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Seeking the Ideal African-American Interior: The Walker Residences and Salon in New York

In its headline news of November 4, 1917, the New York Times Magazine heralded the construction of a new mansion in Irvington, New York. It was to be the home of Madam C. J. Walker (1867-1919), the first black woman "millionaire." Walker's arrival among the elite of New York City in terms of monetary status and the groundbreaking for her new Hudson River home were genuinely newsworthy at the time and they remain so today. The daughter of former slaves, Walker had ascended from poverty to become a formidable businesswoman, and she expressed her wealth by means of philanthropy and building projects—not unlike her white counterparts. Through the program, interior design, and furnishing of her various residences, Walker's increasing knowledge of cultural and design matters and her use of architecture to promote her business and personal goals are evident. Her agenda was more than an expression of racial pride than personal vanity: the growing sophistication of the style and interior decor of her homes reflected her socioeconomic progression as a black woman. Historians and biographers might argue that this was not the case, however, for Madam Walker's daughter and only child, A'Leila Walker (1885-1931). A'Leila, known as the glamour girl of the Harlem Renaissance, did not exemplify or fully embrace the sociopolitical aspirations of her mother, but her more modern aesthetic tastes are also important to an understanding of American domestic living at the turn of the twentieth century and they continue the story of the Walkers and African-American architectural patronage into the next generation.

The Rise of Madam Walker

Madam C. J. Walker was born Sarah Breedlove on December 23, 1867, in Delta, Louisiana (Fig. 1). She was orphaned at the age of seven, married to Moses McWilliams in fourteen, and widowed with one child six years later. To support herself and young Leila (who changed her name to A'Leila in the 1920s), Sarah McWilliams became a washerwoman and laundress. She relocated to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1887 to join her four brothers. In St. Louis, Sarah had her first taste of life in a metropolis. She and her daughter moved constantly, often sharing quarters with her brothers' families due to her financial instability and rocky second marriage, to John Davis, between 1894 and 1903. She did save enough money, however, to send Leila to Knoxville College in Knoxville, Tennessee, in September 1902. In St. Louis, Sarah began experimenting with hair growth treatments for African-Americans; she also met the charismatic Charles Joseph Walker, whom she would later marry. From 1905 to 1907, she lived in Denver, Colorado, and was employed as a sales agent by Annie Pope-Turnbo, a local hair culturist, selling hair products until 1906. Then she started marketing her own "Wonderful Hair Grower" and teaching classes for beauty practitioners on how to use the cream, a development that remained a source of animosity between Walker and Pope-Turnbo for many years. Sarah married C. J. Walker on January 4, 1906, at which time she adopted the name Madam C. J. Walker. The husband-and-wife team was successful in marketing her hair products and began a brisk mail-order business which required promotional travel from the couple. In the fall of 1906, Leila finished college and moved to Denver to enter the business. To escape Sarah's rivalry with Pope-Turnbo, and find a larger black population than Denver offered, the Walkers decided to move the business to Pittsburgh, where they prospered in 1907-1910, and then to Indianapolis. That city remained the base of the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company until the company was sold in 1986.

By the time Madam Walker settled in Indianapolis, she was the proprietor of many Walker Hair Salons and employed a legion of hair culturists—all of them trained at Leila Colleges (which she founded and named after her daughter)—as well as sales agents across the country. Her annual income by the end of 1910 was $10,989 (a sum that A'Leila Bundles, Madam Walker's great-great-granddaughter and biographer, estimated at the equivalent of $200,000 in 2001). Her annual income at the end of her career in 1918 was $275,937.88 (the equivalent of almost three million dollars in 2001). Walker's professional life flourished with the eventual establishment of a factory, a hair and manicure salon, and another training school.

Early in her Indianapolis tenure, Walker underscored her growing prosperity and fame with the purchase of a two-story brick house (Fig. 2). The dwelling, onto which she added two rooms and a bath, featured a front porch supported by brick piers and topped with a wooden balustrade running the breadth of the entrance. As well as serving as her residence, it provided work space until Walker expanded the company; she prepared her hair products and serviced clients in a back room. A
plaque on the front of the house, much like a shop sign, identified it as the home of "Madam Walker, Hair Culturist," but the house’s practical uses by no means detracted from the cultured environment she created. She had shared dwellings and lived in small, rented spaces, but Walker now had twelve rooms to make her own. She decorated the drawing room in rose and gold and set off its dark wood floor with Oriental rugs, adding upholstered oak settees, a gilded curio cabinet, and a Tiffany chandelier. The library housed a Chickering baby grand piano, a table of Mexican onyx, and oil paintings by William Edouard, an Indianapolis artist. The dining room featured wallpaper with a grape cluster design, an oak table, and two china cabinets. Far removed from the log cabin where she was born and the quarters she previously rented, the house was that of a prosperous middle-class family in the early twentieth century. A local newspaper, the Freeman, ran a photograph of it with Madam Walker and her husband. This illustration of June 27, 1910, served to announce Madam’s status as a new homeowner, which in turn advertised the success of the Walker Company.

