

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Propertyhistoric name Westbethother names/site number Western Electric Company; Bell Telephone Laboratories; Bell Labs**2. Location**street & number 55 Bethune Street [] not for publicationcity or town New York [] vicinitystate New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10014**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally [] statewide [] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[] entered in the National Register

[] see continuation sheet

[] determined eligible for the National Register

[] see continuation sheet

[] determined not eligible for the
National Register

[] removed from the National Register

[] other (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

Westbeth
Name of Property

New York County, New York
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4		buildings
1		sites
		structures
		objects
5	1	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

1 (Bell Telephone Laboratories, 463 West St.)

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

LANDSCAPE/park

RECREATION & CULTURE/auditorium,

museum

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

LANDSCAPE/park

RECREATION & CULTURE/auditorium,

museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Mid-19th Century/Early Romanesque Revival

Late 19th & Early 20th Century American Movement/

Commercial Style

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Ston

walls Brick. Granite.

Terra-cotta

roof Synthetics (built-up roofing)

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Westbeth
Name of Property

New York County, New York
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave
- ☐ **D** a cemetery
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property
- ☒ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

Community Planning & Development

Architecture

Period of Significance:

1967-1970

Significant Dates:

n/a

Significant Person:

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect/Builder:

Meier, Richard

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☒ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☒ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Building Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office

☐ Other State agency

☐ Federal Agency

☐ Local Government

☐ University

☐ Other repository: _____

Westbeth
Name of Property

New York County, New York
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 2.21 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 1 8 5 8 3 6 7 1 4 5 0 9 9 7 8
Zone Easting Northing

3 1 8
Zone Easting Northing

2 1 8

4 1 8

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By (**See continuation sheet for author)

name/title Contact: Kathy Howe, Historic Preservation Program Analyst

organization NYS OPRHP, Bureau of Historic Preservation date October 21, 2009

street & number Peebles Island, P.O. Box 189 telephone 518-237-8643, ext. 3266

city or town Waterford state NY zip code 12188

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name Westbeth Corp. HDPC, Inc. Contact: Steve Neil, Executive Director

street & number 463 West Street telephone

city or town New York state NY zip code 10014

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 1

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Narrative Description

Westbeth, the artist's residential and studio complex, occupies the entire block bounded by Bethune Street on the north, Bank Street on the south, Washington Street on the east, and West Street on the west, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, New York. The complex consists of five buildings and a park; one building has a designed courtyard. The buildings are sited on the lot line, creating uninterrupted streetscapes on Bethune, Washington, and West Streets. A park opens onto Bank Street and connects to an interior courtyard that can also be reached via passages through the buildings on Bethune and West Streets. Westbeth is located in what was once a mixed-use neighborhood consisting of mid-nineteenth-century row houses, later nineteenth-century tenements, and a variety of factories and warehouses. By the early twenty-first century, the area was almost entirely residential, with new apartment house construction and the conversion of commercial buildings to residential use. To the east, on the east side of Washington Street, are a variety of nineteenth-century residential buildings that are located in the locally-designated and National Register-listed Greenwich Village Historic District. To the south, on the south side of Bank Street, are a five-story apartment building (148-158 Bank Street; 1969-74), a twelve-story apartment building (160 Bank Street; 1985-89); and a seven-story soap factory (162-168 Bank Street; 1887-88) that was converted into apartments in 1978. Farther south on West Street are additional warehouse and industrial buildings that have been converted for residential use. Beginning two-and-one-half blocks south are three early twenty-first-century luxury apartment towers of glass that were designed by Richard Meier, architect of the Westbeth conversion. To the north, on the north side of Bethune Street are a modern high-rise apartment building, at the corner of Washington Street, erected c. 2000, and a second high rise, designed by Robert A. M. Stern, constructed in 2007-09, at the corner of West Street. Farther north, on West Street, is the Gansevoort Meat Market, a mix of old market buildings, commercial buildings converted into residential use, and new residential structures. To the north, along the east side of Washington Street, are additional buildings in the Greenwich Village Historic District, while the west side of Washington Street contains new hotel construction. Beginning three blocks north, at Horatio Street, are the locally-designated and National Register-listed Gansevoort Market Historic District, with its historic meat market and industrial buildings, many converted into high-end residential, commercial, and office uses. To the west is busy West Street, a major transportation artery located at the western edge of Manhattan Island. On the west side of West Street is a narrow strip of Hudson River Park located between the street and the Hudson River. Westbeth and its adjoining park and courtyard occupy an entire block. The complex retains the integrity of its 1967-70 conversion into artists' studios to a very high degree.

The Westbeth complex consists of five separate buildings and a park (see attached plan). One of the buildings – 455-465 West Street – was previously listed (NR/NHL) as Bell Telephone Laboratories.¹ Each building is in

¹ This building was designated a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register in 1975 under the listing name of Bell Telephone Laboratories. The address of the building is noted as 463 West Street in the nomination. The NHL designation focused solely on the laboratory building and does not appear to include the other buildings within the block that once made up this former industrial complex. The period of significance for Bell Telephone Laboratories is 1907 to 1966 and the area of significance under Criterion A is science. See

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 2

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

the complex is described separately. The descriptions begins with 455-465 West Street (Building A on plan) at the southeast corner of Bethune Street and continues in a clockwise direction with 51-55 Bethune Street/746-754 Washington Street (Building B), 141-149 Bank Street/734-44 Washington Street (Building C), 151 Bank Street (Building D), Westbeth Park at 155-163 Bank Street, and 445-53 West Street/169 Bank Street (Building E). Buildings A, B, and C interconnect at the interior.

455-465 West Street/59-77 Bethune Street (Building A; see plan). Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, architect for Western Electric Co., 1896-1898. This twelve-, thirteen-, and ten-story building located at the southeast corner of West and Bethune Streets was built by the Western Electric Company for use as corporate offices, manufacturing, and workshops. The building was converted into artists' housing as part of the creation of Westbeth in 1968-70. The entire building has a granite watertable capped by heavy classical moldings. Above the watertable the facades are faced with yellow brick and trimmed with terra cotta of a matching hue. The building has a two-story base with the brick laid in a rusticated pattern. The base is capped by a terra-cotta modillioned cornice. The focus of the symmetrical West Street facade is a centrally-placed, two-story, rusticated granite entry arch with a central, segmental-arch vehicular entry flanked by modest pedestrian entrances. The vehicular entrance is capped by a keystone. Recessed within the arch of the vehicular entrance is an ornate latticework, wrought-iron transom and pair of wrought-iron gates. Similar latticework is used on the pedestrian entrance doors. Above each of the pedestrian entrances is the iron base of a lamp that is no longer extant. The segmental arch of the vehicular entrance is capped by a drip molding ending in foliate corbels. Above this drip molding is a frieze of shells supported by brackets in the form of foliate corbels. The entry pavilion is topped by a modillioned cornice.

The fenestration on the West Street facade is arranged in a symmetrical manner with (from left to right) two single windows, two larger openings each with a pair of windows, one single window, three single windows, one single window, two openings with a pair of windows, and two single windows. On the first two floors, the five central single windows are replaced by the granite entrance pavilion. An exception to the symmetrical arrangement of openings occurs on the first story, in the third bay from the left, where the main entrance to the building is located. This is a simple, wide opening. Most of the window openings retain original 4x4 metal sash (from the tenth through the twelfth floors, all of the windows have 1x1 sash). On the first-story, the windows are capped by terra-cotta lintels with rusticated voussoirs. On the second-story, the terra-cotta lintels form a beltcourse extending across the facade. The windows on the upper floors have terra-cotta sills and terra-cotta lintels with projecting caps ending in modest volutes. Above the eighth story windows is a projecting denticulated cornice.

Above the tenth story is another terra-cotta cornice. This cornice has strapwork panels and a centrally-placed, projecting, metal balcony supported on six brackets (pairs at the ends and single brackets in between); the face of the balcony has four cartouches. Above the balcony, on the eleventh and twelfth stories, the three central windows form a three-sided, angled, pressed-metal bay set flush with the facade. The bay is flanked by attached terra-cotta columns. The eleventh and twelfth stories are massed in a pavilion manner, with the two

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 3

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

pairs of windows on either side recessed so that the central five windows and the end sections appear to be projecting. Each end section on these stories has only one single window, rather than the two single windows below. The central and end pavilions are marked by terra-cotta quoins and attached columns, while in the recessed sections the paired windows are separated by brick pilasters with terra-cotta capitals. Corbelled brickwork supports a pressed-metal cornice above the twelfth story. The end pavilions are then capped by brick parapets. Above the central pavilion is a thirteenth story that is articulated by single end windows and a triple central opening. The single and triple windows are separated by brick piers with terra-cotta capitals. The triple windows are separated by metal pilasters. The thirteenth story is crowned by a scalloped, pressed-metal cornice.

The twelve-story portion of the Bethune Street facade of this building is identical to the West Street frontage except that the windows are arranged with two single openings, two larger openings with triple windows, and two more single openings. The remainder of the Bethune Street frontage, extending eastward, is similar in design, but is only ten stories tall. The building consists of ten window bays, each with triple windows. The detailing is identical to that on West Street through the projecting eighth-story cornice. Above this cornice, on the ninth and tenth stories, the window bays are separated by piers and columns with terra-cotta capitals. The building is capped by a corbelled cornice, identical to that above the twelfth story on West Street.

The south facade of the building is largely utilitarian, articulated by rows of rectangular windows with 6x6 sash. This brick elevation was painted white as part of the conversion to Westbeth. The exception to this is a section, three bays wide, on the upper three floors, extending from the tenth through the thirteenth stories, located just east of West Street. This section is faced in the same yellow brick used on the street elevations. The wall is cut by single and rectangular windows. On the twelfth story, the easternmost bay takes the form of a three-sided, angled, pressed-metal oriel, with single narrow windows in the side elevations and a pair of narrow windows on the front elevation. The east facade of the building also faces a courtyard. This elevation, partially visible from Washington Street, is brick that was painted white as part of the Westbeth conversion. The wall is cut by rectangular window openings. A bridge over this courtyard connects the roof to that of the building to the east, at 51-55 Bethune Street. At the south end of the east facade are two massive brick chimneys. A wide chimney at the southeast corner of the wing has battered walls and a corbelled cap; the chimney located to the north of the corner has straight sides.

The vehicular entrance on West Street leads into a single-story high space created as part of the Westbeth conversion from a two-story high space. The lower sections of two round columns are extant. From this space, concrete stairs lead up to a courtyard created as part of the conversion into Westbeth, from what had been a structure for shipping and delivery. Above this, there has always been a light court. Originally the main entrance to Westbeth was at the east end of the courtyard (this entrance can still be used, but the main entry is now on Bethune Street). Besides the West Street arcade, the courtyard is also reached, up a flight of stairs, through a narrow arcade leading from Bethune Street, and through two wide entrances leading to a wider arcade at the south, connecting with Westbeth Park. This later arcade is flanked on the west by the complex's Community Room and on the east by the Bank Street Theater. At ground level the long narrow courtyard, paved in small, square asphalt blocks, is punctuated by an open circular, reinforced-concrete seating area and by a long, two level, concrete ramp with rounded front, leading to a second-story commercial space, that houses

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 4

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York's lesbian and gay synagogue. The lower story of the courtyard is articulated by a series of large picture windows that light what were planned as commercial spaces and galleries (the Westbeth Art Gallery occupies some of the space on the north side). Plate-glass openings can also be found on the second story of the east side of the court. The original main entrance to the complex is on the north side of the east courtyard wall and is entirely of glass. The upper levels of the courtyard facades have triple groupings of windows with 4x4 metal sash. The east and west walls are cut by two triple windows on each floor, while on the longer north and south facades, the windows are arranged (from west to east) with three triple groups, two single windows, and four triple groups. As part of the conversion of the complex into Westbeth, architect Richard Meier added rounded fire balconies on the second, fourth, fifth, seventh, eighth, and tenth stories. The fact that these balconies are not located on every floor indicates that the interior units are duplexes.

The original main entrance to this building for workers was on West Street. From this entrance, previously noted in the third bay south of Bethune Street, one enters a vestibule with a plaster ceiling supported by brackets, yellow brick walls, and a marble mosaic floor with red, black, green, and white tesserae laid in geometric patterns. The door between the vestibule and lobby is set into a wood frame with triple light transom. The lobby has a plaster ceiling, yellow brick wainscot with marble baseboard, plaster above, and a marble floor with the same colors and patterns as in the vestibule. Two windows on the south wall of the lobby have wood frames; these windows look out onto the vehicular entrance arcade. The east wall of the lobby has two elevators, also set within wood frames, each frame capped by a projecting cornice supported on brackets. The lobby retains some of the original blue paint color chosen by Richard Meier as part of the conversion into apartments.

