

40-Year Watch

Bridge Apartments by
Brown & Guenther
By Fred Bernstein



In 1963, my parents decided that a one-bedroom "garden apartment" in Queens wasn't suitable for a family of four. They were considering buying a house in Nassau County, but first they wanted to check out the Bridge Apartments – four new towers that had recently been built just east of the George Washington Bridge (above the section of Route 95 dubbed the Trans-Manhattan Expressway).

I was seven at the time, and I remember being dazzled by the sleek, aluminum faced buildings, which resembled the Girder & Panel building sets I loved to play with. To my mother, who had grown up in a Bronx tenement, and my father, the child of the Williamsburg "projects," the shiny new buildings by Brown & Guenther were luxury housing. According to a Washington Heights "nostalgia website," when the buildings opened, there was a waiting list to get in.

It's a good thing my parents chose Long Island. The Bridge Apartments weren't luxury housing for long. As Robert A.M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman wrote in *New York 1960*:

"The project's four 32-story aluminum-clad north-south slabs, housing 960 families, were not only banal but were subject to appalling environmental conditions: noxious fumes from the traffic below rose from the highway that separated the pairs of slabs, rendering the balconies useless and the apartments almost uninhabitable."

These days, banal would be a blessing. The façades' aluminum

panels have tarnished, and the painted sections are peeling. Inside, the depressing lobbies are dominated by bulletproof guard booths. Riding one of the elevators, I asked a young man how he felt about his home. "It's ironic that you're asking that," he said. "I was just thinking what a shithole this is." Arriving at the 27th floor, he kicked open the door to a stairwell so I could smell the stench of urine. His family's apartment, which he let me see, felt claustrophobic (thanks to the less than eight-foot ceiling). Lace curtains obscured the view (mostly Route 95 and the adjacent building) – a futile attempt to create a homey feeling under inhospitable conditions. The sound of traffic didn't let up.

In the *AIA Guide to New York City*, Norval White and Elliot Willensky dismiss the Bridge Apartments in six words: "The buildings' curtain walls are fussy." Perhaps, but that's the least offensive thing about them. What the Bridge Apartments prove, once and for all, is that highways and housing don't mix.

Fred Bernstein, an *Oculus* contributing editor, studied architecture at Princeton University, and has written about design for more than 15 years; he also contributes to the *New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Blueprint*.

Bridge Apartments: Brown & Guenther (1963), Washington Heights