Madam C. J. Walker understood the prestige that her residence could add to her social and career status. She scored a personal as well as professional coup in July 1913 when she entertained Booker T. Washington there during his attendance at the dedication of the city’s new YMCA. Walker had sought the recognition of this prominent black leader but had yet to receive the attention and respect from him that she thought she deserved as a self-made businesswoman. The fact that she now owned her own home, which was comparable to Washington’s residence, The Oaks, in Tuskegee, Alabama, must have impressed the African-American spokesman. It appears that after Washington’s visit to Indianapolis he was willing to treat Walker with considerably less condescension. Undoubtedly, the elegant manner in which she lived, far removed from her girlhood in Louisiana, played a role in changing Washington’s opinion of her and may have helped her to enter his inner circle, allowing him to endorse her business and philanthropy. Walker’s Indianapolis home provided a permanent residence where she began establishing her place as a prominent member of the African-American community. Here she started accumulating the trappings of wealth for enjoyment and display. An amateur, she seems to have made her purchases of luxury consumer items and her design decisions without the aid of professionals. The dark palette, ornate details, and eclectic furnishings of the house reflected the Victorian fashions that lingered at the turn of the century. For her first design statement, Walker chose familiar and accessible conventions to announce her entry into a higher social and economic bracket.

On a personal level, Walker’s life was less than perfect. In 1912, she divorced the adulterous C. J. Walker, whose dealings threatened the stability of her company; but the failure of her third, and final, marriage did not deter her. She maintained her married name for professional reasons and planned, at Lelia’s instigation, to make the ultimate expansion of the Walker Company by opening a Walker Hair Salon and Lelia College in New York City.

The Harlem Townhouse

In the fall of 1912, Lelia persuaded her mother of the soundness of purchasing properties on the East and West coasts to take advantage of business opportunities. In addition, Lelia was allowed to take charge of East Coast operations. On June 6, 1913, Walker began mortgage payments for a townhouse at 108 West 136th Street. The salon and school would occupy the first two floors, and the top two would provide living quarters for Lelia. In the summer of 1915, Walker acquired the adjacent townhouse at number 110. In order to create the appropriate setting for their East Coast headquarters, the Walkers hired the black architect
Vertner Woodson Tandy to remodel the two townhouses into a single unit. (They were demolished in 1949, as discussed below.)

Vertner W. Tandy (1885-1949), one of the first practicing African-American architects, was born in Louisville, Kentucky. He was the son of a prominent local builder—a circumstance that probably fueled his desire early in life to become an architect. For three years he attended Tuskegee University, where he received training in construction and architectural drawing. In an effort to obtain a more professional education, he then enrolled at Cornell University and was trained in the manner of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After graduating in 1908, he immediately began practicing. In 1911, he collaborated with George Washington Foster on St. Philip's Episcopal Church at 214 West 134th Street in New York. By the time the Walkers were buying property, Tandy was a well-known figure in Harlem. Although Lelia was the visible face of the Walker Company there, she had to receive approvals for decisions and additional funds from her mother, often through Sarah's attorney F. B. Ransom. It is safe to say that via communications with Lelia, and contacts with New Yorkers, Madam Walker knew of Tandy's reputation. Given her desire to support the African-American community wherever she lived, Madam Walker was probably eager to patronize a black architect. She would not be disappointed.

From 1915 to 1916, the Walkers had their New York City property remodeled. The firm of Miller and Reed served as general contractors. To unify the two townhouses, Tandy created an imposing Neo-Georgian façade of red brick and limestone (Fig. 3). The mansion structure stood out among its brownstone neighbors. The first phase of the work at 108 was allotted $7,000; the total cost, however, came to $15,000. Lelia, who supervised expenditures on the project, would later require additional funds for the purchase and integration of number 110. Indeed, Lelia had to ask Ransom to intervene on her behalf on several occasions because of the rising costs of the structure, which Lelia told him did not include "wall coverings or any of the hundred and one things that are taken in a building." Though the project went far over budget, Madam Walker was pleased with the results; Lelia, with the aid of the interior decorating firm Richter and Kolbe, furnished the house and salon to provide for the comfort of its inhabitants and clients and to make a powerful statement regarding the Walkers' establishment within Harlem society.

