

# Noonan Plaza Apartments. The recovery of an Art Deco landmark in the Bronx

## Noonan Plaza Apartments. La recuperación de un hito del Art Decó en el Bronx

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**Abstract:** The rehabilitation of the built heritage and its close relationship with the collective memory acquire a special dimension when it positively affects the availability of social housing. This has been the case of the intervention carried out in the Noonan Plaza Apartments complex, one of the first works developed in the Art Deco style in Highbridge, in the Bronx County, in New York. This work designed by Horace Ginsberg and Marvin Fine and whose construction was completed in 1931 has been restored by Danois Architects, P. C. This firm scrupulously followed the restoration criteria established by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, for which it was recognized in 2022 with the Lucy Moses Award granted by the New York Landmarks Conservancy. This high-density housing complex has a sophisticated architectural plan, an impressive interior garden courtyard and a carefully designed envelope, which make it an example of good design at low cost. The rehabilitation updated the building's infrastructure to improve its energy efficiency, universal accessibility, and livability conditions, while recovering the urban image of an Art Deco architectural landmark in the Bronx. The article describes and analyzes the work, its relevance as an architectural landmark in New York and the restoration process carried out.

**Keywords:** art deco, New York landmarks; heritage preservation; garden apartments; Bronx architecture.

**Resumen:** La rehabilitación del patrimonio construido y su estrecha relación con la memoria colectiva adquieren una dimensión especial cuando afecta positivamente a la disponibilidad de viviendas de interés social. Este ha sido el caso de la intervención realizada en el complejo *Noonan Plaza Apartments*, una de las primeras obras desarrolladas en el estilo Art Deco en Highbridge, en el condado del Bronx, en Nueva York. Esta obra diseñada por Horace Ginsberg y Marvin Fine y cuya construcción concluyó en 1931 ha sido restaurada por *Danois Architects, P. C.* Esta firma siguió escrupulosamente los criterios de restauración establecidos por la *Landmarks Preservation Commission*, por lo que fue reconocida en 2022 con el Lucy Moses Award otorgado por la organización *New York Landmarks Conservancy*. Este complejo habitacional de alta densidad posee una sofisticada planta arquitectónica, un impresionante patio jardín interior y una envolvente detalladamente diseñada, que lo convierten en un ejemplo de buen diseño a bajo costo. La rehabilitación actualizó la infraestructura del inmueble a fin de mejorar su eficiencia energética, accesibilidad universal y las condiciones de habitabilidad, mientras recuperaba la imagen urbana de un hito arquitectónico del Art Deco en el Bronx. En el artículo se describe y analiza la obra, su relevancia como hito arquitectónico neoyorquino y el proceso de restauración llevado a cabo.

**Palabras claves:** art deco; Nueva York; rehabilitación del patrimonio; garden apartments; Bronx, arquitectura.

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## 1. Preface



**Figure 1.** Perspective drawing of the *Noonan Plaza Apartments*, taken from the brochure made by the Nelden Corp to promote the project (1931). Source: (Shockley, 2010)

Adaptation to climate change, efficiency in energy consumption and attention to the problems of habitability of an increasingly large and urbanized world population have become important challenges for the preservation of architectural heritage. This becomes especially complex when the building to be intervened is intended for domestic use and not for institutional and cultural functions in which the conservation of the object is usually associated with the creation of citizen identity and construction of collective memory.

In the Noonan Plaza Apartments project, the firm Danois Architects, P. C., took on the challenge posed by the need to rehabilitate a social housing complex and the restoration of one of the most emblematic buildings in the Bronx in New York.

The constructive density of this building, which houses 283 housing units, generates a significant contribution to the demand for decent social housing, so its entry into the real estate market has a positive impact: providing quality housing, recovering good architectural planning practices and restoring an Art Deco landmark relevant not only for the Bronx County or New York City, but for anyone who is interested in the incorporation of green in architecture and its link with the quality of life in cities.

This article discusses the circumstances in which the Noonan Plaza Apartments are designed and built, its relevance as an architectural landmark, and part of the resort's rehabilitation and restoration experience.

## 2. Methods

This article is based on the analytical review of the technical documents of the architectural project for the rehabilitation of the Noonan Plaza Apartments, provided by the firm Danois Architects, P. C., and the nomination file and entry into the list of the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. In addition, the construction of a theoretical body that would allow the understanding of the sociocultural context in which the initiative of the original work arises, based on bibliographic sources, newspaper articles and graphic references, was sought. The photographs taken before and after the intervention were also provided by the firm responsible for the restoration and rehabilitation works of the property.

The analysis is organized under the following structure:

- Architectural description of the property.

