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Cross & Cross: transforming New York

by Peter Pennoyer

How two brothers reshaped the architectural landscape of New York

The General Electric (originally RCA Victor) building at 570 Lexington Avenue by Cross & Cross; image: Jonathan Wallen; cover image via NewYorkitecture

When Le Corbusier visited New York in 1935, he was already known as a fervent advocate of high-rise construction, so the *New York Herald Tribune* found his disdain for the city's recent crop of tall buildings both surprising and amusing: "Your skyscrapers are too small," he huffed. Of course what he found lacking in the streetscape was the "tower in the park"—his vision for a new urbanism based on point towers, arranged with Cartesian rigidity, of a density sufficient to allow open public space, highways, and landing strips at their bases. While Corbu and his allies were reacting with furiously destructive impulses to free their visions of the future from the very real and beloved context of old Europe, Americans—and New Yorkers in particular—were bent on creating their own modern cities on a basis that was completely antithetical to the tenets of the budding modernist movement: The new architecture of New York was fueled in equal parts by robust capitalism and by assertive mastery of the lessons of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The modernists were at the very least uncomfortable with capitalism and completely rejected the historical basis of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts pedagogic model. But the American students at the Ecole were able to export their training to great ends back home.

The Beaux-Arts-trained architect John Cross (1878–1951) and his brother Eliot (1883–1949) formed an architectural practice, Cross & Cross, which produced a significant share of the buildings that gave New York City its essential image that persists to this day. Moreover, their industry and wiles put them in a position to realize commissions without always depending on a client. Indeed, Eliot's role in founding the real estate firm Webb & Knapp make the team one of a few examples of successful architect-developers. Their story is part of the history of an intensely productive time when American architects embraced new versions of traditional styles, creating buildings and cities that left an important legacy.

The brothers formed Cross & Cross in the inauspicious year of 1907, when a cascading wave of bank and trust company defaults led to the Knickerbocker crisis, the fifth significant financial crisis in twenty years. The country quickly emerged from the shadow of this threat, however, and the young firm was soon exploiting its connections—John (Groton-Yale-Skull and Bones) and Eliot (Groton-Harvard-Porcellian)—to win commissions just as New York was starting a huge real estate boom.

Following the completion of Grand Central Terminal in 1913, a huge swath at the center of Manhattan was transformed from industrial wasteland into highly desirable property by the construction of a great platform over the open tracks and train yards. As business agents, the Crosses assisted the Vanderbilts in handling some of the ground leases in what was known as Terminal City. As architects, they vaulted from the generally small commissions of the firm's early years to a large-scale project for a twelve-story apartment house at 405 Park Avenue in 1911. As one of the first luxury apartment houses in New York—McKim, Mead & White's 998 Fifth Avenue was completed the same year—405 displayed the elements that became the basic language of classically inspired apartment-house architecture on the main avenues of Manhattan's Upper East Side: The façades were tripartite with a four-story limestone base capped by a balustrade, a middle section in Harvard brick, and a top-story cornice. The architects also divided the broad façades horizontally into

three bays with the windows flanking each side expressed as balconies with elaborate broken pediments on the base and middle. Bas-relief panels, volutes, and huge urns capping the balustrade at the skyline further enlivened this composition.

Cross & Cross planned the apartments in 405 Park Avenue to exploit the potential offered by the broad lot with the public rooms aligned on formal axes, creating an enfilade along Park Avenue. The architects also deftly separated the service areas from the family quarters and public spaces. The ingenuity required to devise such an elegant solution to this novel programmatic challenge was substantial and gave Cross & Cross an opportunity to prove themselves to both the backers of the project and the residents, many of whom would prove to be important supporters and partners in the firm's future success. Since the surrounding blocks were all occupied by low row houses, the scale of the building must have been shocking. Even though Royal Cortissoz, the critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, found it a "huge affair," the building was well received. But what wasn't clear, at this early stage of the development of Park Avenue, was that this building would become part of a grand streetscape of apartment houses designed in a similar spirit, unified in height by the zoning code and in style by a shared aesthetic.

The brothers would go on to design more than twenty large apartment houses in New York's east side, among them a number of well-conceived smaller buildings in less prominent locations. They consistently took advantage of the evolving patterns of development spurred by the growing population and wealth of New York as well as new infrastructure such as the IRT subway that made Lexington Avenue a frontier for upscale apartment living.

While many of the sites were squarely in the path of development, the Crosses also allied their skills in architecture and finance with their ability to envision the future for neglected sections of New York. Notably, the brothers rebranded a rundown area on a bluff overlooking Long Island as Sutton Place. For the townhouse segment of this development, Webb & Knapp purchased the land and sold lots subject to conditions that included the requirement that all plans be subject to approval by

Cross & Cross. The entire package attracted Anne Morgan and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, among other prominent New Yorkers, assuring the appeal of the new precinct.