Most of the space on the upper floors of this building are divided into duplex (two-story) apartments. One level of each duplex occupies a portion of a floor, with a hall dividing the floor, while the other level extends from the street facade to the courtyard facade. The duplexes are entered from the hall, with the larger space either up or down a flight of stairs – thus, one hall served three floors. Long halls run through the entire building on only three floors – the third, sixth, and ninth. The halls have plaster walls, concrete ceilings, and linoleum floors. Some elevators retain wood enframements. The west and east ends of the building are divided into simplex apartments. The Westbeth conversion provided the apartments with bathrooms and kitchens. The kitchens were supplied with simple counters and with cupboards with horizontal metal handles. The remainder of the space in each apartment was open and, therefore, was completed by each tenant. The living areas of the apartments were supplied with single and double closets that had wheels so that they could be located wherever tenants wished. The twelfth floor originally had the corporate offices of Western Electric. The Board Room is extant, with its large wooden fireplace mantel and wood trim. Several of the apartments on the office floor also retain original fireplace mantels.

51-55 Bethune Street/746-754 Washington Street (Building B). McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, architect for Bell Telephone Laboratories, 1923-26. This eleven-story yellow brick building with granite watertable reads as a part of the large building located to the west (Building A), described above. The building is five bays wide on Bethune Street and seven bays wide on Washington Street. It has a rusticated, two-story base. On Bethune Street, each bay is marked by two single windows, while on Washington Street, the end bays have

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 5

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

two single windows, all with 4x4 metal sash, while the five central bays have two-story high openings that are separated by rusticated pilasters with terra-cotta capitals supporting a terra-cotta entablature with bracketed cornice. Within each bay are triple windows with 1x1 sash. The main entrance to Westbeth is presently on Bethune Street, through a doorway in the third bay from the corner. The doorway has a limestone enframing with projecting cornice. A non-contributing iron hood (not original to the conversion) over the entrance reads "Westbeth Artists' Housing." The entry has granite stairs leading to recessed bronze doors. The third and fourth stories of the building were partially removed in 1931-34 when the New York Central Railroad built the High Line which runs through the building. The large High Line openings are supported by horizontal concrete beams on the facade and diagonal braces within. On Bethune Street, the fifth through eighth stories are arranged with three central, triple window bays and two single windows at each end. Washington Street is massed in a similar manner with two single windows at either end and five triple windows between. A cornice projects above the eighth story, continuing the line of the cornice on the early building to the west. The ninth and tenth stories are massed in a similar manner to the floors below, with the exception of a single window replacing the two windows at the end bays. A cornice above the tenth floor also echoes that on the earlier building. Above this cornice is an eleventh story with a sloping roof clad in Spanish tile and gable ends facing north and south. The pediment on the Bethune Street gable end is articulated by a single ocular window.

The south facade of the building is faced in yellow brick but is otherwise unornamented. The fifth through ninth floors have two triplet windows; the tenth floor has a single triplet and two single windows; and the eleventh story has five single windows, as well as a small ocular opening. The west wall of the eleventh story has a row of round-arch windows opening onto a small courtyard. To the south is a square pavilion, rising an additional story, that houses the elevator. The pavilion has several rectangular windows and a hip roof clad in Spanish tile.

The entry on Bethune Street leads into an L-shaped lobby with marble walls and floor and a coffered plaster ceiling that was painted red as part of Richard Meier's conversion of the building into Westbeth. The wall to the east has an ornate bronze radiator grille with quatrefoil design. There are two elevators on the north wall of the short wing of the el. The building was entirely converted into simplex live-work apartments in 1968-70. The gabled section on the eleventh story was originally a Bell Labs auditorium; since 1971 it has been the studio of modern dance pioneer Merce Cunningham. The studio space retains some of its original ornamentation.

141-149 Bank Street/734-44 Washington Street (Building C). Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, architect for Western Electric Company, 1899-1900. This three-story factory building was substantially altered in 1931 when the High Line was built, resulting in a structure that is three stories on Bank Street and two stories on Washington Street. As at other parts of the complex, the building has a granite watertable with yellow brick trimmed with terra cotta above. The Washington Street elevation is virtually identical to the facade described at 51-55 Bethune Street/746-54 Washington Street (Building B), with the corner bay articulated by a single window on each floor, and five additional triple bays separated by rusticated brick piers with terra-cotta capitals. A cornice above the second floor supports a railing from the High Line. The tracks of the High Line are extant on the roof. The six-bay long Bank Street facade is also articulated by two-story rusticated pilasters, but there are two single windows on each floor within each bay; the westernmost bay, is partially filled in for a vehicular

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 6

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

entrance. At the first-story level, the windows of the four westernmost bays are capped by steel lintels. A bracketed terra-cotta cornice continues the cornice line that runs along the other buildings of the complex. A five-bay long third story rises above the cornice at all but the westernmost bay which is only two-stories tall. The third story is marked by five bays of triple windows with terra-cotta lintels ending in small volutes.

151 Bank Street (Building D). Bell Telephone Laboratories, Inc.'s architectural staff and Warren B. Sanford, engineer for Bell Telephone Laboratories, 1928-29. This three-story building, which from the street appears as a four-story building (it will be described in four levels), was erected by Bell Laboratories as a research center for experiments in sound recording. As part of the Westbeth project, the building was converted into a theater and, in 2009, housed the theater program of the Actors Studio at the New School. This foursquare building has a concrete base with yellow brick above. A central entrance is located on the ground floor, flanked by projecting piers that rise to the base of the third level where they are capped by rusticated brickwork. A similar rusticated pattern can be found at the ends of the building, adjoining the windows on the first, second, and fourth levels. To either side of the entrance is a triple window group with 3x3 metal sash; the mullions divide each sash horizontally. The second level has a single central window flanked by triplet windows; all of the second-story windows have 2x2 metal sash with horizontal mullions. Above the central window is a panel with six courses of soldier bricks. The third level is marked by a single large central opening (closed up in 2001) with two-course raised bands of header bricks as the lintel and as keys along the sides of the window. The fourth level is marked by two horizontal triple window groups with some original 2x2 metal sash. Four, two-course bands of raised bricks run across the facade at this level. The building is capped by a soldier brick parapet and concrete coping. The west wall of the building, overlooking Westbeth Park, is brick punctuated by window and door openings (some bricked up). This facade was painted white as part of the conversion to Westbeth.

Westbeth Park. 155-163 Bank Street. Richard Meier, architect, 1968-70. As part of the conversion of the former Bell Labs complex into Westbeth, two deteriorated industrial buildings were demolished in order to create a community park known as Westbeth Park or Westbeth Courtyard. The park is separated from Bank Street by a low concrete wall. At the west end, the wall gives way to stairs, while to the east is a ramp. On the inner side, the wall forms U-shaped areas for seating and to shelter trees. Two rows of London plain trees (*Platanus acerifolia*) are planted in this area; the tree pits are surrounded by granite Belgian blocks. Three cylindrical planters are set to the north of this grouping. The paving in this area is a rough concrete. The remainder of the park is paved in small, square asphalt blocks. In the center of the park was a fountain that has been replaced by a polygonal planter with wood sides. The planter is surrounded by low cylindrical concrete seats. These concrete seats, and all of the other low concrete elements scaled for seating, have a single incised band located about six inches from the top. To the north, a low, wide stair leads from the park to the two large openings leading into the arcade connecting with the inner courtyard (described with Building A). To the east, beginning several yards before the stair, a concrete wall, rounded at the southwest corner, creates a round planting pit. North of this, the wall step up gently, creating a garden with locust trees. To the west, at the line of the stairs, a curved concrete wall creates a slightly raised plaza with a raised rectangular planter.

445-53 West Street/169 Bank Street (Building E). Architect unknown; built for William Van Hook, c. 1861. This four-story brick building was originally part of a wood-planing mill. The long West Street facade is

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 7 **Page** 7

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

divided into seven sections; the first two sections (from left to right) are two bays wide, while the remaining five sections are three bays wide. The sections are separated by projecting piers and the windows within each section are separated by shallower piers, accentuating the verticality of the massing. The facade is articulated by rectangular windows on the first three stories and round-arch windows on the fourth story. The building is capped by a corbelled brick cornice. The Bank Street facade is identical to that on West Street, with three sections, each three-bays wide. The building retains some early 6x6 wood sash on the third story and some early 2x2 wood sash on the fourth story. On the first story, vehicular entries have been added to the first, second, fourth, and sixth bays on West Street and on the second bay on Bank Street; this was later converted into a pedestrian entrance with a stair. Another pedestrian entrance is located at the east end of the Bank Street elevation. The northern half of the brick east wall, visible from Westbeth Park, is articulated by segmental-arch windows. This wall was painted white as part of the conversion into Westbeth. On the interior, the building retains original wood stairs, and the heavy wood posts and beams that typify nineteenth-century, industrial, slow-burning construction. The building houses studios for Westbeth residents, as well as space largely rented to cultural tenants, such as the Brecht Institute. The interior retains early features such as wood stairs and the massive wood beams and posts typical of nineteenth-century slow-burning construction.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 1

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Narrative Statement of Significance

Westbeth is nationally significant under criterion A in the area of community planning and development² as the first and to this day, largest publically and privately financed conversion of an industrial complex into housing for artists in the United States. The conversion of the former Bell Laboratories complex into subsidized housing for a diverse group of artists, with 384 studio, one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments, gallery, theater, and commercial spaces, and large landscaped park and courtyard, occurred in 1967-70, at a time when the adaptive reuse of buildings was in its infancy and the notion of converting an obsolete and abandoned industrial complex into live-work space for artists was a radical notion. In addition, the project codified the idea of artists living and working in studios created from obsolete industrial space, a development that had recently begun, in an illegal manner, in post-industrial sections of New York, such as SoHo. The success of the Westbeth project in creating live-work space for artists led to new laws that permitted artists to live in other areas that were zoned for industrial use. The project also inspired other projects that converted factories into housing for artists in other American cities. The Westbeth project was an important example of the private and public sectors joining together in partnership to create new housing, since planning and funding was undertaken jointly by the recently formed federal National Endowment for the Arts and the private J. M. Kaplan Fund, with the assistance of The Federal Housing Authority, the City of New York, and the Bankers Trust Company. The pioneering character of the Westbeth project was widely recognized, by the government, by architectural and popular newspapers and magazines, and by authors of books about preservation and artist housing as soon as it was announced. Upon its completion, the conversion won several awards. The Westbeth conversion also had a direct influence on other projects to convert industrial buildings into artist housing, notably at the conversion of the Chickering Piano Factory in Boston into the Piano Craft Guild in 1974. Commentary in the forty years since the project was begun has continued to see it as a major early example of adaptive reuse and as a significant example of low- and middle-income government-supported housing. In addition, the conversion of the former Bell Labs laboratory and factory complex to the Westbeth residential complex, marks the first inroads of housing into the Greenwich Village waterfront area, heralding the major change that would transform the far West Village into a residential neighborhood by the end of the century. The conversion project was the first significant design of Richard Meier, who has gone on to become one of the world's most prestigious architects, with commissions throughout the United States and Europe; Meier won the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the profession's most prestigious award, in 1984. Westbeth also meets Criterion C for embodying the distinctive characteristics of a new property type that developed in the late twentieth century known popularly as a "loft conversion" for live-work space made possible by the convergence of several factors including the abandonment of large-scale industrial buildings in cities, rezoning, public-private funding, and ideology. Meier's approach in addressing the spatial needs of the tenants was creative particularly in the inclusion of a variety of simplex (one-story) and duplex (two-story) spaces and the creation of open space. The architectural interventions by Meier were generally kept to a minimum thus preserving much of the original fabric of the Bell

² Community planning and development, as defined by the National Register of Historic Places, is "the design or development of the physical structures of communities." In the case of Westbeth, the buildings were rehabilitated to serve the housing and work-space needs of a community of visual and performing artists, and writers in New York City.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 2

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

Telephone laboratory and factory complex. The period of significance – 1967 to 1970 – represents the years in which the complex was converted to live-work space. Though the opening of Westbeth took place less than 50 years ago, this pioneering adaptive re-use project is exceptionally significant under NR criterion consideration G.