- Architectural relevance of the Noonan Plaza complex in the socio-cultural context of 1930.
- Process of restoration and rehabilitation of the architectural complex

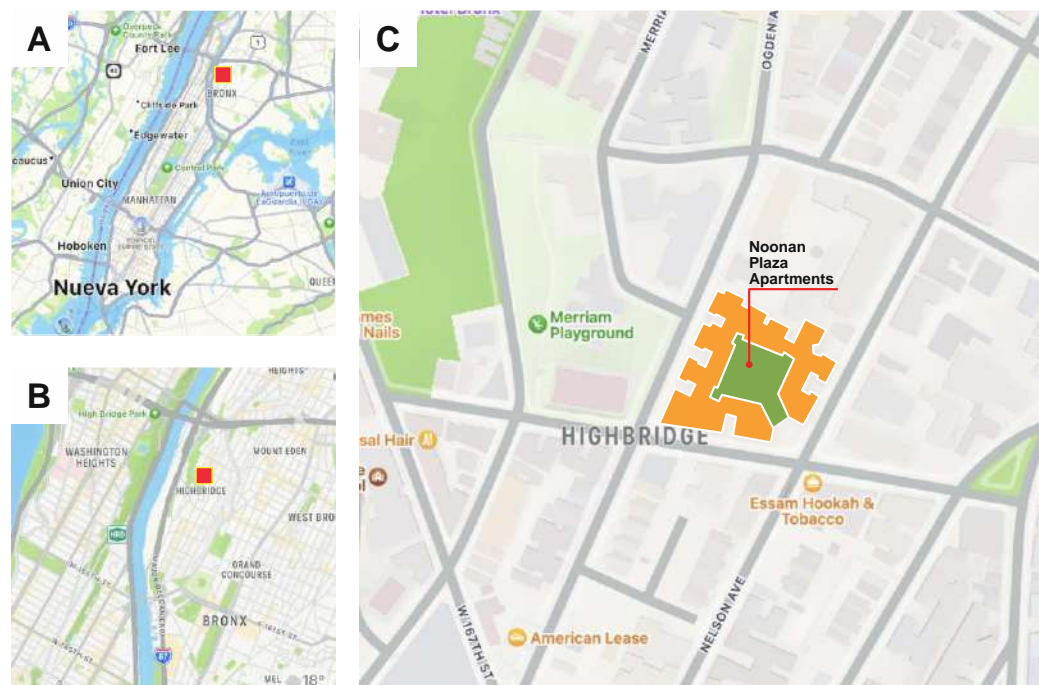
Following this order, it is intended to present the formal and spatial characteristics of the building. Then highlight the qualitative aspects of the work as part of heritage of the city of New York and, finally, the processes carried out for the rehabilitation of the building are presented.

The collaboration of Arch. Denny Bowman has been instrumental in the production of this article, as he has been the liaison with the firm Danois Architects, P. C., providing the required documentation and clarifying, through interviews, the essential technical aspects of the intervention.

### 3. Architectural description of the property

The Noonan Plaza is a housing complex located in the Highbridge sector of the Bronx, New York. It is implanted in lot 1, located in the southern portion of block 2518 defined by Nelson and Odgen Avenues, to the east and west, as well as West 168th Street to the south of the building (see figure 2). Its construction ended in 1931, becoming, together with Park Plaza, one of the first and most relevant Art Deco buildings erected in the Bronx. The work was the product of the efforts of the real estate developer Bernard J. Noonan, to whom it owes its name, and the architects Horace Grinsberg and Marvin Fine being the latter responsible for the design of the facades of the complex.

The building is articulated between six and eight levels of height, taking advantage of the topography of the land. According to the description published in the contained some 283 housing units in which units from one to five bedrooms were offered. A key feature of this project is the 38.00 m (125 ft) by 33.50 m (110 ft) wooded inner courtyard. This element is combined with the light patios that structure the exterior facades to allow all units to have at least two facades exposed to sunlight, thus ensuring well-lit and healthy interior spaces despite the constructive density.



**Figure 2.** Location of Noonan Plaza Apartments in New York City (A) and its location in Bronx County (B) and (C). Source: Own elaboration (2023), base cartography taken from the Apple Inc. Maps application (2023)

The arrangement of access at the corner of Nelson Avenue and 168th Street (see figure 3) is striking, since there is a single-level portico that precedes the entrance to the landscaped inner courtyard and in turn is flanked by two towers at the top of which ornamental lanterns were originally projected. The contrast between the low and welcoming portico and the monumental scale of the blocks that limit it imprints in the memory a singular image that has been recognized as "one of the most remarkable examples of the typology of garden apartments" (Plunz, 1990).



**Figure 3.** Noonan Plaza Apartments complex, seen from the main entrance at the intersection of 168th Street and Nelson Avenue. Source: Provided by Danois Architects, P.C., taken from the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designation dossier (2010).