Clients and staff entered the new salon through the French doors at 110 (Fig. 3, at right). Guests stepped down from a small landing into a large reception room decorated in muted greens with accents in royal blue velvet and with marble and parquet floors laid in a modified herringbone...
pattern (Fig. 4). The front windows were covered with gray chiffon curtains. The reception room boasted a pressed tin ceiling with a stenciled swag under a simple crown molding. At the party wall shared with number 108 was a built-in display case with shelves below and glass-front cabinets above. Like the large free-standing unit in the room, this was designed to show off Walker products that were sold at the salon. Clients could check in, make future appointments, and settle bills at an office area adjacent to the entry landing, which was sectioned off behind velvet ropes (Fig. 5). This office area was serviced with simple chairs, a desk, filing cabinets, and a display case, all in white. Around a large structural column in the room was a circular banquette upholstered with tufted velvet (see also Fig. 4). In a contemporary photograph, one of the porcelain manicure tables that were present in the salon is visible to the right of a water fountain (Fig. 5 at rear wall). The room was populated with seating groups of wicker tables and chairs, the latter with tufted velvet cushions. Wicker furniture was also placed in the center of the Japanese tea room beyond the reception area at the rear end of the ground floor (Fig. 6). These clients received their beauty treatments. Like royalty, they were directed to this area by a carpet leading from the reception area and through a doorway with a beaded curtain (Fig. 5, at left). The same floor treatment and pressed tin ceiling found in the reception room were present in the tearoom. Here, however, the ceiling-

wall junction was accented with a cornice-line stencil of trelliswork interspersed with ivy leaves in keeping with the Japanese theme.

The design of the room reveals striking similarities to the contemporary work of Elsie de Wolfe. As a prominent figure with modern sensibilities, Lelia would have been aware of de Wolfe’s acclaimed early designs, which were showcased in her book The House in Good Taste of 1913. The same aura of cultural sophistication that de Wolfe brought to her clients’ interiors was evident at the Walker townhouse and salon. The reception room (Fig. 5) was highlighted by the white of the furniture, walls, and ceiling—a de Wolfe trademark. Furnishings were light and slender in proportions and placed to create intimate spaces and conversation groups. The business aspect of the salon was kept to one small section and the beauty products were displayed aesthetically in attractive cases, allowing for the salon’s social function to take precedence. Similarly, the utilitarian nature of the tearoom with its beauticians’ stalls was obscured. Instead, its purpose as a gathering place for middle-class black women was emphasized; the wicker furniture and ceiling fixtures created a relaxed, leisurely atmosphere, a simplified quotation of de Wolfe’s Trellis Room at New York’s Colony Club for socially prominent women. The impression of an outdoor space was suggested by the tall windows providing views of the backyard. De Wolfe’s trellised
walls were also mimicked by the wall decoration and thin ironwork of the curtained sink stalls that lined the sides of the tearoom. These working spaces for the beauticians were styled in direct contrast to the salon with its social and leisure functions, and each had its own equipment, including a sink, dryer, mirror, hamper for used towels, and wastebasket (Fig. 7). The stalls, where a client was served in privacy, created an air of clinical hygiene and efficiency. The design of the salon not only expressed the Walkers' desire to provide their clients with an elegant environment. The stress in the stalls on cleanliness and simplicity was an attempt to demonstrate their adherence to modern ideals of health and hygiene. The emphasis on whiteness in the palette and clarity in the layout would have reminded clients of other buildings devoted to the care of the body and mind, especially sanatoria.

In her article on Josef Hoffmann's Parkesdorf Sanatorium, 1904-1906, outside Vienna, Leslie Topp discusses the healing properties associated with modern architecture by its first champions. She describes the sanatorium as a totally planned environment with stimuli to health—including the rational organization of space, the airiness and abundance of light, and the regularity and rectilinearity of interior features and furnishings—to aid in the rehabilitation of patients. The Walker Beauty Parlor presented some of the same therapeutic features that Topp cites: specifically the removal of clients from their usual environments and from the ailments of the city into regularized spaces where modern apparatus was used to provide a service. As a hair culturist, Walker would have subscribed to the values of the utmost cleanliness and hygiene and to their promotion in her beauty salons. All this met and encouraged the growing interest among African-American women in the practice of good grooming habits to improve their status in society.