This nomination encompasses the previously listed (NR and NHL) laboratory building at 463 West Street (Building A on attached plan) which was deemed nationally significant for its importance in the history of science, relating to the important experiments and inventions undertaken here by the Western Electric Company and its successor, Bell Laboratories (generally known as Bell Labs).³ The 1975 nomination for the laboratory building includes information on Westbeth noting that “Local and national media praised the venture as an example of recycling an older building while at the same time providing artists with low cost housing and studio facilities.”⁴

Early History of the Westbeth Site

Westbeth occupies the entire block bounded by Bethune Street on the north, Bank Street on the south, Washington Street on the east, and West Street, paralleling the Hudson River, on the west. This block is entirely built on landfill created in the nineteenth century. While blocks to the east were built up with residential buildings, the area west of Washington Street, at the far western edge of Greenwich Village, adjoining the Hudson River and its shipping piers, largely developed as an industrial neighborhood in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is evident, for example, in the earliest extant building on the block, a former wood planing mill, completed c. 1861, at 445-53 West Street, on the northeast corner of Bank Street. The building was erected by William Van Hook, who had acquired the property in 1857. By 1879 the building had become a box factory; by 1881 a paint and oil works; and after a fire in c. 1895, lofts and stores.⁵ In 1897 the building was purchased by the Western Electric Company as part of its assemblage of lots on block 639 that would be used for the creation of a new research and manufacturing complex. Western Electric was the electrical engineering research and manufacturing unit of the Bell System, the large telecommunications company that also included AT&T. In 1898, with the completion of the large building at 455-65 West Street, extending east along Bethune Street, Western Electric transferred its operations to this site. The new building contained corporate offices, manufacturing facilities, and laboratories. The building was designed by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz. Eidlitz had previously designed several buildings for various components of the Bell System. The complex was expanded, first with the construction of 141-49 Bank Street, on the northwest corner of Washington Street, designed in 1899 by Cyrus Eidlitz, and then by 51-55 Bethune Street, at the southwest corner of Washington Street, built in 1923-26. This extension was designed by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, the successor firm to Eidlitz’s own office, which continued to receive multiple commissions (under

³ The nomination notes the period of significance for the laboratory building at 463 West Street as 1907 to 1966.

⁴ Sheire, Section 7, p. 1.

⁵ Regina M. Kellerman, *The Architecture of the Greenwich Village Waterfront: An Archival Research Study* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 45.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 3

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

various names) from the arms of the Bell System, most prominently the Barclay-Vesey Building, the headquarters of the New York Telephone Company (McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, 1923-27; NR listed) on Barclay and Vesey Streets at West Street, and the AT&T Long Distance Building (Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker, 1930-32) at 32 Sixth Avenue. On January 1, 1925, before 51-55 Bethune Street was completed, Western Electric became a part of Bell Laboratories, the more comprehensive research and development arm of the Bell System; Bell Labs completed the building and occupied the entire complex.⁶ The final addition to the complex was the construction of a building for sound recording experiments at 151 Bank Street, in 1928-29, designed by Bell Labs' own staff. A major alteration occurred to the complex when the New York Central Railroad erected its elevated High Line freight tracks in 1931-34 along a right-of-way running just west of Washington Street. The approximately forty-foot wide rail line cut right through the third story of the Bell Labs building at 51-55 Bethune Street and ran along the roof of the building at 141-45 Bank Street (this section of the elevated High Line was removed by the Rockrose Development Corporation in 1991). The presence of the rail line running right through the building established efficient shipping of goods to and from the complex.

The Western Electric/Bell Labs complex was devoted both to experimentation in pure science and to evolving ways in which to use science to further the technological and corporate advancement of the Bell System. As noted in the National Register nomination for the Bell Labs building at 463 West Street, "the accomplishments of the Bell Telephone Laboratories have been truly remarkable."⁷ Western Electric and Bell Laboratories technological breakthroughs have included: the development of the first high-vacuum tube (1912); the invention of the condenser microphone which became the "mike" for early radio (1913); the technology for cross-continental telephone service (1915); the principle for what became radar (1919); high fidelity recording (1925); sound motion pictures (1926); television transmission (1927); color TV transmission (1929); the digital computer (1938); the transistor (1947); a microwave radio relay system (1948); direct distance dialing (1951); the silicon solar cell (1954); transoceanic telephone cable (1956); lasers (1958); large superconducting magnets (1961); satellite communications (1962); and the picturephone (1964).⁸ By the mid 1960s, Bell Labs had not only outgrown the Greenwich Village site, but noise and vibrations from city traffic made certain experiments impossible. Thus, the company moved to a new suburban complex, designed by Eero Saarinen, in Holmdel, New Jersey. The Greenwich Village complex was left vacant and the future of these buildings in what had become a deteriorated area of underutilized industrial buildings was in doubt. The property came to the attention of William Zeckendorf, a prominent New York developer who often acted as a packager and promoter

⁶ "Bell Lab. Building to be Sold," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 200 (4 November 1967): 3.

⁷ "Bell Telephone Laboratories," National Register nomination (1975), 8-2.

⁸ "Bell Telephone Laboratories," National Register nomination and Don Woodford, "Parnassus on the Hudson," *Bell Telephone Magazine* (July/August 1970): 5-6.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 4

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

of projects. It was he who suggested to the advocates of a subsidized housing complex for artists that this would be an appropriate site.⁹

The Creation of Westbeth

The idea behind the creation of Westbeth as a live-work community for low- and moderate-income visual and performing artists was that of Roger L. Stevens, the first chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, in conjunction with Jacob Merrill Kaplan, the founder of the J. M. Kaplan Fund. Roger Stevens (1910-1998) was born in Detroit and, as a young man, joined a large real estate firm in that city, making a fortune in real estate before he was thirty.¹⁰ As a young man, Stevens had become interested in theater and with his growing real estate income, he became a theatrical producer on Broadway, first succeeding in 1950 by signing up Leonard Bernstein to write the music for a production of *Peter Pan* starring Jean Arthur and Boris Karloff. In 1951, Stevens not only produced four plays on Broadway, but also led a syndicate that purchased the Empire State Building. While continuing in real estate, Stevens produced over 200 plays on Broadway, including *West Side Story*, *Death Trap*, *A Man For All Seasons*, and *Bus Stop*, as well as works by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, T. S. Eliot, Tom Stoppard, and Harold Pinter. In 1961, President Kennedy appointed Stevens chairman of a proposed national cultural center, which later became the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He raised most of the money to build the Kennedy Center and ran it for its first two decades. In 1964, President Johnson asked Stevens to chair a National Council on the Arts, which would advise the president on art issues. After the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, the Council became the advisory body to the Endowment. Stevens was appointed the first chairman of the new Endowment. Among Stevens' earliest concerns as chair of the Council and the Endowment was solving the problem of affordable housing for artists. This was considered a problem of national significance, and, therefore, became one of the first issues considered by the new National Endowment.

The issue of creating housing for artists was first discussed at the second meeting of the National Council on the Arts in June 1965, when the council suggested that a priority should be "projects that will help creative artists to obtain adequate and appropriate studio space. This should include both individual studios and group facilities."¹¹ This concern was a result of an understanding that artists needed space for both their work and their homes and that funding a single space was difficult and using two spaces was prohibitively expensive. This, of course, was not a new problem for artists and solutions had resulted in the creation of interesting housing types, notably the artist-studio apartment houses of the early twentieth century, funded by and

⁹ William Zeckendorf with Edward McCreary, *The Autobiography of William Zeckendorf* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1970), 9-10.

¹⁰ For Roger Stevens, see "Roger L. Stevens, Real Estate Magnate, Producer and Fund-Raiser, Is Dead at 87," *New York Times*, 4 February 1998, B9.

¹¹ *First Annual Report of the National Council on the Arts* (1965); quoted in Ana Steele Clark interview, 17 May 2007, 9, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation's Westbeth Oral History Project. Clark went to work for the National Endowment in 1965 as a clerk/typist and by the 1990s rose to Acting Chairman.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 5

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

inhabited by successful artists, largely on West 67th Street in the National Register listed West 67th Street Artists' Colony Historic District. In 1965, the Council authorized Stevens to initiate, in the best possible way, an immediate pilot project to remodel an old loft building or buildings into studios for artists' quarters."¹² The *First Annual Report of the National Council on the Arts* also included a section entitled Low-Cost Artist Housing," in which it states that:

Adequate space which is essential to the artist in his creative activities, is at a premium in most large cities. The artist frequently combines both his living and working areas because of the special nature of his work. Many European cities provide such facilities for artists at low cost. The HHFA [Housing and Home Finance Agency] has indicated a willingness to cooperate with the National Council on the Arts in developing plans which would help to alleviate this problem, which has become acute. . . . The remodeling of a loft building as a pilot project may shortly be undertaken to demonstrate the feasibility of such a program.¹³

It is notable that from the inception, Stevens saw that a solution to the problem of artists' housing lay in the conversion of old industrial loft space into live-work space. This reflects the trend that had begun in the late 1950s of artists moving illegally into underutilized industrial buildings with large open floors that could accommodate almost any size canvas or sculpture. This development was most evident in the New York neighborhood that has become known as SoHo.¹⁴ Even though residential uses were illegal in SoHo, an area zoned for industrial and commercial use only, landlords were happy to rent space to these artists since industry was declining and it was difficult to find tenants. The artists spent their own money installing bathrooms, kitchens, and other residential features. It is important to remember that in 1965, at the time that the National Endowment was considering the issue of creating housing for artists in an old industrial building, loft living was generally illegal since most loft buildings were in areas zoned for industrial and not residential use; even if they were in residential areas they generally did not meet residential fire codes and other code requirements for habitation. The National Endowment's idea of government involvement with artist housing was completely new in America where all previous artist housing had been created by private investment, either by artists themselves or by speculative builders. This contrasted with the situation in Europe where government-sponsored artists' housing projects had been completed – notably in Paris and Helsinki – albeit on a far smaller scale than that contemplated by the National Endowment. Thus, not only was the National Council on the Arts interested in creating housing for artists, but members were aware of the most recent trend in artists' live-work space and were intent on providing such space in a legal manner.

¹² *First Annual Report of the National Council on the Arts*; in Clark interview, 9.

¹³ *First Annual Report of the National Council on the Arts*; in Clark interview, 9-10.

¹⁴ The history of SoHo as a center for artists' lofts is detailed in Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 263-270 and James R. Hudson, *The Unanticipated City: Loft Conversions in Lower Manhattan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 6

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Although a location for the artists' housing complex was not specified in early Council reports, it was clear that this project would be undertaken in New York, the arts capital of the country. The Council could only advise on arts policy and had no funds to implement projects. However, with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, funding became available. With the encouragement of Stevens, one of the Endowment's first projects became carrying through with the Council's proposal to create housing and working space for artists. In order to successfully complete the project, Roger Stevens turned to Jacob Kaplan, founder and president of the J. M. Kaplan Fund, who already had some experience in providing housing for artists.¹⁵ The J. M. Kaplan fund was established in 1945 with the profits from Kaplan's sale of the Welch Grape Company to the National Grape Co-operative Association in Westfield, New York. The fund was especially active in the creation of affordable housing, a result of the fact that Kaplan had grown up in slum tenements and "believed that decent affordable housing in well-designed neighborhoods was a most basic human right."¹⁶ Much of Jacob Kaplan's interest in the arts came about through the influence of his wife Alice Kaplan, and beginning in the 1960s, the Kaplan Fund backed many arts-related projects. Thus, the idea of sponsoring affordable housing for artists reflected two of Kaplan's major concerns. Prior to Westbeth, the Kaplan Fund had supported several small-scale artist-studio conversion projects. For example, in 1963-67, two red brick buildings on Greenwich and West 12th Streets in Greenwich Village, that had once been the warehouses for an iron foundry, were converted into New York City's first low-income housing cooperative for artists, with twelve units of live-work space.¹⁷ Kaplan also funded the conversion of the industrial building at 80 Wooster Street into an artists' coop for George Maciunas, the founder of the Fluxus Group, a major arts movement of the 1960s, that included Yoko Ono among its members.¹⁸

In 1965, it was Stevens who approached Kaplan about supporting a larger artists' live-work project. This project was, according to Lisa Greenwald, "the culmination of Kaplan's interest in affordable housing."¹⁹ Stevens hoped to harness Federal programs aimed at creating low- and middle-income housing to the specific needs of artists. Stevens and Kaplan joined together to find the perfect venue for this visionary project, searching through underutilized and abandoned buildings and neighborhoods for an appropriate building. Joan Davidson, Jacob Kaplan's daughter, who would soon play a key role in the creation of Westbeth, describes how they "went chasing all around New York City, these two old Geezers, looking for the ideal building . . . They

¹⁵ For Jacob Kaplan, see "Jacob Kaplan, Philanthropist, Is Dead," *New York Times* 20 July 1987, D12; "History of the Fund," J. M. Kaplan Fund web site, www.jmkaplanfund.org, 20 August 2007; Lisa Greenwald, *The History of the J. M. Kaplan Fund* (New York: privately printed, 2004).

