

Westchester's Landmarks: Villa Jello

By Michael Molinelli, AIA LEED ap

The taxi drivers call it the Taj Mahal. I call it Villa Jello. It was once known as the headquarters to General Foods. General Foods was bought by Philip Morris who renamed their company Altria. It is now owned by the RPW Group and is marketed as 800 Westchester Avenue, a multi-tenant office complex.



800 Westchester Avenue, White Plains, designed by Roche and Dinkeloo in the 1980s.



Villa Emo, Fanzolo, Italy designed by Andrea Palladio in the sixteenth century.

While Westchester Avenue was being developed with corporate parks composed of acres of asphalt punctuated by glass office boxes and landscaped big rocks with little rocks orbiting around them, General Foods distinguished itself as being different AND good.

It was designed by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo Associates, the successor firm to Eero Saarinen (TWA at JFK, the St Louis Arch.) Roche and Dinkeloo is an award winning firm including the Pritzker Prize (the architectural version of the Pulitzer) and the AIA Gold Medal (the profession's version of a gold star from your first grade teacher.)

Despite the taxi driver's nickname for the edifice, it never struck me as a remake of the Taj-Mahal which was a mausoleum for a favorite wife. Rather it hit me as a Palladian Villa scaled up to modern American proportions.

In the 1800s, while approaching a Palladian Villa in a single horse barouche at a speed of 5 mph, you would be slowly overwhelmed by its size and grandeur. So impressed are you, that you ignore that your beau has sealed up in the attic of said villa, his crazy first wife, annoying mother-in-law, and a cousin of questionable hygiene. But today if you were traveling in a Corvette at 80 mph, the building would have to be immense for you to get a glimpse of the building's glory as you approached it.

Palladian Villas were created in the 1500s by Andrea Palladio, a student of ancient Roman architecture. He imposed classical proportions and symmetry on farmhouses throughout the Venice region. Many designs would have a strong central building with low wings stretching outward to identical buildings at the ends. You can see that in Villa Emo, Villa Barbaro and others.

The General Foods building stretches broadly across the site with the same imposing central building, wings and end buildings. The architects placed the parking underneath the building even though this costs about three times paving around it. You must laud the client for paying for this as it preserves green space.

The name Villa Jello will probably not stick, but perhaps the next time you are stuck in traffic on 287, you will appreciate the Palladian wannabee just to your north.