Regarding the exterior cladding, the Landmarks Preservation Commission states that "the building is clad in gilded iron point bricks, with vertical emphasis consisting of continuous pillars that contrast with brown and black brick panels and accents of geometric patterns in the crown" (Shockley, 2010). These patterns bring a sophisticated and subtly elegant aesthetic to the building. The discreet craftsmanship of the brick rigging in the panels, lintels, portals, and crowns make this building a significant reference of New York Art Deco (see figure 14).

The reading of the articulated blocks by the outer courtyards of light seeks to establish the perception of lightness in a dense building block, to which also contributes the feeling of slenderness achieved by the continuous pilasters and the patterns of bricks placed vertically. (See Figure 4)





**Figure 4.** Noonan Plaza Apartments complex, seen from the intersection of 168th Street and Odgen Avenue. Source: Provided by Danois Architects, P.C., taken from the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designation dossier (2010).

#### **4. Results**

##### *4.1. Architectural relevance of the Noonan Plaza complex in the socio-cultural context of 1930.*

The Noonan Plaza Apartments has been identified as one of Highbridge's most impressive Art Deco housing complexes in the Bronx (Shockley, 2010). This assertion supported by the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the city of New York acquires special relevance if one considers that this neighborhood houses a significant number of buildings corresponding to modernism of European influence.

The Bronx received an important migratory influx at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the demographic increase raised in the island of Manhattan since the late nineteenth century and sharpened after the First World War. The boroughs of Queens and the Bronx turned out to be reasonable alternatives for real estate development that would cater to the emerging middle classes,

formed by professionals and technicians who were presented with the opportunity to enjoy a new urban structure, more linked to open space and the presence of nature in everyday life. Carla Breeze in her work *New York Deco* indicates that "Manhattanians turned to the suburbs in Queens and the Bronx where houses and apartments were available at reasonable prices, and often with landscaped surroundings" (Breeze, 1993).

In the Bronx there were special conditions for the consolidation of a new vision of the city. In the first instance, connectivity with the centrality at Manhattan Island was guaranteed through the expansion of the subway lines. While the mayor's office promoted the protection of open urban spaces of a public nature, making available six main parks around the large housing projects developed around Grand Concourse Avenue (Breeze, 1993) which brought the image of the city closer to the precepts of the "Garden City".

The Noonan Plaza complex is projected in a context in which the spatial structure identified by Richard Plunz as "Garden apartments" is adopted. This typology produced homes of great architectural quality for its environmental contribution associated with the green areas in the interiors of the blocks. In addition, dynamic urban scenarios were generated that incorporate the light court or patios of light. These esplanades structure and articulate the large urban volumes associated with high-density constructions, improving access to ventilation and lighting for all housing units (see figures 4 and 5).

There are indications that support the thesis that at the beginning of the twentieth century two trends or movements coincided in New York that influenced the appearance of the typology of garden apartments: the movement in favor of improved housing and the "Garden City" movement. Richard Plunz states that this "trend became more elaborate with the passage of time" (Plunz, 1990). The Noonan Plaza Apartments masterfully synthesizes the principles that drove this new way of living (see Figure 5).

The equipment and finishes of Noonan Plaza demonstrate the aspirations of the social context in which he built. The building featured "a ballroom, a community room, as well as a walk on the rooftop terrace (protected by a parapet) and a playground with sandboxes, swings and games." The architect Frederick Ginsberg, son of the author of the work Horace Ginsberg, recalls that in the central courtyard there was a pond "and behind the pond there was a waterfall (...) and the water ran under the Japanese bridge to the pond" (*The New York Times*, 1982) in which the swans swam pleasantly (see figure 6).

The Noonan Plaza Apartments maintains the scheme of the exterior light patios as semi-public spaces that articulate the rhythm of the housing blocks generating spaces of permanence on the first level and portals of natural lighting on the upper floors. This expression dialogues with many of the "Garden Apartments" of the Bronx; However, the quality, proportions and qualities of the indoor garden are unique in this context.