¹⁶ Greenwald, 64.

¹⁷ "Co-op In 'Village' to House Artists," *New York Times* 8 April 1967, 28.

¹⁸ Stern, *New York* 1960, 266.

¹⁹ Greenwald, 64.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

hiked up and climbed down. They went under and over. And, yes, it was the two of them.”²⁰ Finally, following a lead provided by William Zeckendorf, they settled on the former Bell Labs complex on West and Bethune Streets, a location that resulted in the name of the complex – first “West Beth” and then simply “Westbeth.” At the time, the West Village neighborhood was an area of deteriorated and under utilized industrial buildings, located just south of the Gansevoort Meat Market; the elevated West Side Highway (officially the Miller Highway) ran above West Street along side the complex. Joan Davidson described the area as a “wilderness when we were there.”²¹ Architect Tod Williams recalled that “beyond Washington Street, there was nothing, absolutely nothing.”²² As Henry Geldzahler, then an associate curator of American art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Council’s consultant on the visual arts noted, “it’s really avant-garde to move into this area.”²³

The National Endowment, in one of its first grants, and the Kaplan Fund each agreed to provide \$100,000 to develop the project. The *First Annual Report of the National Council on the Arts* describes the concept:

The project is being designed to provide artists with adequate lighting, acoustics and space, and long-term leases, which are frequently difficult to secure, enabling them to work and live in both practical and comfortable surroundings. The Kaplan Fund was chosen because of its pioneer work in the field. The Council believes that adequate and reasonably priced studio quarters are among the most urgent need for artists, especially in the field of painting and sculpture.²⁴

The commitment of both the National Endowment and the Kaplan Fund soon grew enormously. In the *Annual Report* for 1968, the Endowment reports that it was “launched with a \$750,000 matching grant, enabling the J. M. Kaplan Fund to set up the non-profit Westbeth Corporation, which purchased the old Bell Telephone Laboratories on New York City’s Lower West Side. Endowment Funds joined with those of the Kaplan Fund, as well as Federal Housing Administration financing and other private sponsors.”²⁵ The involvement of the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which ultimately guaranteed a low-cost mortgage of almost twelve million dollars, was key to the success of the project. This

²⁰ Joan Davidson interview, 13 March 2007, 3, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation’s Westbeth Oral History Project.

²¹ Davidson interview, 7.

²² Tod Williams interview, 2 April 2007, 5, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation’s Westbeth Oral History Project.

²³ Quoted in “\$10-Million Block to house Artists,” *New York Times* 8 August 1967, 41. Geldzahler later became the Metropolitan Museum’s curator of twentieth-century art and a key player in New York’s late twentieth-century art world.

²⁴ First Annual Report of the National Endowment for the Arts, in Clark interview, 12.

²⁵ Annual Report of the National Endowment for the Arts (1968), in Clark interview, 12.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

was the first time that the FHA used its moderate-income housing program, known as 221 (d) 3 for the creation of housing for a specific professional group.²⁶ The project was officially announced to the public on August 7, 1967. The plans immediately received national attention since the project was seen as a new venture in housing.²⁷

This pioneering housing project was definitely planned as a home for painters and sculptors, but Stevens was interested in the possibility of going beyond this limitation. He stated that “we especially want this to be a national center, not only for painters and sculptors, who undoubtedly will comprise the major portion of tenants, but also possibly for writers, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, and others.”²⁸ It was, however, the Kaplan Fund that expanded on this vision, moving away from the idea of just housing painters and sculptors to creating a diverse community of visual and performing artists and writers. The 1968 *Annual Report* of the National Endowment clearly states the character and objectives of the projected community of artists – objectives that went beyond simply creating living and private working spaces to providing the framework for the creation of a vibrant artists’ community:

Federal Housing Administration financing and other private sources will permit the conversion of these properties into excellent studio living quarters, which will be made available to artists at reasonable rents. In addition to the 384 units which will house artists and their families, as well as providing working space, this artist housing center will include an almost limitless supply of other facilities for these artists and the community: a theater, film studio, exhibition galleries, rehearsal rooms, sculpture gardens, projection rooms, darkrooms and adjoining park and playground areas as well.²⁹

Westbeth was not simply a project to house artists, but was seen as an important investment in the future of New York as an urban center. It was, according to an early history of the National Council and the National Endowment, “in keeping with our emphasis on developing cities which serve the soul as well as the body.”³⁰ It was also hoped that the success of this project would be a model for the creation of similar artists’ live-work

²⁶ “Plan Disclosed to Alter N. Y. Lab Into Housing Center for Artists,” *Washington Post* 8 August 1967, A2.

²⁷ For example, besides the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles cited above, the project was discussed in local and national general-interest journals and in professional magazines: “West Village Renaissance: 500 Artists’ Apartments,” *Village Voice* 12 (10 August 1967); “Art City,” *Newsweek* 70 (21 August 1967): 63; “Homes for Artists on New York’s Lower West Side,” *Interiors* 127 (September 1967): 14, 17, and “Greenwich Village Renewal Under Way,” *Los Angeles Times* 6 July 1968, 10.

²⁸ “Homes for Artists.”

²⁹ *Annual Report of the National Endowment for the Arts* (1968), in Clark interview 12-13.

³⁰ National Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts During the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, vol 1: The History (1968); in Clark interview, 16.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 9

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

complexes elsewhere in the country that would be similarly beneficial on their communities. As the 1968 *Annual Report* notes, “if this experiment is successful, it is hoped that many such centers will be established all over the United States. . . . [T]here isn’t a city in the country where the physical and spiritual life of the rest of its citizens cannot help but be improved through the salvaging of sturdy, unused buildings for artist housing.”³¹ Joan Davidson similarly notes that both the Endowment and the Kaplan Fund hoped “that this would be the first. This would be a model. And then they would be repeated in every major city.”³² One of the first and largest conversion projects that followed Westbeth was the Piano Factory, the transformation of the abandoned Chickering & Sons piano factory in Boston into artists’ live/work space which was undertaken as a direct result of the success of the New York project. As Carleton Knight III wrote in the *American Institute of Architects Journal* in 1974, “having seen the success of New York City’s Westbeth and having conducted a market study in Boston, they [developers Robert Gelardin and Simeon Bruner] determined that the 250,000-square-foot structure could be converted into 174 apartment/studios for artists.”³³ It is clear that the general success of Westbeth and the national publicity that it received were a catalyst for other conversions of urban industrial buildings into artists’ housing; however, it is not always possible to find published commentary directly citing Westbeth’s influence.

The National Endowment provided funding for Westbeth to the J. M. Kaplan Fund and, therefore, it became the Fund’s responsibility to see the project through to completion. Jacob Kaplan hired Dixon Bain, who had studied housing finance and development at MIT, as the administrator of the project. Kaplan’s daughter, Joan Davidson, was named the Fund’s vice president, and was placed in charge of overseeing the project and the Fund’s own investments in its success. Together, Davidson and Bain, working with Mayor John Lindsey and City Planning Commission chair Donald Elliott, maneuvered the project through the city permitting process while Stevens dealt with the FHA’s detailed specifications for the creation of housing. Davidson and Bain managed the construction, and devised a method for choosing the artists who would move in upon completion. The first issue was selecting an architect to design the conversion. Neither the National Endowment nor the Kaplan Fund had anyone specific in mind for this task and there were not yet any architects who had established a track record for the conversion of older buildings into housing or other uses, since, in 1967, what has become known as “adaptive reuse” was a new idea for both saving old buildings and reinvigorating older urban neighborhoods. In 1967, the conversion of the Ghirardelli chocolate factory in San Francisco into the Ghirardelli Square commercial complex, generally heralded as the earliest such adaptive reuse scheme, was nearing completion and the similar Cannery and Ice House projects, also in San Francisco, were just beginning.

³¹ *Annual Report of the National Endowment for the Arts* (1968), in Clark interview, 13.

³² Davidson interview, 4.

³³ Carleton Knight II, “Adaptive Use, Cont. Apartments from a Factory and a Store,” *American Institute of Architects Journal* 62 (November 1974): 39 and Allyson Mehley, *Preserving the North Light: Boston’s Early Artist Studio Buildings and the Historic Precedent for Adaptive Use* (MS Thesis in Historic Preservation, Columbia University, 2008), 140.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 10

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

In New York, Westbeth was being planned just as two of New York's other pioneering adaptive reuse projects were completed – the conversion of the Astor Library (NR listed) into the Public Theater (1966) and the conversion of the Jefferson Market Courthouse (NR listed) into a branch of the New York Public Library (1967). Together, these early projects proved that old and seemingly obsolete buildings could be converted into a variety of new uses that would assist in the creation of lively urban neighborhoods. Jeanne M. Davern put the pioneering quality of the Westbeth conversion into context in her 1980 book *Architecture 1970-1980* when she noted that “at a time when the creative potential of rehabilitation for community revitalization was only beginning to be understood, Westbeth became an architectural landmark.”³⁴ Westbeth was conceived and completed well before other large-scale adaptive reuse projects that converted factories into residential complexes. As has been noted, Westbeth had a direct impact on the creation of the Piano Factory. It was also completed several years before the heralded 1975 conversion of the A. C. Lawrence Leather Company factory in Peabody, Massachusetts into the Tannery, a residential conversion that included subsidized housing for the elderly, undertaken by a private developer but assisted by the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency.³⁵

In the fall of 1967, a relatively unknown architect named Richard Meier was hired to design the conversion of the Bell Labs complex into Westbeth. Meier had studied architecture at Cornell University and was a close friend of Jacob Kaplan's son (and Joan Davidson's brother), Richard Kaplan. Richard Kaplan recommended Meier and he was hired. Joan Davidson recounts that “Richard said ‘Well, there's this bright kid in my class.’ We interviewed him and we liked him. And we said, ‘What the heck! Let's give him a shot!’ . . . It was so informal, the way we did things then.”³⁶ Meier had only recently opened his own office and had previously designed two houses. Westbeth brought him publicity and several awards, launching a career that would reach the highest pinnacle of architectural success in both the United States and Europe. This was recognized in 1984 when he became the youngest architect to ever win the Pritzker Prize, the most prestigious architectural award in the world, and again in 1997, when he received the AIA Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects and the Praemium Imperiale from the Japanese government. In addition, as of 2007, Meier's buildings had won twenty-nine National Honor Awards from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and fifty-three New York AIA and other AIA chapter awards.³⁷ He was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architects Royal Gold Medal in 1989, made a Commandeur, l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 1992, received the Deutscher Architektur Preis in 1993, and was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1995. Among the landmarks of late Modernism designed by Meier in the course of his career are the Hartford Seminary (1978-81) in Connecticut, High Museum in Atlanta (1980-83), Getty Center in Los Angeles (1984-97), United States Courthouse in Islip, New York (1993-2000),

³⁴ Jeanne M. Davern, *Architecture 1970-1980: A Decade of Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 16.

³⁵ Barbaralee Diamondstein, *Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 255.

³⁶ Davidson interview, 13.

³⁷ Richard Meier, web site, www.richardmeierarchitect.com, 20 August 2007.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 11

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Frankfurt Museum of Decorative Arts (1979-85), Canal + Television Headquarters in Paris (1988-92), and the Jubilee Church in Rome (1996-2003).

Meier accepted the Westbeth commission, and, as a result of receiving this large commission, expanded his office, hiring, notably, a young graduate of Princeton, Tod Williams. Williams had been studying utopian socialism and housing, in particular Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, a building that would have a direct influence on the plans for Westbeth.³⁸ As related by Williams, the first task for Meier's office was to measure the building so that the constraints of converting the preexisting structure into housing would be evident. After detailed examination of the Bell Labs complex, three important decisions were made that created the special character of the complex. Dixon Bain felt that the notions that Meier came up with were quite creative.³⁹ First, it was decided that a park would be created on Bank Street by demolishing some of the older buildings in the complex. Initially four buildings were to be demolished – two midblock structures that actually were torn down, the c. 1861 building on the corner of West and Bank Streets, and the former sound recording studio at 151 Bank Street. Both the City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate approved plans that included the demolition of all four buildings. However, the Westbeth sponsors soon decided to keep two of these buildings and requested and received a change in the plans, specifically so that 151 Bank Street could be “leased out to theatrical groups for rehearsals and performances, to a commercial art supply store, a coffee shop and to other commercial tenants whose services or supplies will supplement or support the facilities of the main building.”⁴⁰ The West Street building was to be used for community facilities on the lower two floors and commercial rental space above.

