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HABITATS/454 WEST 35TH STREET

Of Fiction and Reality

By TRACIE ROZHON

AFFIXED to the brownstone corner of the building is a small plaque: "On This Site Stood the Elegant Brownstone of the Corpulent Fictional Private Detective Nero Wolfe with his able assistant Archie Goodwin."

The bronze plaque is itself based on a fiction. It was placed there this summer by the Wolfe Pack, a group of fans of the mystery writer Rex Stout, whose famous private detective's address on West 35th Street shifted several times -- but never to 454 West 35th Street. ("In New York City, it's hard to find someone gracious enough to let us put a plaque on their building to honor a man who never existed," Ettagale Blauer, a club member, explained.)

The building to which it is attached, however, is firmly grounded in reality: newly renovated, it is actually a marriage of adjoining town houses, and is used to provide federally subsidized housing for the elderly and the mentally ill.

One of the late-19th-century houses is brick with brownstone trim and a fine wooden cornice; another is all brownstone, with arched attic windows. The \$5 million renovation, which last year created 49 single furnished rooms (and a few apartments for the original tenants, who were relocated and then moved back), was done by a partnership of nonprofit community organizations.

One of the building's new tenants is Paul Beatty, a chipper 73-year-old full of opinions and anecdotes who survived several campaigns in the South Pacific during World War II and refuses to be laid low because he has throat cancer.

Puffing determinedly on his omnipresent cigar, Mr. Beatty talked about his "old place," a sort of transient hotel on West 30th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, where he lived for 18 years, which featured "las cucarachas" -- roaches, he translated -- and "mice -- at least I hope they were mice."

The new place, he said, is different. "Oh, there's some cranky old women in the laundry room," he grumbled, "but nothing else." He credits Kathy Prioleau, the building's manager, with maintaining the building; he calls her "The Colonel."

The new place consists of two furnished rooms with a kitchen that Mr. Beatty shares with his long-time friend Charles Harris, whom he has known for decades, since they both lived in White Plains, when Mr. Beatty worked in the public relations department of General Outdoor Advertising and Mr. Harris worked on Wall Street.

It was Mr. Harris who, all those years ago, introduced Mr. Beatty to the woman who became Mr. Beatty's wife. "We were married six years and then she moved back to Ireland," Mr. Beatty said. "No, no kids." Mr. Harris lived with him on West 30th Street; he didn't want to leave, according to Ms. Prioleau, who drove over and moved Mr. Beatty. "Mr. Harris walked," she said.

THE 35th Street buildings, formerly derelict structures -- their windows had been stoppered with cinder blocks -- were developed by the Enterprise Foundation, the national organization started by James Rouse, the developer of South Street Seaport in Manhattan and Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, working with a neighborhood group, the Clinton Housing Development Company. The \$5 million to buy and renovate the brownstones came from New York City's S.R.O. (Single Room Occupancy) loan program and from corporate investment.

The tenants pay rent according Federal rent subsidy guidelines, which mandate that they contribute 30 percent of their monthly income. Mr. Beatty has a monthly rent of \$429, of which he pays \$191 from his pension. The building's units are well constructed, with refinished hardwood floors; the small white kitchen is attractive. Mr. Harris does the shopping, Mr. Beatty most of the cooking.

"How's pork chops cooked with almond paste sound to you?" asked Mr. Beatty, a former master sergeant in the Marine Corps. "Homemade soup? No cans."

Last Monday morning, Mr. Beatty greeted his visitors wearing a sharp-looking red plaid robe with navy socks. He asked several times whether he should get dressed. He draped a bedspread over the pale blue mattress of his bed, and sat down on it. The room was clean, but piled with souvenirs: a red scrapbook with gold binding, a well-used suitcase, several pairs of brown wing-tipped shoes lying next to a shoe brush.

"Money's a worry," he said. "Uncle Sam only gives me enough to pay my rent, smoke my cigar and have a bit of suds now and then."

Photo: Paul Beatty in the kitchen of his renovated apartment. (Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times)