**Figure 5.** Architectural plan of the first level of the Noonan Plaza Apartments, taken from the brochure made by the Nelden Corp to promote the project (1931). In the center the courtyard is identified as a "Garden Court" that also includes a pool or pond. Source: (Shockley, 2010)



**Figure 6.** Image of the "Garden Court" of the Noonan Plaza Apartments complex in which you can see the central pond, with the Japanese bridge, the lighthouse, and the waterfall in the background. Source: (Lennard, 2010)

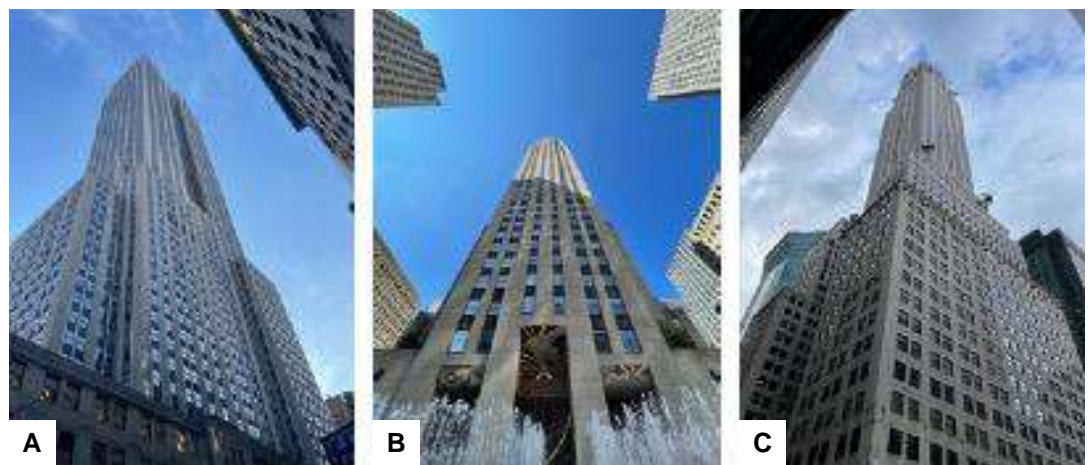


#### 4.2. Noonan Plaza in the socio-cultural context of 1930.

The envelope is undoubtedly one of the most powerful elements of the building. The Art Deco or Modernistic Style used in the facades establishes links with the American avant-garde that adopted it as the expression of progress after World War I. His distancing from the historicist ornamental repertoire, consecrated in the United States through government architecture and his emphasis on verticality, made Art Deco the language of skyscrapers.

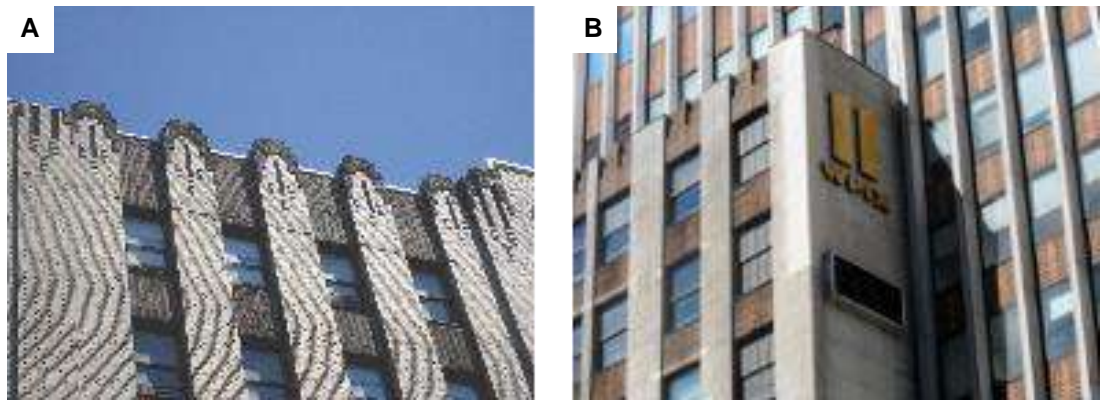
Art Deco is welcomed in New York as the new expression of life in the city. It was used in "downtown housing, hotels, banks, department stores and buildings dedicated to modern media: newspapers, publishing firms, telecommunications" (Frampton, 2000) among others. Buildings such as the Chrysler Building (William Van Allen, 1930), the Empire State Building (Shreve, Lamb & Hardon, 1931) and Rockefeller Center (Raymond Hood, 1933) evidence the semiotic strategy aimed at supporting the "New Deal" agreed by American society as symbols of hope, power, and well-being after facing the "Great Depression" of 1929 (See figure 7). However, this vocabulary had not found a significant echo in the housing units of the suburbs, in which the classical and Victorian tradition was still rooted.

The Noonan Plaza Apartments is designed and built in the Bronx, in the midst of this Manhattan real estate euphoria, in 1931, around the same time as the world's tallest skyscrapers at the time the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. However, although these works dialogue through Art Deco, the most obvious influence on Noonan Plaza could come from the building that houses the headquarters of the Daily News (Raymond Hood, 1930), also in Manhattan. Some experts indicate that the design decisions made by Marvin Fine for the design of the façade of the Noonan Plaza Apartments can be linked to his previous experience working in the workshops of Raymond Hood and William van Alen (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981). The formal references associated with verticality, the use of gilded bricks with iron oxide and the panels decorated with brown and black bricks arranged in rigging that define geometric motifs, establish a close link between the headquarters of the newspaper and the housing complex (see figure 8). The level of detail executed in the staggering of the surfaces of the pillars, as well as in lintels, porticos and crowning of the walls contributed, during the years after the completion of the work of the Noonan Plaza Apartments, to this complex being "acclaimed as one of the most important Art Deco buildings in the world" (The New York Times, 1978).