The park, with its planting beds, concrete seating, and central fountain (now converted into a planter) is an excellent example of landscape design from the period, with its juxtaposition of green planting space and hardscape with beautifully poured concrete embellishments. The space was brightened by painting the side walls of the three facing buildings white. Since the park faced south, sunlight would reflect off of the bright walls, creating a light-filled space. The park became a center for the life of the community and remains largely as built. It was here that the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, now a major civic event, originated, with Westbeth children dressing up in creative costumes and, led by puppeteer and Westbeth resident Ralph Lee, marching from Westbeth Park through the neighborhood.

The second decision made by Meier and his team was the creation of an inner courtyard opened to the air. This was accomplished by demolishing a shipping block. Meier stated that the creation of this courtyard was “the unifying theme at Westbeth. . . . With the roof removed, this area could become a courtyard open to the sky

³⁸ Williams went on to become one of the most sought-after architects of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, working with his wife in the firm of Tod William/Billie Tsien.

³⁹ Dixon Bain interview, 27 April 2007, 4, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation's Westbeth Oral History Project.

⁴⁰ Calendar of the Board of Estimate, 4 April 1968, 33.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 12

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

while simultaneously providing a focal point for both residential units and commercial shops and galleries.”⁴¹ The new courtyard space was to be surrounded with commercial spaces, that could be rented to galleries, restaurants, or other establishments that would pay rent to Westbeth. The courtyard was embellished with a round, concrete bench and a large Corbusian concrete ramp leading from the ground level to a second-story commercial space. Tod Williams states that this ramp was his idea – a “sort of macho thrust to say ‘I’m here. This is the architecture.’”⁴² Unfortunately, the commercial space, which was to subsidize the residential uses and keep rents low, was not successful, since it was difficult to find commercial tenants willing to pay rent in what was, at the time the complex was completed, still a backwater. In addition, the commercial market in general in the late 1960s and early 1970s was in the doldrums. Davidson notes that “the theory was valid, but the location and timing was wrong.”⁴³

The third, and most significant design decision resulted in the creation of a mix of simplex (one-story) and duplex (two-story) units. The duplexes, located in the large building on Bethune Street, were an adaptation of the duplex housing plan of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles. Le Corbusier’s duplex plan had halls on every third floor, from which residents entered apartments and then went either up or down to larger second levels. Williams recalls that “it wasn’t long before we had an idea of the design which was in effect . . . a poor man’s Marseille Block, which had used the idea of a corridor essentially down the mass of the two sides of the buildings, and then apartments that would go up and over, or down and under.”⁴⁴ At Westbeth, central halls already ran through each floor of the long Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz building fronting on Bethune Street. These halls were preserved on every third floor; thus apartments on the floor above and below extend across the entire building. Each apartment was, in a sense, an L-shaped space extending across two floors. Le Corbusier’s work was extremely influential in America in the 1960s and had a strong impact on Meier and his work. “We were all very much interested in the work of Le Corbusier,” notes Williams, “and the Marseilles Block, was the sort of an ideal for a young architectural community, thinking that one could solve social problems and build beautiful buildings in an urban condition.”⁴⁵

The plan was well received by contemporary commentators. A critic for *Architectural Record* commented that “Meier’s manipulation of space has ingeniously increased the amount of apartment area available.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Richard Meier, “Westbeth and Flexible Code Interpretations,” *Architectural Record* 147 (March 1970): 106.

⁴² Williams interview, 9.

⁴³ Davidson interview, 16. Commercial rents were supposed to pay approximately thirty percent of Westbeth’s expenses, including repayment of the mortgage. Thus, the lack of rent from commercial tenants had a negative impact on Westbeth’s financial stability, resulting in problems when residential rents needed to be raised.

⁴⁴ Williams interview, 4.

⁴⁵ Williams interview, 6-7.

⁴⁶ “Westbeth’s Rehabilitation Project,” 104.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 13

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Prominent arts critic Dore Ashton also commented on how “in designing the interior spaces, Meier used great ingenuity.”⁴⁷ In retrospect, Joan Davidson feels that the spatial arrangement and the creation of open space were the two most imaginative features of Meier’s design. She notes that Meier “took advantage of the total space” by devising the system of duplexes that only preserved the long corridors on three floors, and that the park on Bank Street was a beautiful design that opened to the street “in a very generous, welcoming way.”⁴⁸ The locations of the fire balconies of the complex’s courtyard indicate the presence of these duplexes. These rounded metal fire balconies, which substitute for the massive fire escapes that would otherwise have been necessary on these buildings of semi-fireproof construction, turned “the courtyard into something of an aesthetic plus rather than a huge negative,” relates Dixon Bain.⁴⁹

Besides the duplex apartments, which account for about half of the units, simplex units were also created, as well as commercial and community spaces on the first and second stories and a rooftop studio. The architectural interventions were kept to a minimum, preserving as much of the original fabric as possible, including most walls, elevator shafts, the fireplace mantels in the executive offices, the marble floors, plasterwork, and wood enframements of the West Street lobby, and the marble walls, coffered plaster ceiling, and radiator grilles of the Bethune Street lobby. Some of the interiors were highlighted with vivid paint colors – referred to by Williams as “day glo colors”⁵⁰ – these survive on the coffered ceiling of the Bethune Street lobby. Structurally, the main buildings had arched steel and terra-cotta ceilings that Tod Williams remembers were “beautiful.” “Remember,” he notes, “this has the great undulating character of ceilings that were terra cotta stretched between steel and they give this beautiful undulating interior to the spaces.”⁵¹ Entirely new plumbing, electrical, and other utility systems had to be threaded through the existing structure.

Meier’s aim, within the constraints of cost and the built fabric of the old buildings, was, as he told a writer for the *New Yorker*, to “give people incredibly large units for the rent – much larger than you could give nowadays by starting from scratch.”⁵² He planned separate bathrooms in each unit, but otherwise, spaces were generally kept open so that each artist and his or her family could sub-divide the space as needed. This insistence that artists’ live-work space needed to be flexible and that traditional room arrangement would not work for such a population, caused problems with the FHA which had strict rules about apartment design and infrastructure and which gave loans strictly governed by the number of bedrooms in an apartment. Finally, in order to placate the FHA, dotted lines were drawn onto the apartment floors plans, indicating where walls could legally be erected

⁴⁷ Dore Ashton, *New York* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 222.

⁴⁸ Davidson interview, 20-21.

⁴⁹ Bain interview, 4.

⁵⁰ Williams interview, 9.

⁵¹ Williams interview, 22.

⁵² “Talk of the Town: Westbeth,” *New Yorker* 44 (8 June 1968): 27.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 14

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

to create the rooms required by the FHA. The FHA was hesitant to accept the notion that artists would want space without walls, but after a great deal of persuasion and statements made by several artists, the FHA agreed to the unusual arrangement for counting bedrooms. Barbaralee Diamondstein, an early chronicler of adaptive reuse projects in America, noted that "such open plans had never before been sanctioned by the FHA, but, in a revolutionary turnabout, the authority permitted the architects to substitute dotted lines for actual walls in their plans, signifying potential space distribution. Government flexibility was a vital ingredient in the project."⁵³ Meier found that the "most gratifying" element of the entire project "was the manner in which the various city and Federal agencies responded to our efforts to provide maximum openness and flexibility."⁵⁴

As the design was progressing, efforts were undertaken to acquire approval from the city and permits from various city agencies. In order to gain city support and the variances and tax abatements needed to make the project financially possible, it was important to gain support from the Greenwich Village community. Dixon Bain recalls that he first sought the support of Jane Jacobs, a local activist who not only lived nearby, but whose book, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1959, had already begun to change people's outlook on urban development. Jacobs was supportive, as was the West Village Planning District. Local support was coupled with support from Mayor John Lindsey and Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton. Mayor Lindsey was especially interested in the arts and, indeed, in July 1967, just as planning for Westbeth was beginning, the city announced that the Peaks Mason Mints factory at 20 Henry Street in Brooklyn Heights would be converted into a cooperative residence for 42 artists as part of the Cadman Plaza Urban Renewal Area.⁵⁵ This project, subsidized by the state's Mitchell-Lama middle-income housing program, was the idea of architect Lee Harris Pomeroy, who first proposed it in 1963. After continuous delays, the conversion into a rental building for artists was completed in 1974, several years after Westbeth opened. Although the building is extant, it is no longer an artists' residence, but was converted into market-rate housing in 2007.⁵⁶ In order to insure that Westbeth would be completed, the city initiated a radical new planning idea, establishing the first special zoning district, thus permitting living and work space in what was an industrial zone. (This was the first of many such districts in the city, such as the Lincoln Square Special Zoning District.) New York City also agreed to a seventy percent tax abatement. Getting permits from the Department of Building for the creation of housing also proved to be difficult since, like the FHA, the Department had a problem with the open live-work space. With no actual bedrooms built, how could they be sure that rooms would not be illegally created without windows. Finally, Meier, Davidson, and Bain, working closely with Mayor Lindsey and City Planning

⁵³ Diamondstein, *Buildings Reborn*, 162.

⁵⁴ Meier, "Westbeth and Flexible Code Interpretations."

⁵⁵ "City Plans Lofts as a Studio Co-op," *New York Times* 17 July 1967, 31.

⁵⁶ "Factory Is Revived as Home for Artists," *New York Times* 17 March 1974, 96. The project also included the creation of an adjoining sculpture garden. In 2007, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission gave permission for the construction of a new apartment building on the garden site.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 15

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Commission chair Donald Elliott, were able to get the department to agree to the same dotted-line arrangement that the FHA had accepted.

On 21 March 1968, New York's Board of Estimate approved the project and the zoning change that made it possible; a second action by the board slightly amended the proposal on 4 April 1968.⁵⁷ It is clear from the text of the Board of Estimate's calendared motion that the Board understood the importance of the proposed Westbeth project for both the city and the country:

Westbeth, sponsored by the National Council on the Arts and the J. M. Kaplan Fund, will be the largest artists' housing facility in the world and the only one of its kind in the United States. Among the types of promising artists who will be tenants at Westbeth will be painters, sculptors, photographers, dancers, composers, actors, filmmakers, musicians, singers, and writers. . . . Its completion in mid-1969 will bring important benefits to Greenwich Village, New York and to the nation, not only in an artistic sense, but in an economic sense as well. It seems likely that other American cities will look to Westbeth as an important demonstration that this country cares enough about the arts to take affirmative action to assure their growth.⁵⁸

Financing also proved to be difficult. Although the FHA was ultimately persuaded to accept the notion that it could provide a subsidized mortgage for a project that did not have traditional room arrangements, commercial banks were hesitant to loan construction money for such an unusual project in such an out-of-the-way location. Finally Jacob Kaplan used his personal influence with Bankers Trust, a bank that he had been closely involved with for many years, and a mortgage was finally issued. The planning of the project was difficult, but ultimately succeeded in a relatively short time – construction work was ready to begin in the early summer, with ground broken on 22 June 1968, at a ceremony attended by Mayor Lindsey, Roger Stevens, Jacob Kaplan, Joan Davidson, Dixon Bain, Richard Kaplan, and Richard Meier.⁵⁹ At the ceremony, Stevens called Westbeth “one of the most important projects ever undertaken by the [National] council [on the Arts].”⁶⁰

Not everyone was equally enthusiastic about the Westbeth project – some artists complained that the creation of 382 apartments was too small to really solve the problem of creating affordable housing for artists, while others noted that they rejected the idea of a “homogeneous ghetto community.”⁶¹ However, these critics were a minority, as most commentators were enthusiastic about the promise the complex held out to create an

⁵⁷ “City Approves Plan for ‘Village’ Artists’ Center,” *New York Times* 22 March 1968, 51.

⁵⁸ Board of Estimate Calendar, 4 April 1968, 34-35.

⁵⁹ “Ground Broken for Westbeth, Project for Artists,” *New York Times* 22 June 1968, 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Greenwich Village Renewal Under Way.”

