

House of Bronze Leaves

Freeman & Pizer, Architects, New York, renovates the lobby of 936 Fifth Avenue.

PHOTOGRAPHY: EDWARD HUEBER

Believe it or not, the elegant lobby of the 32-unit cooperative apartment building at 936 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan was, prior to this renovation by Freeman & Pizer, Architects, a monument to the now questionable tastes of the fabulous fifties. All 600 sq. ft. were dripping in gold-and-beige Chinoiserie, to which nothing much had been done over the years. Explained Belmont Freeman, partner with Max Pizer in their New York-based design firm, "We gutted the lobby completely, including removing the front doors of the building."

The principal material the architects used to re-dress the lobby was English chestnut veneer, a species that the designer reports as having been out of fashion for a while. "The large, six ft. panels of veneer were set in a diamond pattern. We panelled the whole lobby and ceiling so that the space would look like a real jewel box. The woodworker did an incredible job. The entire lobby is from one tree," noted Freeman. Black granite, honed to a matt finish, and an inset carpet replaced the terrazzo.

The ebonized mahogany doors and metal grillwork, noted Freeman, "are in the tradition of the great Fifth Avenue apartment buildings. We were attempting to achieve a modern equivalent." The designers developed the details from a bronze tube with a finial. Stated Freeman, "We worked out a grid and decided to inset a bronze leaf into each square of the grid below the seven ft. mark." Not above playing in the leaves, Freeman found his archetypal beech leaf in the park one day while walking to work. He started playing with the shape, first sketching it and later molding it in clay and then having a plaster mock-up made. Finally, the grill itself was fabricated in Toronto; the leaves were cast in a New Jersey foundry; the grid and the leaves were assembled and finished in Long Island City, and eventually installed in the lobby.

The interior won a design citation from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

JUDITH NASATIR



Above: Freeman & Pizer designed the doors and grillwork, based on a grid and a beech leaf.

Left: The same bronze leaf covers the ventilator holes in the elevator cab.

Right: The leaf theme, though not a matching species, reappears in the carpet pattern. Metal tubing was used to detail the interior. The quarter-round door pull indicates the passage through to the back service area.

Opposite: Six ft. panels of English chestnut veneer were set in a diamond pattern on the walls and ceiling. Carpet was inset into black granite. The architects designed the plant stand and bench.

Light fixtures: Raak Lighting • Carpet: Stark Carpet • Elevator cab: Stuart Dean • Metalwork: Brandt Airflex (Bernard Gerber) • Woodwork: B & S Woodworking • General contractor: Herbert Construction