**Figure 7.** (A) Empire State Building (1931) as seen from East 34th Street level. (B) RCA Building at Rockefeller Center (1933) and (C) Chrysler Building (1930). Photographs by the author (2022).





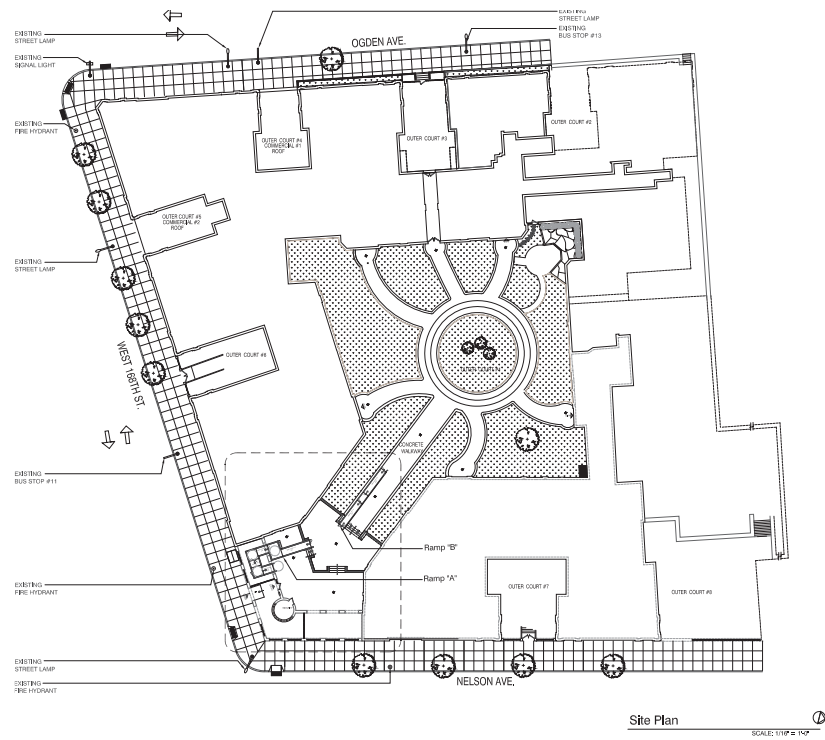
**Figure 8.** (A) Detail of the crowning of the Noonan Plaza Apartments (1931). Photo supplied by Danois Architects, P. C. (2020). (B) Daily News Building (1930) photograph by Jared Kofsky (2013). Note in both cases the accent on the verticality produced by the pilasters that frame the window openings and the layout of the brown and black brick panels between the windows.

### *3.2. The architectural restoration and rehabilitation of Noonan Plaza Apartments*

The recovery process of the Noonan Plaza Apartments took approximately five years, from the beginning of the project approval processes in 2016 until the completion of the works in 2021. This long process was accompanied by the LPC and specialists to save the dialectical process of preserving heritage elements while updating the conditions of safety, accessibility, and habitability, all in a balanced and harmonious way. The result has been very satisfactory.

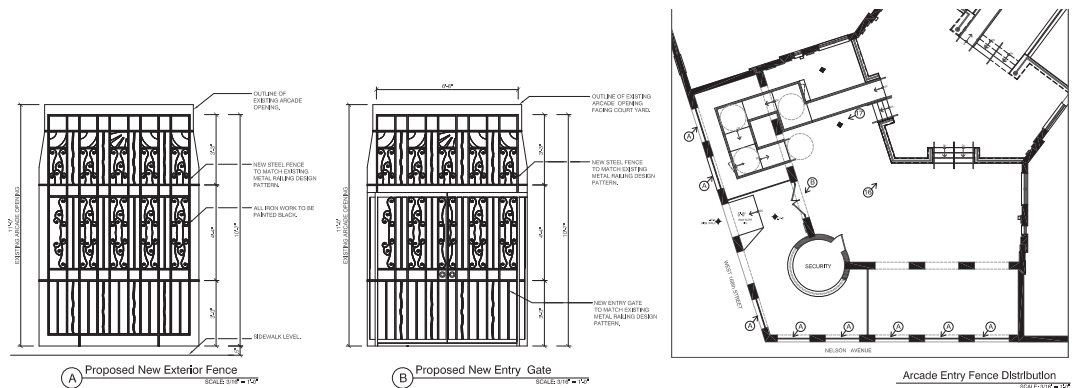
In the first instance, the proposal for the restoration of the access portico, located at the intersection of 168th Street and Nelson Avenue (see figure 9), is presented. After carrying out the required surveys, it was established the need to replace missing bricks, restore the wrought iron bars and renew the ramp that allows universal accessibility to the whole.