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 16

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

affordable artists' community. Emily Genauer, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* just after construction began, noted that:

The most imaginative, unconventional and in some respects controversial of the many projects instigated by the National Council on the Arts to assist creative artists in all fields looks at this point as if it could turn out to be the most successful. It's the transformation, physically inaugurated last week, of a Greenwich Village block of old and abandoned industrial buildings into a complex of studio-apartments providing low-rent living and working space for 380 [sic] painters, sculptors, dancers, composers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers and writers.⁶²

In order to carry out work on Westbeth and to establish the new complex as an artists' community, Joan Davidson founded the non-profit Westbeth Corporation as the entity that actually owned the complex. Once design, planning, and financing had been completed and permits had been acquired, the most complex issue before Davidson and her colleagues concerned who would move into the Westbeth units and who would choose the artists. In order to answer these questions, Davidson organized an advisory group, made up of prominent figures in the arts – artists, writers, editors, publishers, critics, patrons, academics, and others (see Appendix). This was an especially august committee with, as Davidson remembered, some members more active than others. Among those who were deeply involved with Westbeth were Thomas Hess, architecture and design curator at the Museum of Modern Art, art historian Ellie Munro, art critic Katherine Kuh, poet Stanley Kunitz, Howard Moody, minister at Judson Memorial Church, and civic leader Rachele Wall.⁶³ The most important people active with the selection committee were Ellie Munro and Ann Sperry, who worked with Davidson in the Westbeth office. As Davidson recounts, the primary challenge “was trying to figure out who lives in this place. . . . [W]hat are the standards, what are the goals. What kind of a community is it going to be? Is it going to be a little isolated dormitory, or is it going to be a regular neighborhood of the city? . . . [I]s it going to be isolated like an artists' colony?”⁶⁴ A strong commitment was made to the goal, previously stated by Stevens, of creating a diverse community, open to individuals from many disciplines, that would be part of the larger community:

Westbeth would choose as diverse a group of artists as possible, welcoming painters and sculptors, musicians, poets and playwrights, choreographers, crafts-persons, filmmakers, etc. of all ages, backgrounds, levels of accomplishment, and point of view; preference would go to creative artists rather than performers; evidence of talent not yet, or so far insufficiently recognized, would be sought; and a commitment to professionalism would be required – rendering students and weekend art dabblers ineligible.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Davidson interview, 8-10.

⁶⁴ Davidson interview, 10.

⁶⁵ Davidson, as quoted in Greenwald, 67.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 17

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

It is significant that the organizers of Westbeth sought professionals in the arts (indeed, each applicant had to have three people attest to his/her professional qualifications), but were not looking for famous names. The idea was to support those who were attempting to make a living as artists, not those who were already successful. Dixon Bain states that “in addition to the income criteria, which was required by law, the criteria that you had to be a practicing artist, by which it was meant that this wasn’t something that when you put down your job as stockbroker during the day, that you pick up an easel at night and painted.”⁶⁶ Over the years, a number of well-known artists have lived at Westbeth, but supporting the famous had never been the idea behind the community. The selection committee was led by Ellie Munro, an art writer, who, Joan Davidson recounts, “knew people all over the lot, and was very smart, had good judgment and high standards. . . . She was a good choice for who to select as tenants because of her vast knowledge of the art world.”⁶⁷ Munro and the committee sought a diverse group of residents, working in different media and in different styles. They also sought a diversity of people, including large numbers of families. Davidson and her advisory board also suggested the idea that artists would live at Westbeth for a certain number of years and then, having established themselves, move on, thus opening the way for other groups of artists. This notion, however, was never codified, and Westbeth became a community of more long-term artist-residents.

During the later part of 1968 and during 1969 construction on the buildings proceeded at a rapid pace and potential tenants were interviewed and selections made. People started moving into the building in late 1969 and the complex was officially opened on 19 May 1970, with speeches by Mayor Lindsey, Jacob Kaplan, Joan Davidson, and the Reverend Howard Moody.⁶⁸ There was a waiting list for entry with over 1,000 names. “I really dig it here,” artist Harry G. Koursaros told *New York Times* reporter Grace Lichtenstein in March 1970, “I never had a complete bathroom before in my life. Without wallowing in bourgeois luxury, it’s nice.”⁶⁹ The diversity of tenants, planned by Davidson and the advisory committee, was evident from the start. The *New York Times* reported that “tenant rosters list 150 painters, 49 sculptors, 27 photographers, 29 writers, 26 musicians, 38 actors, 18 dancers, 14 filmmakers, 11 playwrights, seven poets, nine composers, seven printmakers, three designers, four graphic artists, five craftsmen, four theater producers, hundreds of children and a lot of pets.”⁷⁰

The new residents immediately began creating their own spaces out of the open live-work units. Tod Williams, who was not only an architect on the project but also one of the earliest residents, recalls that “I immediately in

⁶⁶ Bain interview, 17.

⁶⁷ Davidson interview, 15-16.

⁶⁸ “Artists’ Colony Formally Opens,” *New York Times* 20 May 1970, 33.

⁶⁹ Grace Lichtenstein, “Artists’ Housing, Like Art, Mainly a Matter of Taste,” *New York Times* 12 March 1970, 43.

⁷⁰ Lichtenstein, “Artists’ Housing.”

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 18

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

fact did build in lofts for the children. And tried to take as much advantage of the space as possible.”⁷¹ Many artists used the space as planned, for both living and working, but for some visual artists, the space was not big enough for their work, or the materials that they used were not conducive to use in a residential environment. The size issue was partly a result of the fact that FHA rules apportioned apartments depending upon family size not upon studio needs. Thus, a single painter who worked on large canvases could still only receive a studio apartment, whereas, a painter of miniatures or a writer with several children received a larger unit. In order to help alleviate the space problem, some studio space was created in the basement and in the c. 1861 building on the corner of West and Bank Streets for these artists, but others were unhappy with the arrangements, creating some tension in the early years.

As has been noted, finding commercial tenants for the space on the lower floors proved to be virtually impossible. However, the plan for Westbeth also included a large studio space on the top floor of the building on the corner of Washington and Bethune Streets (51-55 Bethune Street, Building B on attached plan). In 1970, this space was rented to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company which has maintained its studio in this space ever since. David Vaughn and Jean Craig, both of whom worked with Merce Cunningham, read about Westbeth and, according to Vaughn, the company was in need of a new studio and “so I called the number to ask if there was a space, a suitable space, for a Merce Cunningham Studio in Westbeth. And they said there was something, and I went over to look. I might add that one of the people who was involved at the moment, at that time was Howard Moody who was the minister of Judson Memorial Church, and I was involved in performances at Judson, so I had this sort of a little bit of an ‘in’ there with Howard Moody. But Merce and I came over, and we clamored about in hard hats.”⁷² In 1970, the Cunningham company did not have the funds to adequately convert the space into a proper dance studio and also pay the rent. Thus, as Jean Craig recalled, the Kaplan Fund gave “us a grant for the first three years, so that we could plan for raising the money to be able to pay that rent in the future. Which we did.”⁷³ Cunningham, a pioneer of Modern dance, has generally been regarded as one of the world’s greatest choreographers. The company performs all over the world. The building at 151 Bank Street (Building D on attached plan) was rented to the Theater for the New City (it is now home to the Actors Studio at the New School).

The Critical Response to Westbeth

The opening of Westbeth in 1970 resulted in a great deal of publicity and commentary by critics in local newspapers, architectural journals, and popular magazines, and even in foreign publications.⁷⁴ Almost all of

⁷¹ Williams interview, 13.

⁷² David Vaughn, in Merce Cunningham , David Vaughn, and Jean Craig interview, 29 May 2007, 2.

⁷³ Craig, in Cunningham , Vaughn, and Craig interview, 5.

⁷⁴ See, for example, “Künstlerhaus ‘Westbeth’ in New York,” *Baumeister* 69 (January 1972): 24-27.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection 8 Page 19Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

the critical commentary was positive, most of it beginning by noting that this was the largest rehabilitation project in America and the world's largest artists' residential complex. For example, Barbaralee Diamondstein stated that Westbeth was "the world's largest living and working facility for artists" and Elisabeth Kendall Thompson wrote in her 1975 analysis of recent housing that it was "one of the largest and most complex rehabilitation projects in the country."⁷⁵ Critics were especially impressed with how this project, reusing old industrial buildings, set a new standard for the creation of urban housing. Richard Meier himself noted that "a willingness to open new directions in the field of urban rehabilitation was strongly evidenced by all of the agencies involved."⁷⁶ A critic for *Architectural Record*, writing in the first major critical article about Westbeth, stated that "in rehabilitating old buildings, instead of tearing them down and starting over, and in the act of claiming apartments from commercial space, Westbeth offers some useful clues about possible ways of improving cities throughout the country."⁷⁷ Similarly, Ellen Perry Berkeley, writing in *Architectural Forum* concluded that what Westbeth "has done – rehabilitate a full city block, create a whole new community, break numerous administrative barriers – it has provided an answer to some important questions posed throughout the country."⁷⁸ Jeanne Davern noted a decade after the completion of Westbeth that the project was "a milestone rehabilitation effort."⁷⁹

The most important synopsis of the establishment of Westbeth and analysis of its success was provided by *New York Times* architecture critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, in a review published on 10 May 1970, just a few days before the official opening of the complex. After relating the history of the planning, Huxtable proclaimed that "no trumpets sounded when Westbeth triumphed over the system, but they should have" since Westbeth's open apartment plans "represent a first step out of the steel trap of FHA rules, one of the most powerful and deadly implements of domestic design." She felt that "Mr. Meier's architectural solution is exemplary," especially in the creation of duplexes and in the bold and sensitive use of color. "Important ground has been broken at Westbeth," she concluded, "and valuable lessons learned. Whether or not this is the artist's promised land, its neatly shod sponsors are showing the way."⁸⁰ The critic Peter Blake, writing in *New York Magazine*, was also impressed with the apartments, writing that the sponsors "have succeeded in creating some of the nicest apartments to be found anywhere in the U.S." Indeed, he noted, "for the moment . . . it seems to be just about the best place you can find to live in Manhattan, if you are an artist . . . , if your income is within what the Federal Housing Administrations 221(d) 3 program says is 'middle,' and if you were lucky enough to get

⁷⁵ Diamondstein, *Buildings Reborn*, 162 and Elisabeth Kendall Thompson, *Apartments, Townhouses and Condominiums* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 138.

⁷⁶ Meier, "Westbeth and Flexible Code Interpretations."

⁷⁷ "Westbeth's Rehabilitation Project," 104.

⁷⁸ Ellen Perry Berkeley, "Westbeth: Artists in Residence," *Architectural Forum* 133 (October 1970): 48.

⁷⁹ Davern, *Architecture 1970-1980*, 16.

⁸⁰ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Bending the Rules," *New York Times* 10 May 1970, 111.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 20

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

signed up before the waiting list began to grow to its present length.”⁸¹ Several critics hoped that Westbeth would be a model for the creation of artists’ housing in older industrial buildings throughout the country. As the critic for *Architectural Record* wrote in March 1970 “Westbeth can be called a generative experiment in both the financing and physical reclamation problems which occur in rehabilitating an existing structure for residential use.”

The success of the complex has also been noted in the years since its completion. In 1979, *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger discussed Westbeth in his *The City Observed: New York*, confirming that it “remains a major pioneering effort – the spiritual father of all the commercial loft conversions that have created a whole new housing type for Lower Manhattan in the last decade.”⁸² In the same year, architecture and planning writer Jim Burns wrote that “instead of the usual approach of demolition . . . sturdy old buildings were turned into ‘Westbeth,’ a beehive of artists’ housing, studios, theaters, galleries, and performance spaces. The conversion . . . gave an object lesson of creative conversion . . . Architect Richard Meier introduced a witty sophistication into the design. The success of Westbeth made the subsequent conversions of lofts and cast-iron buildings in downtown Manhattan into artists’ studios and galleries easier.”⁸³ Robert Stern and the coauthors of the monumental *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* wrote in 1995 that Westbeth “indicated that creative solutions to the city’s housing problems could indeed be envisioned and achieved with a modicum of frustration and disappointment.”⁸⁴

Westbeth won several awards in the years immediately after its completion, attesting to the success of the project built according to the vision of Roger Stevens and Jacob Kaplan. In 1970, the American Institute of Architects, the National Center for Low- and Moderate-Income Housing, the National Urban Coalition, and the Urban Design and Development Corporation sponsored the first design awards program for subsidized housing. The only award given to a rehabilitation project went to Westbeth. “Many cities, said the jury, have loft buildings that could be similarly converted into dwellings.”⁸⁵ In 1971, Westbeth received a prestigious AIA Honor Award. The jury stated that “Although no radical departure from anonymous architecture, this is an outstanding example of building and neighborhood preservation through the rehabilitation of an obsolete, yet worthy, structure to new uses. The jury commends this approach for the economical provision of housing through such reclamation and renovation, and advocates that the strong social commitment it expresses be

⁸¹ Peter Blake, “Downtown Dakota,” *New York Magazine* 3 (3 August 1970): 54.

