

On the industrial streets of Long Island City, a local modernist left his mark. Largely forgotten today, Jerome Perlstein used a vast array of materials and design devices to give the area's vernacular industrial and commercial buildings a uniquely Modern design signature on a limited budget. Perlstein practiced from 1950 to 1984 and his work exists elsewhere in the metro region, but Long Island

# JEROME PERLSTEIN

## An industrious Modernist in Queens

City, Queens, boasts a concentration of his quirky interventions, designed to transform small industrial buildings into something more, something modern.

Why does an obscure architect who designed largely façade alterations to one-story warehouses belong in the narrative of New York City's Modern architecture? Perlstein was part of a community of architects who helped shape Queens as it transitioned from a quiet borough of villages to a booming suburban and urban landscape. Prominent Manhattan firms like Kahn & Jacobs and Emery Roth & Sons had the lion's share of the city's mid-century commercial building commissions, upon which they built national and international reputations. In Queens, prolific local practitioners such as Simeon Heller, John O'Malley, and Perlstein labored steadily, quietly shaping the sturdy, low-rise, workaday borough.

Before the 1909 opening of the Queensborough Bridge, Queens County was isolated and rural. With direct connection to Manhattan the population surged, increasing 130 percent in the 1920s alone. By 1930, the borough was home to over one million people. By 1970, Queens was closing on two million inhabitants.

The architectural community responded, designing entire new neighborhoods, housing devel-

opments, religious complexes, schools, and shopping malls. Manufacturing was key to the growth of Queens, with factories and warehouses springing up across Long Island City. And here is where we can explore Jerome Perlstein's contributions.

Perlstein began as a draftsman in his father's office. Morris Perlstein was an architect whose practice concentrated on small commercial

projects—garages, stores, and warehouses. After attending New York University, Jerome served in World War II. He then joined his father's firm from 1946 to 1949, received his architectural degree from Pratt Institute in 1949, and subsequently set up his own shop in 1950.

One of his earliest known buildings is the Do All Eastern Company, completed in 1955. The Do All Eastern is a long, low building of tan brick with a contrasting red brick entrance surround and a corner wall of picture windows (now enclosed). The Queens Chamber of Commerce award-

ed it an honorable mention in its annual Building Awards that year. Soon Perlstein was able to get non-industrial work and by the end of the decade he had designed homes, an athletic facility, and



GAM WAH RESTAURANT, 1960

another Queens Chamber award winner, a restaurant rehabilitation in Ozone Park.

One first gets a sense of Perlstein's unusual design sensibilities in an over-the-top Cantonese restaurant he designed in 1960, Gam Wah, in Carle Place, NY. The single-story building was

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fronted by two towering, stylized take offs on the traditional Japanese torii gate, a form often coopted to signal Asian. Perlstein's dramatically scaled gates hugged a glass-enclosed entrance block featuring a midcentury staple, the upwardly swooping roof. Many Long Islanders remember the restaurant fondly.

In 1962 Perlstein became a consultant to Propper Manufacturing Company, a maker of medical devices. The company, founded in 1935 by Seymour Schuman and still in business today, is based in Long Island City. In the 1960s, Schuman began to branch out into real estate development, eventually controlling numerous small industrial sites around Long Island City under the names Propper Properties and Schuman Properties. Perlstein was hired to rehabilitate many of these.

Between 1962 and 1975 Perlstein altered at least ten buildings with design solutions that were cost effective for Schuman but sufficiently engaging to attract the eye. Many of the buildings were rentals so they needed to be interesting but flexible spaces. Perlstein used numerous materials, primarily

in façade alterations, to make the street view of these buildings dynamic and appealing. The new façades incorporate Roman brick, stone veneer, glass, concrete, enamel paneling, metal screens, and in one case mosaic tiling, as quick ways to enliven these largely utilitarian complexes.

On the block in Long Island City bounded by 10th and 11th Streets, 44th Avenue and 44th Road, viewers can see several buildings Perlstein altered starting in 1962. Intriguingly, Perlstein or Schuman marked several of their buildings with plaques naming the building after someone specific. Some were for Schuman relatives, including the Beautiful Beatrice Building of 1975, most likely for Schuman's wife. Perlstein named one after himself. Others are more random, including the Walter Lippmann Building for the political commentator and the H. G. Wells Building for the noted author.

At the corner of 10th Street and 44th Avenue is the M. Henry Chernay Building, which exhibits some of the most defining characteristics of Perlstein's alterations: Roman brick—here in variegated tints—and white concrete framing to create

texture and depth along what is actually a flat façade. Perlstein adds a ribbon of small windows just below the roofline and places the main pedestrian entrance at the corner in a rather narrow and slightly recessed space, which gives even more character to this prominent corner.

Just up the street from the Chernay Building, Perlstein used murals to dress up another of Schuman's industrial properties. Accenting his signature Roman brick and concrete frames, the entrance of the Walter



WALTER LIPPMANN BUILDING, 1967

A VERNACULAR BUILDING THAT EVOKES A 1960s AESTHETIC AS STRONGLY AS THE PERLSTEIN BUILDING WOULD BE HARD TO FIND IN NEW YORK.