Physicochemical studies of both the bricks and the binder mortar were carried out before the replacement and replacement of the damaged parts. The LPC established as a requirement that the binder mortar be equal to the original in terms of color, adhesion, and aggregate composition. This would ensure the compatibility and functional and aesthetic integration of the elements.



**Figure 9.** Location of the access portico to the Noonan Plaza Apartments housing complex. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)

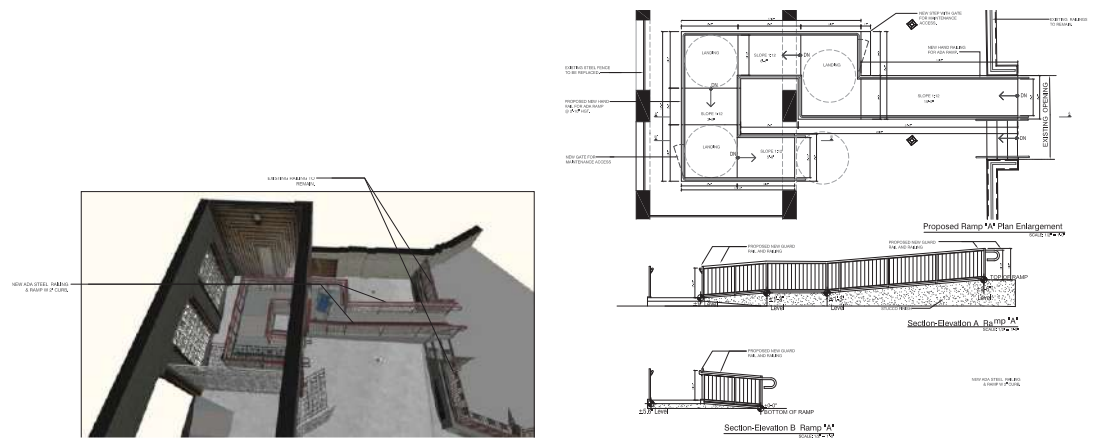
The exterior bars were restored, replacing the additions and repairs it underwent over time. As there were complete elements on the site and sufficient documentary information, it was possible to reconstruct the missing bars and repair the existing ones in both formal and material aspects (See figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Proposals for the restoration of the exterior grilles (left) and the entrance door (center) of the access portico of the Noonan Plaza Apartments. On the right the distribution floor of the elements to be restored. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)

Work on the wrought iron elements posed challenges in upgrading the universal accessibility ramp. In the first place, in the original design this ramp did not exist, this element had been placed during one of the interventions that the building had in the late twentieth century, but it no longer met the current safety standards. Secondly, the new wrought iron railing had to dialogue with the slabs of the original railings, without producing confusion regarding the historical context in which the element was introduced. These goals were achieved by extending the route within the access portico,

with a natural route, which allows the original spatial reading without invading the constituent elements. As for the slabs, the proportions, the color of the finishes and the rhythm between the vertical bars were maintained to establish the dialogue with the basic geometry of the original railing. However, the new elements were stripped of the ornamental details typical of the blacksmithing of the 1930s. (See Figure 11).



