

Streetscapes: 316 East 59th Street

New Role for 'Gnomes' Home'

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

STOREFRONT design bubbled with vitality in the 1920's and early 30's as small shops sought an identity amid a rising group of chain operations and department stores.

New York streets were veritable catalogues of materials and styles: One shopfront half-timbered mock-Tudor, one an 18th-century French antique facade, one a modernist-class design looking like a lightbulb, one Art Deco with oval windows and stainless steel.

Perhaps the apotheosis of such eye-catching shopfronts was the Gnome Bakery, which started out as a two-story building at 316 East 59th Street, next to the southerly approach ramp to the Queensboro Bridge. Now the building that was the "home of the gnomes" is up for sale and, says the broker, Robert Knakal, a deal is close that would have it occupied by an owner not unlike the original, although with uncertain architectural results.

The origins of the Gnome Bakery are confusing. It first appears in telephone directories in 1932, associated with Vivant Machin, another bakery in the same building. Vivant Machin had been in business for more than 25 years at that address.

By 1932 the firm was operated by George Mutschler and Frank Modr. In February 1933 Mr. Mutschler's architects, Adams & Prentice, filed plans for a new storefront, new roof with several pitches and the addition of a third story. The cost was a modest \$8,000 but, in the deepening Depression, the architects were no doubt happy to have it.

Building records indicate that the work was completed in three months. The transformation was radical.

A broad, curved, multipaned shopfront had been installed under the sign "Home of the Gnomes" — the store's motto was "unusual bread and rolls." The added roof was a steeply pitched interweaving of red tile and jerkin-head gables culminating in a giant chimney on one side.

Resting against this chimney was the figure of a giant gnome, bearded and with a stocking cap, sitting cross-legged holding a piece of bread with a bite missing. Smaller painted figures of gnomes danced against the upper walls around a stalk of wheat formed around the word "energy."

What had before appeared to bridge-bound drivers as an anonymous roof was now an ingenious advertisement in red, green, yellow and black against white painted brick walls.

Apparently the original business plan for Gnome was as a retail bakery and the shop was furnished in the rebuilding as a medieval cottage, with square stools, beam and plaster ceilings and great half-round supporting arches. Trestle tables displayed baskets of bakery goods. The furniture was all designed by Adams and Prentice.

In "New York 1930," Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and Thomas Mellins describe the Gnome Bakery as "a Hansel and Gretel cottage." But it was short-lived. Gnome declared bankruptcy in late 1933 or early 1934 and was taken over by Frank Fernandez, who shifted the bakery's business to institutional clients. In September 1934 he destroyed the shop in favor of a wide, open truck bay. The "Home of the Gnomes"

legend was replaced by one reading "Gnome Bakers."

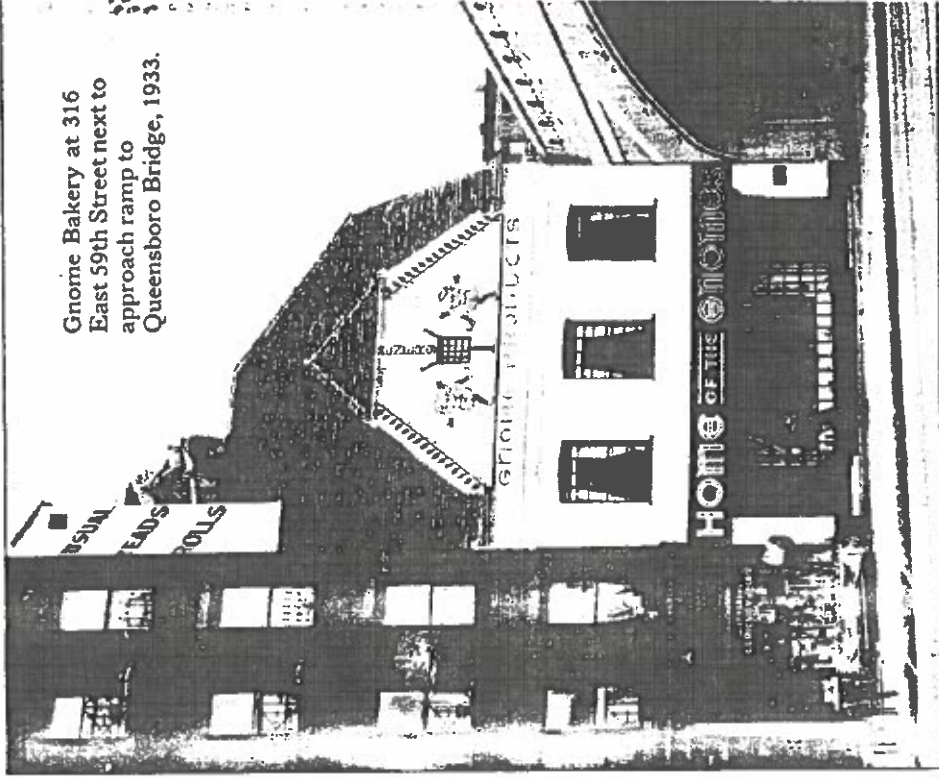
The papier-mâché rooftop gnome was gone by 1940. Gnome, then owned by Fernandez, sold the building in 1942 and it was later occupied by a farmer and then an exterminator. The decorations were painted out by the 1950's but the building's unusual cascade of roofs and its prominent location continued to pique the interest of passersby.

GNOME, still in business elsewhere in the city, was absorbed by Fink Bakeries in 1974. It is no longer a separate label.

In recent years the storefront has been leased by the Butcher Block, a kitchen furnishings store, but now the owner of the property, Ilena Ross, is offering to deliver it vacant for \$1,295,000.

According to Mr. Knakal, her broker, his firm originally tried to put together a project using 316 along with 306 East 59th Street, on the other side of the bridge approach, as the approach, giving the new structure 100 feet of frontage above 59th Street. But although he says the city did not discourage such an air-rights sale, it never seemed to progress and the owner decided to simply sell the Gnome Bakery building. Current zoning allows about five stores to be built on the site.

Mr. Knakal would not identify the Japanese bakery that he says is "the likely buyer" of the property but said that it is involved more with institutional than retail sales, so a real restoration of the "Home of the Gnomes" seems unlikely and, indeed, even its remains may not long survive.



Gnome Bakery at 316 East 59th Street next to approach ramp to Queensboro Bridge, 1933.

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