⁸² Paul Goldberger, *The City Observed: New York: A Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan* (New York: Random House, 1979), 86.

⁸³ Jim Burns, *Connections: Ways to Discover and Realize Community Potentials* (Stroudsburg, Pa.: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1979), 10.

⁸⁴ Stern, 251.

⁸⁵ Wolf Van Eckardt, “Low-Cost Design Winners,” *Washington Post* 18 November 1970, E4.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 21

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

applied to housing for other needy groups.”⁸⁶ In 1971, Westbeth also won a certificate of merit from the New York State Association of Architects, was praised for its innovations by the City Club of New York’s Bard Award jury, and received an Honor Award from the Homes for Better Living Program, sponsored by the AIA in cooperation with *House & Home* and *American Home* magazines.⁸⁷

Ever since the first artists moved into Westbeth, the complex has been an important part of New York’s varied arts scene. One only need look at the extensive number of art, theater, and music reviews in the *New York Times* and other publications for events that took place in the galleries, theaters, and other spaces of the complex: for example, “12 Artists Join in an Uncommon Show,” (*New York Times* 18 March 1971, 44); “Wagoner Shows Eclectic’s Taste: Dancer’s Troupe Performs 2 Duets and a New Work” *New York Times* (21 March 1971); “Group Show at Westbeth (*Arts Magazine* 45, April 1971, 79); “Laura Dean Dances Program of 2 Solos” (*New York Times* 30 August 1971, 35); “Realists at Westbeth,” (*Arts Magazine* 46, December 1971, 59); “Stage: An All-Male ‘Trojan Women,’ *New York Times* 20 March 1972, 47); “New York,” (*Art International* 17, May 1973, 62).

Artists who once lived and worked at Westbeth include Diane Arbus, photographer; Karl Bissinger, photographer; Patti Brown, musician and composer; Hiram Bullock, musician; Joseph Chaikin, actor and director; Gil Evans, musician; Marsha Farley, painter and sculptor; Moses Gun, actor, founder of Negro Ensemble Co.; Herman Rose, painter; Arlene Sherman, producer; Harry Shunk, photographer, and many more.⁸⁸ Choreographer Merce Cunningham had a 40-year professional relationship with Westbeth but did not reside here.

Westbeth is currently home to over 300 artists and their families. Communal spaces such as the Graphics Studio for printmakers, the Painting Studio, and the Sculptor Studio are reserved for Westbeth artists. Westbeth is run by the Westbeth Board of Directors.⁸⁹

Westbeth remains a major development, important in the history of housing and the history of New York as an arts center. The significance of Westbeth was recognized as recently as 1 August 2007 when William Menking, writing in *The Architect’s Newspaper* commented that:

It is a well-known fact that New York City is fast becoming a place where art is sold but not made; a city where the creative class can no longer afford housing. It wasn’t always so. This

⁸⁶ “The 1971 Honor Awards, Report of the Jury,” *Journal of the AIA* 55 (June 1971): 50.

⁸⁷ New York State Association of Architects Gives Certificates of Merit,” *Architectural Record* 149 (January 1971): 41-42; Ada Louise Huxtable, “Two Buildings Win Design Awards,” *New York Times* 19 May 1972, 18; “Three Uncommon Apartment Projects for the Big City,” *House & Home* 40 (October 1971): 104.

⁸⁸ For more information on artists at Westbeth go to <http://www.westbeth.org>.

⁸⁹ Westbeth website <http://www.westbeth.org>, accessed on 21 October 2009.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 **Page** 22

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

year marks the 40th anniversary of Westbeth, which has 383 units of affordable artists' housing in the West Village, is one of Richard Meier's earliest works, and a model that is more relevant than ever.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ William Menking, "The Way We Were: A Model for Artists' Housing Turns 40," *Architect's Newspaper* 1 August 2007, 16.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 **Page** 23

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

Appendix A

Westbeth Advisory Committee:

John Baur, Director, Whitney Museum of American Art
Arthur Cohen, Publisher
Elaine de Kooning, Painter
Paul Douglas, Jr., Business Executive
Arthur Drexler, Director, Department of Architecture and Design, Museum of Modern Art
Adam and Ellen Giffard, Filmmakers
Robert C. Graham, Director, Graham Galleries
Thomas B. Hess, Editor, *Art News*
Thomas P. F. Hoving, Director, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Jane Jacobs, Writer
Eleanor Munro Kahn, Art Historian
Dr. Billy Kluver, President, Experiments in Art & Technology
Katherine Kuh, Art Critic, *Saturday Review*
Stanley Kunitz, Poet
Sol LeWitt, Artist
Peter Mennin, President, Juilliard School of Music
Rev. Howard Moody, Judson Memorial Church
John Niemeyer, President, Bank Street College of Education
Alwin Nikolais, Dancer/Choreographer
Robert Rauchenberg, Painter
Ruth Richards, Artists Tenants Association
James Rosati, Sculptor
Alan Schneider, Theater Director
Alexander Schneider, Violinist/Conductor
Howard Squadron, Lawyer
Ellen Stewart, Director, La Mama Company
John Szarkowski, Director, Department of Photography, Museum of Modern Art
Rachele Wall, Greenwich Village Civic Leader
James Wines, Sculptor
William Zeckendorf, Jr., Business Executive/Real Estate Developer

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 1

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 2

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County and State

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 3

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 4

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

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All interviews by Jeanne Houck.

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Ana Steele Clark, 17 May 2007

Peter Cott, 19 March 2007

Merce Cunningham, 29 May 2007

Virginia Dajani, 21 June 2007

Joan Davidson, 13 March 2007

Richard Meier, 8 November 2007

Tod Williams, 2 April 2007

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 10 Page 1

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of the nominated property is bounded by Bethune Street to the north, Washington Street to the east, Bank Street to the south, and West Street to the south. The property is in the borough of Manhattan on Block 639, Lot 1. The boundary is outlined on an accompanying map.

Boundary Justification

The boundary of the nominated property includes the entire block on which Westbeth is located.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 11 **Page** 1

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

Form Prepared by

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New York, NY 10003
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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 11 Page 2

Westbeth
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

USGS Map

Boundary Map

Key Plan (Note: Buildings labeled A-E correspond to description of the complex in Section 7 of nomination)

Photographs

Westbeth

55 Bethune Street

New York County, NY

Photos 1-21 by: Andrew Dolkart

Photos 22-26 by: Kathy Howe

Date: May 2008 (photos 1-21); August 2007 (photos 22-26)

CD-R on file at NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Waterford, NY

1. Buildings A and B, Bethune Street (north) façade, looking southeast.
2. Building A with Building E in foreground on West Street, west and south facades, looking northeast.
3. Building A, granite entrance on West Street, west façade. Looking south.
4. Buildings B and A, Bethune Street (north) façade, looking southwest.
5. Building B, northeast corner, view of the openings for the former High Line. At corner of Bethune and Washington Streets facing southwest.
6. Building B, Bethune Street (north) façade, detail showing windows. Facing south.
7. Buildings B and C, south and east facades. View looking northwest along Washington Street.
8. Building C, Bank Street (south) façade, looking northeast.
9. Building D, Bank Street (south) façade, looking north.
10. Building E, West Street (west) and south facades, looking northeast. Building A in background.
11. Westbeth Park, looking northwest from Bank Street. Buildings E and A in background.
12. Westbeth Park, former circular fountain, looking northwest. Building E in background.
13. Westbeth Park, landscape, looking north. Building D at right.
14. East façade of Building E and south façade of Building A, view looking north from Westbeth Park.
15. Inner courtyard at Building A, view looking west from top of ramp.
16. Inner courtyard at Building A, facing east toward ramp.
17. South wall of inner courtyard, Building A, view from 10th floor.
18. Building A, inner lobby at first floor of West Street entrance.
19. Building A, 11th floor, elevator enframingent.
20. Building A, 9th floor, typical corridor. Looking south.
21. Building B, lobby at first floor of Bethune Street entrance, looking south.
22. Building C in foreground with Building A (left) and Building B (right) in background, looking northwest from corner of Bank and Washington Streets.
23. Westbeth Park looking south from inner courtyard of Building A.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 11 Page 3

Westbeth

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

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-
24. View of abandoned High Line in Building B, looking northeast.
 25. Building A, 12th floor, view of former Board Room of Western Electric; later Bell Telephone Laboratories.
 26. Building B, dance studio at 11th floor.

Drawings of Westbeth (also on CD)

Richard Meier, ca. 1968. On file at Westbeth.

27. First floor plan.
28. Third floor plan.
29. Seventh floor plan.
30. Duplex apartment plan.
31. Section through duplexes.