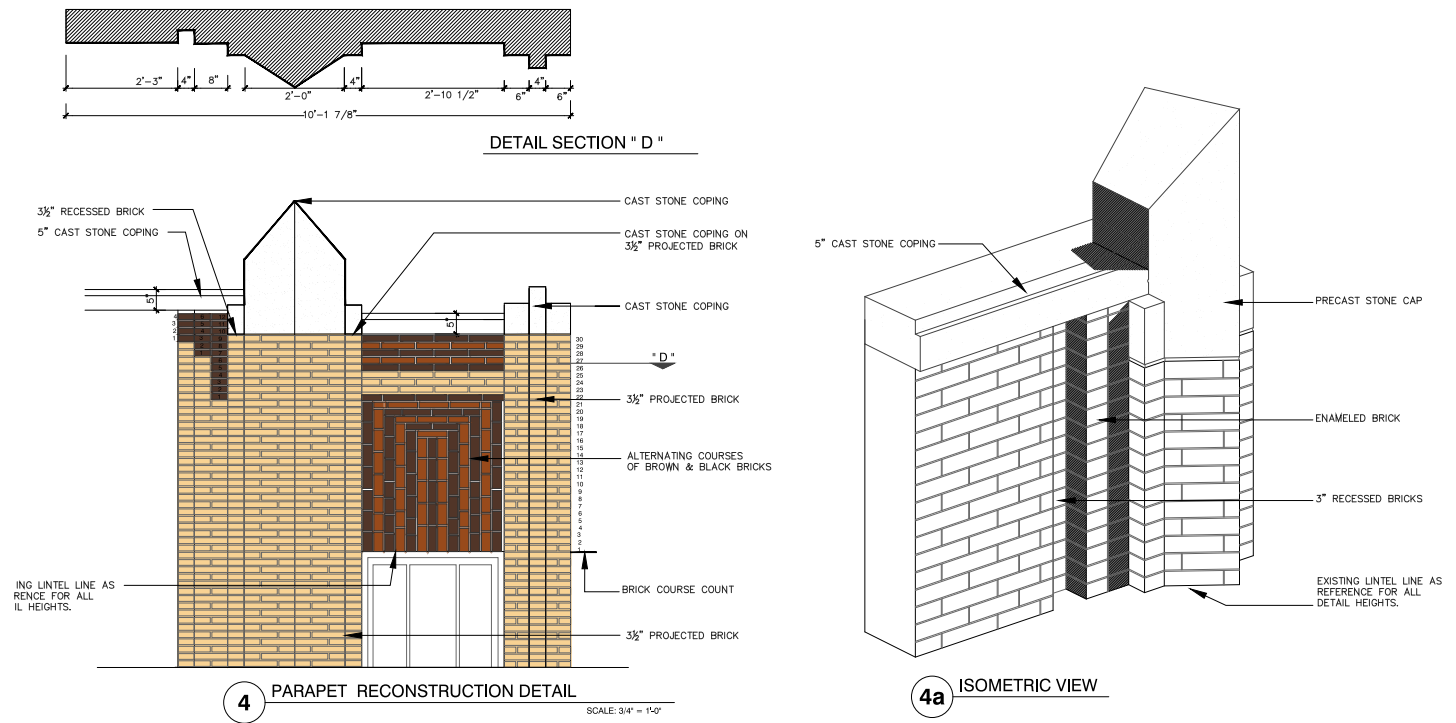
**Figure 11.** Proposals for the renovation of the universal accessibility ramp on the entrance portico of Noonan Plaza Apartments. On the left three-dimensional view of the proposal and on the right the plan and elevations. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)

The restoration of the facades of the complex was another important challenge, since it involved a process of recognition of its state of conservation through photogrammetry with drones and a systematization for the detailed registration of the elements to intervene. This process was especially challenging because the pieces had to be recorded at height with a degree of detail and complex elaboration. The polygonal lintels of the windows, the upper finials of the pilasters and the entire upper parapet stand out in this aspect (Figures 12 and 13).



