, who teaches at the Pratt Institute and the Fashion Institute of Technology, consulted on the design for the Carver Bank at 117th Street and Lenox Avenue. A believer in both modernism and African imagery, Mr. Travis used "adinkra" symbols on metal cut-outs on the ATM's.

In one of three apartments he remodeled in a prewar brick building on St. Nicholas Avenue, Mr. Travis ripped out what the owner only half-jokingly called the "Eurocentric" flat wall between the front rooms. In its place, he erected a curving wall perfo-



BEYOND BROWNSTONE

The new uptown modernism includes Heritage Health and Housing, left, with painted metal panels, designed by Sara Caples and Everardo Jefferson. Above, Jimmy's Uptown restaurant.

Photographs by Albert Vecerka for The New York Times



Photographs by Albert Vecerka for The New York Times; bottom far left, Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

BUILDING AND CONSENSUS Clockwise from top left: The Studio Museum has a cantilevered marquee, glass corridor and pyramidal turret; a light well inside the Heritage Health and Housing center; a "community hut" in Dundee Holt's

rated by geometric cutouts to admit light to two round dining tables within.

The apartment's owner, Dundee Holt, said he had given Mr. Travis carte blanche, and then left on vacation. "When I came home and saw the framing," he said, "I called Jack up and told him his carpenters had made a mistake. It was all crooked!"

Mr. Holt now loves his curved wall — and its Afrocentric modernism. "It's like a community hut, a place where we gather to break bread," he said. "As an African-American, I wanted something not cold; I wanted shapes. When I lived on West 73rd Street, I had the modern box; that was well and good. Now I have a place to come home to."

WHEN it comes to architecture, everybody is a critic — especially in Harlem. The new facade of the Studio Museum on 125th Street, by Rogers Marvel Architects, is conspicuously modern. The ground floor is enclosed in green glass panels, with a glass connecting struc-

ture and a pavilion of glass behind it.

"We don't like it — it's too Eurocentric — and that's a real problem," said Benjamin Armstead, who sells books on the street and who volunteered his opinion when asked for directions to the museum. "It's all straight lines. It's hard. Architecture in Harlem is something that is put on black people. It's not harmonic. Everything is rectangles and squares: it doesn't feel right to the people."

The street vendor is not the first to accuse architects of imposing a hard-edge European design where it doesn't belong. In 1981, J. Max Bond Jr. completed the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at 515 Malcolm X Boulevard. With its horizontal lines and plain columns, the brick and concrete building has been criticized within Harlem as Caucasian-modern.

More than 20 years later, Mr. Bond bristles at the suggestion that the Schomburg's design is not sufficiently Afrocentric. "If they — the critics — knew their history better, they would see that the Schomburg has an octagonal reading room," he said, as

if polishing the same speech he has given many times. "The first buildings built by African-Americans were two meeting houses in the South that are octagonal." He made the library tables out of sapele, a hardwood harvested in West Africa.

The subject may come up again: Mr. Bond is part of the team designing the renovation of the Apollo Theater, one of Harlem's most beloved landmarks.

To Mr. Body-Lawson, 46, who works from a studio on Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 125th Street, modernism and Afrocentrism are compatible. "I see them all as one, because they are related," he said. "I think modernism clearly has its roots in African art and African spirituality."

So far, Mr. Body-Lawson's firm has renovated 32 brownstones in Harlem, most of them in conjunction with developers working for the city. For one client, an artist, Mr. Body-Lawson converted a 1906 firehouse with a two-story rear addition. He made a courtyard by cutting a hole between the addition and the main building.

To Mr. Body-Lawson, his alteration is both modernist and African in spirit, creating a sort of village. And in the process, the architect gave the owner an income-producing property, adding two rental apartments.

The owner, a sculptor named Nari Ward, does not attempt to define the style of the renovation. He just likes it. He sees no conflict between historic preservation of his firehouse and Mr. Body-Lawson's design.

"There wasn't any old detail to preserve," he said. "There had been so many changes that by the time we saw it, the only thing historic that was left were the tiles on the back walls."

So the tiles are still on the walls. And there is one more thing.

The remains of the old stair riser, still bearing its original blood-red paint, are nailed to a clean white Sheetrock wall above the new steel and wire staircase.

"That's my own aesthetic," Mr. Ward said, almost apologetically. "I just couldn't throw it out."

apartment; the door to Jimmy's Uptown; at Settepani, Harlem modernists (from left) Everardo Jefferson, Sara Caples, Tony Crusor, Roberta Washington, Eva Klein (the room's designer) and Victor Body-Lawson.