For the block-long apartment house One Sutton Place South (1925), the Phipps Estates acted as developer, hiring Cross & Cross to collaborate with the Sicilian-born apartment architect Rosario Candela. Though it is likely that Candela was in charge of the floor plans, Cross & Cross brought their skills to the design of the exterior. Centering the façade on three colossal arches leading to an imposing portecochère, the firm employed its typical palette of Georgian references to tame the vast building, endowing it with a scale that would make it an appropriate neighbor for the row of townhouses to the north. Here they created a building that is still considered one of the most opulent cooperative apartment houses in New York, with large simplex and duplex plans topped by the largest penthouse ever built in the city. In addition to One Sutton Place South, Cross & Cross—and in some cases Webb & Knapp—had a hand in such storied buildings as 25 Sutton Place, 4 East 66th Street, 720 Park Avenue, and 834 and 960 Fifth Avenues. Even their less prominent projects, especially near Lexington Avenue, are critical parts of the architectural fabric of the Upper East Side historic districts.

While handling an impressive number of apartment house projects, the brothers were also in charge of many significant commercial commissions. In 1926, the Barclay Hotel, at 111 East 48th Street, was built on “air rights”—part of the real estate atop the New York Central tracks—and Eliot served as the chairman of the Barclay Park Corporation which held the lease. Featuring both residential apartments (Harold S. Vanderbilt took a seventeen-room apartment at the top) and guest rooms, the Barclay embraced the highly popular Colonial Revival style in its interior architecture and furnishings. R. T. Haines Halsey, who as chair of the Metropolitan Museum’s committee on American Art had played a large role in the opening of the museum’s American Wing in 1924, oversaw the décor, and W. & J. Sloane reproduced important examples of American furniture for the public spaces and guest rooms.

The firm was sought after, especially during the 1920s, for the design of office buildings. Their practice encompassed almost every type of commercial development, from a speculative loft building named after its main tenant, the French silk merchant Passavant (1912), to the largely utilitarian refrigerated fur storage building for Revillon Frères (1922), to the celebrated Deco tower at Lexington Avenue for the RCA Victor Company (1929). Regardless of the scale or the importance of the client corporation, the architects imbued each building with architectural references and artistic and sculptural elements that celebrated their client's business and asserted an optimistic view for its future. For Passavant, Cross & Cross created a colossal colonnade encompassing the three stories of the building's base, employing their interpretation of the Corinthian order from the Coliseum in Rome; for Revillon Frères, they treated the building's windowless façades as a version of the Doge's Palace with a diaper pattern of projecting brick headers—a treasury of sorts, in this case for furs; for Chickering & Sons, the piano manufacturer, the firm emblazoned each face of the tower of the headquarters on 57th Street with a gigantic colored bas-relief of the medal of the Légion d'Honneur which was awarded to the company by Napoleon III at the Paris Exposition of 1867. *The New York Times* described even the smaller of the firm's corporate clients as “kindred concerns of stability and character [which] appreciate a certain architectural beauty as possessing a distinct business value.”

Cross & Cross's major clients, the City Bank Farmers Trust Company and Radio Corporation of America, commissioned skyscrapers that defined the glamour and energy of the burgeoning wave of capitalism as it opened up new alliances and technologies that transformed twentieth-century America. One of the most iconic towers of the financial district, the City Bank Farmers Trust (1929), occupies an entire irregular block bounded by Exchange Place and William, Beaver, and Hanover Streets. The architects skillfully modeled the geometry of the building's massing so that it rises majestically through a series of setbacks from an irregular polygonal base to a soaring tower. Delightful ornament ingeniously modeled to give the building a human scale at the base included stylized sailboats, hot air balloons,

steam locomotives, owls, and sheaves of wheat, while at a setback near the top of the building loom impressive if puzzling mammoth-sized, Assyrian-style heads representing the giants of finance. The firm's most celebrated design is the RCA Victor (now GE) building at 570 Lexington Avenue, a soaring Art Deco masterpiece that is a complete synthesis of architecture and sculpture. With its quasi-Gothic crown, bas-relief bolts of electricity and radio waves, and abstracted busts of some of the deities of radio, this building is a highly legible monument to the promise that the then-mysterious new medium held in the 1920s.

Many of the firm's designs survive today as evidence of two important strands of the brothers' careers. While primarily remembered for their landmark skyscrapers, the brothers' greatest contribution to New York City may have been buildings that adopted a more modest outward guise, like the apartment houses of the Upper East Side and the commercial loft buildings. Here we see exceptional designs that set the tone and character for neighborhoods that developed around them, creating streetscapes that eclipse the importance of each building. Mostly created between 1910 and 1930, these districts are now valued for their harmonious character—a concept that was anathema to Le Corbusier and his modernist colleagues.

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