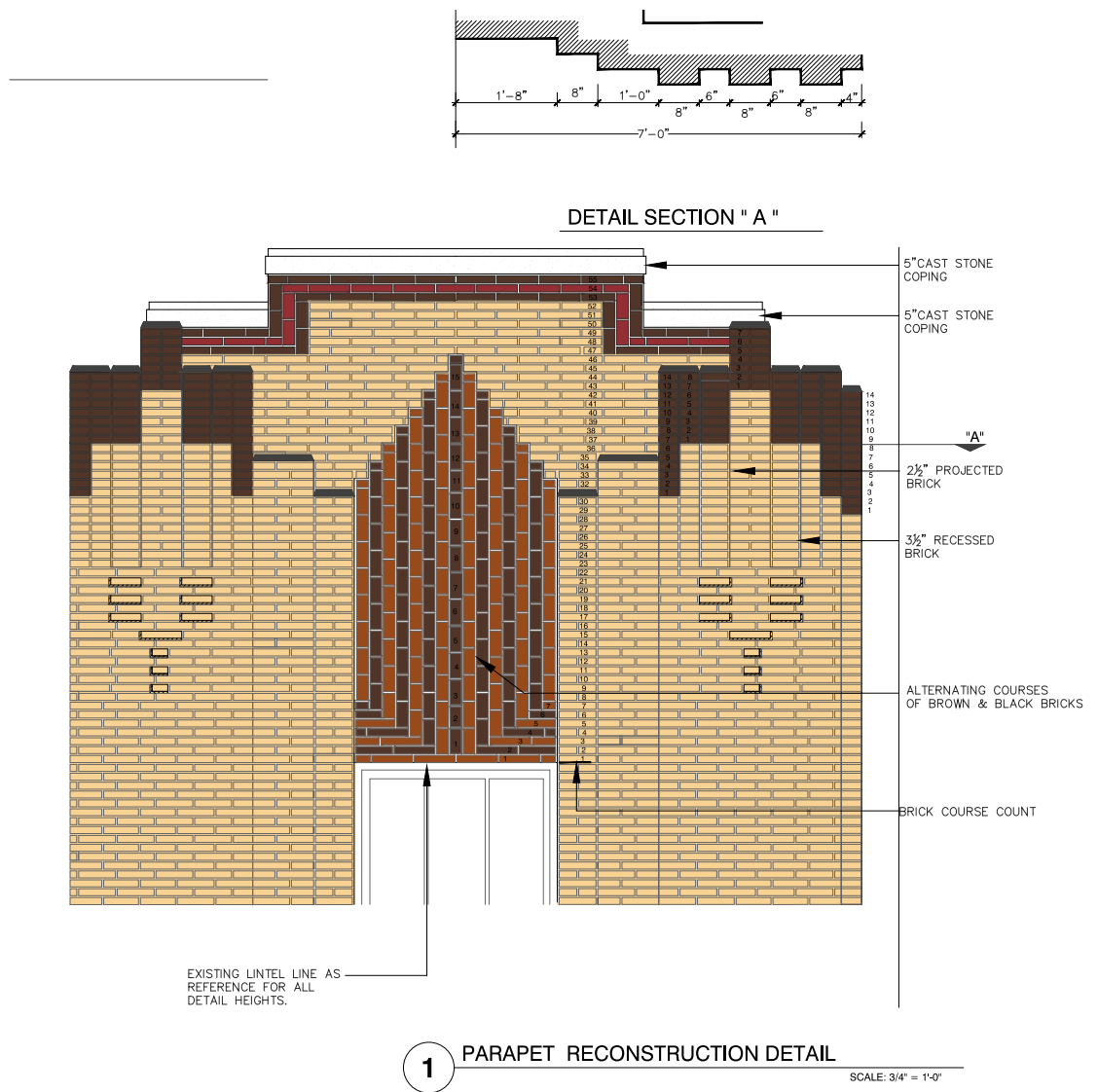
**Figure 12.** Interior west elevation, with view from the "garden court" in which the intervention areas of the parapet are indicated. The notes identified as RMP indicate the areas of the parapet where restoration work was carried out. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)





**Figure 13.** Detailed plan of the proposals for the restoration of the parapet. The drawings in plan, elevation and isometric allow an excellent understanding of the architectural elements that converge in the building, in addition to providing data on the materiality: carved stone, bricks, stucco, among others. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)

The survey and documentation of these elements constitutes a fundamental tool to understand and appreciate the technical richness of the factory of this property. In addition, it becomes a detailed reference for the replacement of elements that could be affected by catastrophes, accidents or negligence in the maintenance of the work.



**Figure 14.** Detailed plan of the proposals for the restoration of the parapet. The numbering of the rows of bricks from the lintel to the top of the parapet or parapet allows to locate the elements in the composition of the façade and the cut in plan offers additional information about the incoming and outgoing achieved by changing the arrangement of the bricks. Source: Danois Architects, P. C. (2020)

The systematization of the intervention process and the extraordinary results achieved in the restoration process were recognized by The New York Landmarks Conservancy, which awarded the 2022 Lucy Moses Award in the residential category to the Noonan Plaza Apartments project.

**5. Conclusion**

From the experience of intervention in the Noonan Plaza Apartments, important lessons can be drawn regarding the potential of service that architectural heritage can offer to the solution of social problems. These could be cited:

1. The dialectic presented by the confrontation of the preservation of architectural heritage and technological updating can be harmonized through the implementation of innovative techniques in the approach to heritage preservation projects.

2. The correct diagnosis of the pathologies that affect heritage works will allow the design of appropriate proposals to correct the problems and mitigate possible future damage.
3. The systematic and detailed documentary record is essential in determining the value of the built heritage and acquires the dimension of historical and cultural record for the purposes of preserving the memory and identity of societies.
4. The restoration and rehabilitation of architectural works of the past, in order to make them more efficient and comfortable, brings benefits to the well-being of communities and generates social cohesion.

The redevelopment of Noonan Plaza Apartments, a landmark of Bronx Art Deco architecture, stands out as an example of good practice that could be relevant to both the professional and academic community.



**Figure 14.** Infographic showing the tree planting of the "garden court", the volumetric joints produced by the lighting courts, which contribute to ventilation and natural lighting and generate a rhythm that breaks with the frequent monotony of large high-density housing blocks. Source: Prepared by the author (2023), on three-dimensional cartography taken from the Apple Inc Maps application.

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**Conflicts of interest:** " The author declares that he has no conflict of interest".

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