BETHUNE STREET

FIRST FLOOR

COMMERCIAL

RAMP

COMMERCIAL

SCULPTURE STUDIO

APARTMENTS/STUDIOS

WASHINGTON STREET

PROPOSED RESTAURANT

FOUNTAIN

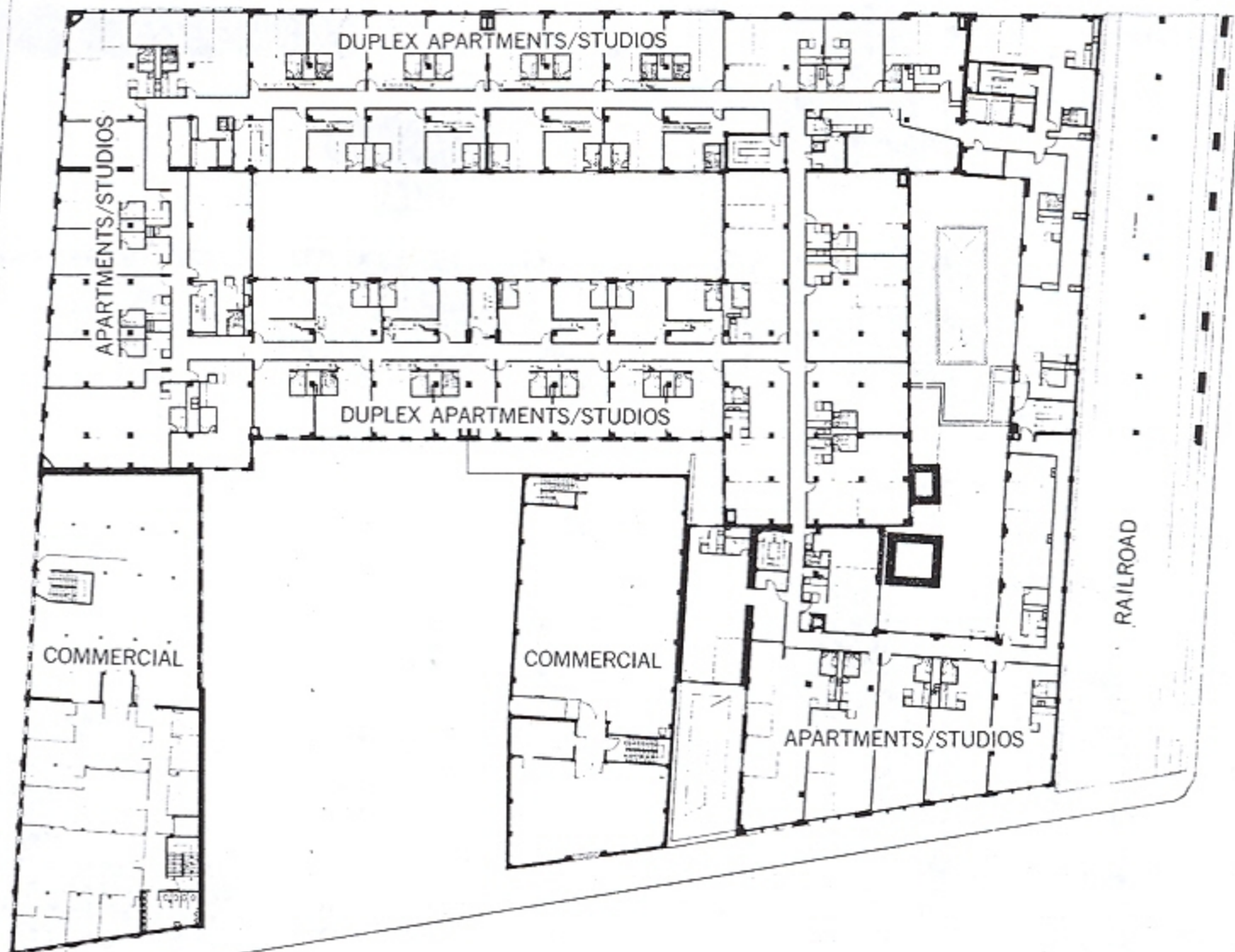
PLAY AREA

TENANTS AREA

BANK STREET

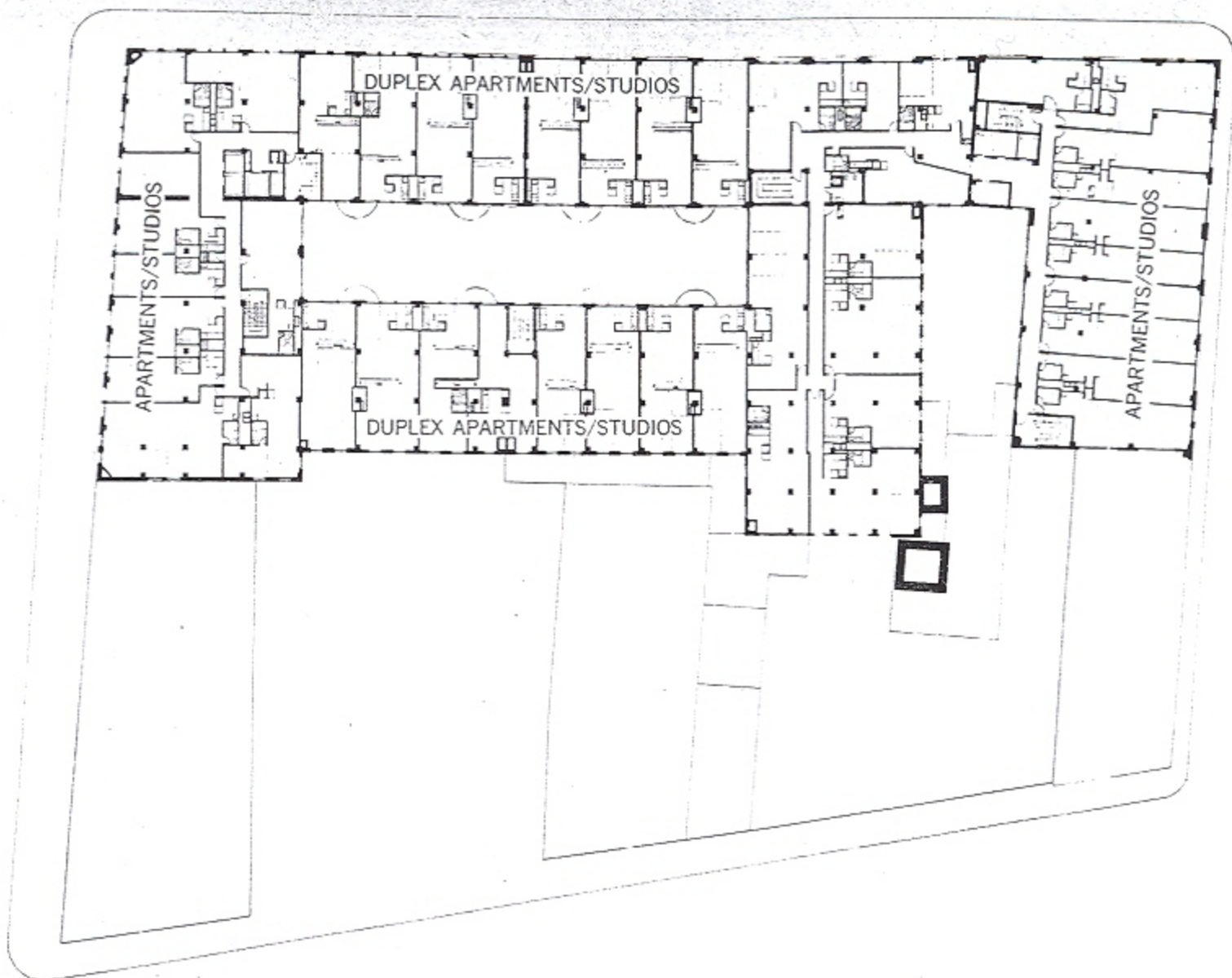


0 50'

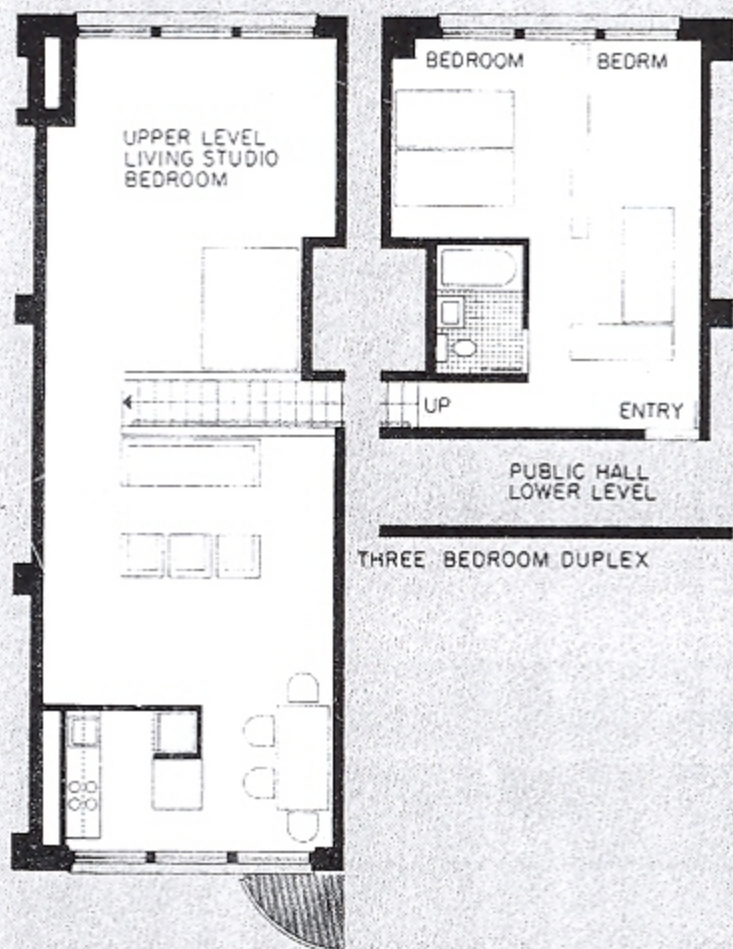
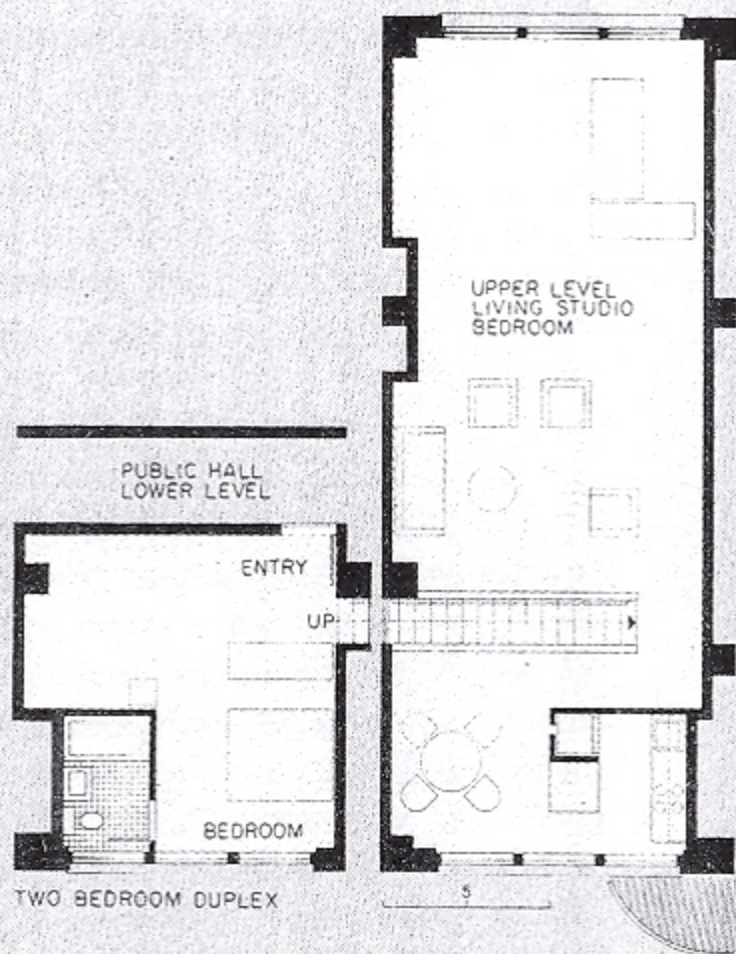


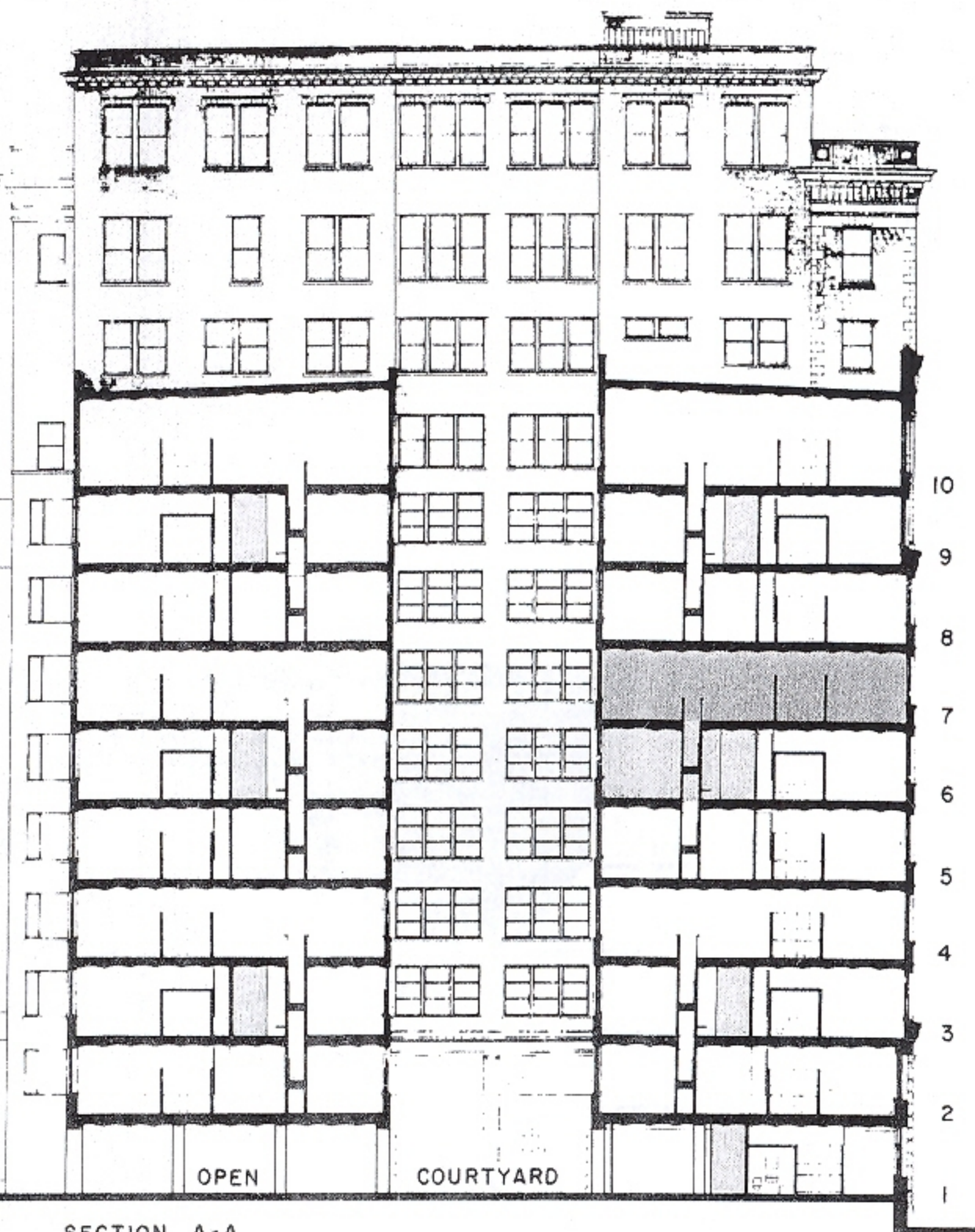
THIRD FLOOR

0 50'



SEVENTH FLOOR





SECTION A-A



