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Brownstone (the Real Thing) Comes Back

PORTLAND, Conn— Mike Meehan, a geologist who once explored for coal in the Appalachian Mountains, is supervising a crew of four men and a canary yellow backhoe, clawing away at the cliffs of the country's only operating brownstone quarry, trying to fill the orders that pour in every day.

"See those chunks with the CU on 'em?" he asked a few weeks ago, pointing to some big rocks the color of fudge and the size of a Doberman's doghouse. "They're for the Cooper Union in New York City. And those over there are going to the Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul in Providence, and that's a stoop going to Yale. Those pieces there are for the cornice trim on a new house going up in the Farmington Valley."

Brownstone is back. That somber yet elegant cloak for more than 50,000 row houses, from Baltimore to Boston, was revered during the so-called Brown Decades of the mid-19th century, then reviled by the century's turn, when gleaming white limestone and marble captivated the public.

For the last six decades, Portland's quarries -- which produced an estimated 80 percent of New York City's brownstone -- have been largely forgotten by the outside world. Already moribund by the start of the Great Depression, they filled with water after the flood of 1936 and the hurricane of 1938, were discovered by teenagers as a make-out spot and were adopted by fishermen who stealthily hunt big bass near the towering brownstone cliffs.

But preservationists and planners are beginning to see a new future for the formidable stone. Architects have started using it to give a touch of historical sobriety to new suburban palazzos, and conservators have begun restoring the elegant facades of grand monuments like the Cooper Union on Astor Place in Manhattan, where Abraham Lincoln addressed crowds before the 1860 election. On May 16, the Department of the Interior gave three Portland quarries (two defunct) status as a national historic landmark.

But just as this Connecticut River town in the center of the state is sponsoring brainstorming sessions on how to lure visitors, the re-opening of the third Portland quarry has set off a debate on whether brownstone should be used at all.

Because the terrible secret is that brownstone -- "the very blood and fiber of New York City," in the words of Vincent Scully, a professor emeritus of the history of art at Yale University -- is not really much good as a building material. The same quality that gives brownstone its charm, making it easy to quarry and easy to carve, also makes it exquisitely vulnerable to harsh weather and the passage of time, especially if the stone is installed improperly, and even worse, is maintained poorly.

At the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Albany, built in 1848 from Portland stone, its preservation architect, John Mesick, said, "you can take your hand and pull off chunks as big as apple pies."

Throughout Brooklyn and Manhattan, many of the most magnificent brownstone houses, the ones that date from the Civil War era, are in danger of losing their sweeping balustraded staircases and their entire facades. At the National Arts Club, in Gramercy Park in Manhattan, the brownstone, like a chocolate bar left on the dashboard on a summer day, just seemed to melt.

Alex Herrera, director of technical services at the New York Landmarks Conservancy, said that the brownstone veneer on the facades on some of the houses began to fall off a few years after they were built. "Historical records state that some started deteriorating 10, 20, 30 years later," he said. "Brownstone is not a consistent material: some of it is O.K., and some is perfectly awful."

Not that anyone is building all-new brownstone houses; the architect Philip Johnson was the last to use it in a major way, for the Bobst Library at New York University back in the 1960's.

Today, it is brownstone repair and replacement that is being debated in classrooms, at special seminars and landmark commissions. Should the real brownstone be used, or a cheap "cut and cover" brown stucco coating favored by contractors?

"It's a very controversial subject right now," said Paul Byard, director of Columbia University's preservation program, and the architect for the Cooper Union's \$12 million brownstone restoration, the largest in history.

Mr. Byard has chosen Portland brownstone, which he says is authentic and should last for at least six decades if maintained, with the joints kept properly full of mortar.

Mr. Mesick says he will not use it on the Albany Cathedral and is combing southern Scotland and the Ruhr Valley in Germany for brownstone that does not spall, or flake off, the way he says the Connecticut stone does.

There is even a long-running debate on whether it is aesthetically pleasing. While many still find the stone beautiful, Edith Wharton could not stand the stuff. In a memoir published four years before the Portland quarries shut down, she told of her childhood return to New York from Europe, her writer's voice dripping with disappointment at "this low-studded rectangular New York, cursed with its universal chocolate-colored coating of the most hideous stone ever quarried."