Lippmann Building is surmounted by a large, colorful abstract mural. Executed by the Mosaic Tile Company based in New York City, the mural is still intact although mutilated by three large windows punched directly through the mosaic work. However, the overall effect is still identifiable, complimented by small additional tile mosaics else-

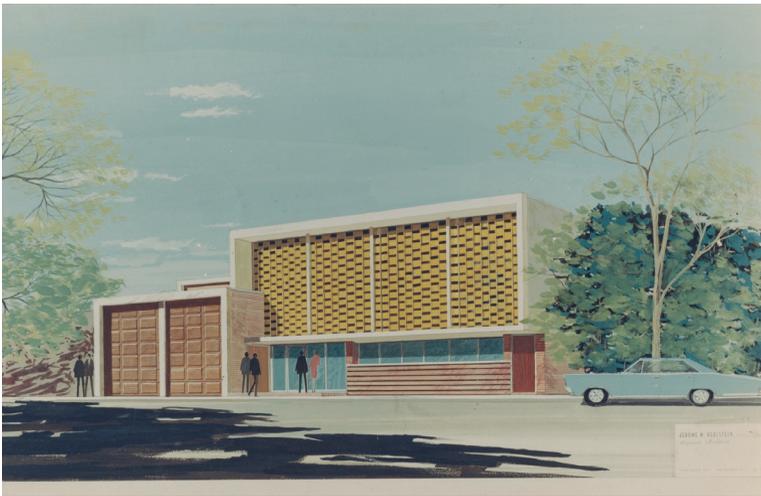
where on the facade that remain intact.

On 11th Street, the self-named Jerome Perlstein Building is immediately recognizable as one of the architect's works, arguably his most striking. On this two-story office building with attached garage, the main façade is covered with a gold-toned metal screen above a base of bright red glazed brick. A

vernacular building that evokes a 1960s aesthetic as strongly as the Perlstein Building would be hard to find anywhere in New York.

Perlstein used the same brick and concrete framing device for several other neighboring buildings, setting them apart from the more utilitarian industrial boxes that generally have no defining characteristics beyond the occasional row of clerestory windows. His Proper Building of 1970 is now lost, but passersby can still see Perlstein's white concrete framing and brick infill along with some unusual metal screening on the neighboring Fanie Schuman Building (c. 1965) at 10-16 44th Drive.

Even as late as 1975, Perlstein was being recognized for his partnership with Schuman. That year he received a Queens Chamber of Commerce Award for the Beautiful Beatrice Building on a site adjacent to Proper Manufacturing's headquarters. The building still displays its vivid blue glazed-brick base and textured vertical partitions designed to mimic exposed-aggregate concrete panels. Another Perlstein hallmark material, stone veneer,





PROPPER BUILDING, 1970

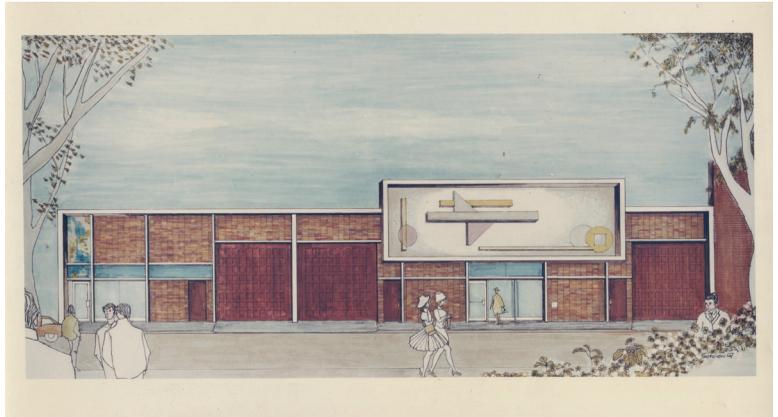
*Perlstein renderings and Proper Building photo courtesy Marcia Perlstein Wise. Present-day photos courtesy the author and Queens Modern.*

is used to mark the entrance.

Perlstein practiced architecture until his death in 1984, continuing to consult for Proper Manufacturing as well as Queens-based Hamburg Savings Bank. He won a 1979 Queens Chamber of Commerce Building Award for an alteration to its branch bank along Queens Boulevard, incorporating stone veneer at the base and metal screening over the windows.

When Perlstein died in 1984 at the age of 60 his firm largely vanished. Today Long Island City, Queens is rapidly changing as massive new housing developments, hotels and commercial towers are replacing the low-rise industrial landscape for which the area was previously known. While most of Perlstein's buildings are extant, some have been altered beyond recognition and it is likely that only a few will last the decade given the pace of

*continued page 47*



WALTER LIPPMANN BUILDING, with windows punched through mosaic mural

**PERLSTEIN, *continued***



M. HENRY CHERNAY BUILDING, c. 1967

new development in the borough. All the more reason to uncover the story of Jerome Perlstein, one of the unsung architects who helped give the vernacular architecture of Queens its midcentury Modern twist.

— FRAMPTON TOLBERT

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BEAUTIFUL BEATRICE BUILDING, 1975



DO ALL EASTERN COMPANY, 1955

**LATIN AMERICA, *continued***

That much of the content in *Latin America in Construction* is new information—some primary source material, obscure even to in-country researchers—speaks to the need for continued focus on the subject and broad dissemination of new scholarship. The book’s annotated bibliography offers valuable content in itself. For each country profiled it not only lists books, articles, and exhibitions that have emanated from the country, but also a helpful backstory about the local architectural discourses of the period and the dissemination of ideas or lack thereof. Arguably, this bibliography is *Latin America in Construction*’s greatest contribution, a foundation from which to bridge the gulf between Latin America’s modern heritage and a world that has much to learn from it.

— MARISSA MARVELLI

**WORLD TRADE CENTER, *continued***

criticism, Lewis Mumford, called the designs “sheer disaster.” Huxtable’s views soon hardened, as well. After the towers’ completion, she dubbed them “blandly undistinguished.” She expressed the widely held view that Yamasaki’s treatment of the tower façades, especially the curvilinear transition between the lobby columns and the more closely spaced ones above, was overtly “Gothic.” The issue includes reproductions of the revealing letters the architect and the critic exchanged about her damning critiques.

As this CLOG makes amply clear, the World Trade Center is more fondly viewed in painful memory than when it actually existed.

— JOHN MORRIS DIXON