The first-floor spaces of the salon presented both sophisticated and innovative means to provide for the needs of those clients. Unlike the public spaces of the salon, the rooms of Lelia College on the second floor of 110 were simply appointed as they were primarily used for the instruction of new Walker Company hair culturists and agents for Walker products (Figs. 8-9).

Word about the elegance of the Walker Beauty Parlor and townhouse spread throughout New York City, just as the Walkers knew it
would. The rooms were featured in several newspaper articles, and pictures taken by the Byron Photography Company were used in Walker Company advertisements to publicize the Walkers' arrival in New York. The formal design and interior decoration of the house further expressed the Walkers' refined tastes, which was essential to an institution that sought to encourage personal hygiene and grooming and to teach young women means to be financially self-sufficient through becoming beauticians. "The Walker beauty salons," as Canon Anthony Anderson writes, always beautifully designed and equipped, became a gathering place for college and society women and the reception rooms of the Walker Townhouse in New York [It]the site for dances, musicales, banquets, and "soirees" attended by black elite from New York and all of the United States. Hence, the business itself, focused as it was around the salons (where very genteel notions of refinement and beauty were promoted), provided [the Walkers] with a convenient basis from which to advance themselves in social terms. 11

One example of Madam Walker's promotion of genteel behavior was the ritual of afternoon tea at her beauty salons to further the cultural development of young black women (Fig. 10). 12 That these events were

**FIGURE 8**
Students making hair pieces at Lelia College in Walker townhouse, c. 1916. Byron Collection.

**FIGURE 9**
Students practicing hairdressing on one another at Lelia College in Walker townhouse. Byron Collection.

**FIGURE 10**
James VanDeZee, Tea Time at Madame C. J. Walker's Beauty Salon, gelatin silver print, 1929. Copyright © Donna Musser-VanDeZee.
The third and fourth levels of the combined townhouses served as living and entertaining quarters for Lelia and for Madam Walker, who moved permanently to New York in 1916. The entry into the private residence was through the French doors at number 118 (Fig. 3, left) and up two flights of stairs to the third floor. No plans of the mansion survive, and the layout of the rooms, aside from the location of the stairs at one end of the structure, is difficult to determine. Likewise, few descriptions are given of the interior decoration of the living spaces. From the original building fabric, mantels and architraves were retained. Through a few details, however, it is possible to gain a sense of the increasing luxury with which Madam and Lelia surrounded themselves. Evidence of their love of music was prevalent throughout the house: the main hall had a player organ, while the drawing room featured a gold Victrola, an Aeolian grand piano, and a gilded harp. A period photograph of one of the two music rooms in the house displays the signs of Madam’s upward mobility and growing taste for fine things (Fig. 11). A piano is placed at one front window. On that same side, a large tapestry hangs on the wall and large, leather-upholstered seating is visible. On the other wall is a Gothic Revival display case behind a long, wooden settee. The parquet floor is like that found in the salon. Windows are treated simply with geometric lambrequins and sheer shades. According to contemporary reports of the mansion, the dining room contained a suite from Wana-
maker's showroom, indicating the prestige of the Walkers and the quality of the furnishings in the Harlem townhouse.26

The bedrooms of the ladies of the house were located on the third floor. Madam Walker's bedroom displayed English wall tapestries and was furnished in mahogany.27 Lelia's room was a mixture of old and new. Her ivory Louis XVI-style bedroom suite trimmed in gold (Fig. 12) gave it a lighter tone.28 The footboard (and probably the headboard) and a side chair were caned. These reproduction period pieces were juxtaposed to a lounge piled with large pillows and a fireplace with an Oriental rug draped on the mantel and others placed on the floor. Various objets d'art, family photographs, and a bust of Booker T. Washington personalized this decor.29

The public rooms and Madam Walker's bedroom in the residence were not, in sum, as eclectic and crowded as their late nineteenth-century counterparts, owing to the trend to simplicity that began to dominate interior design at this time. Nonetheless, these rooms retained some elements of Victorian design, including the dark palette and heavy window treatments and furnishings. Lelia's room, however, exhibited the more modern sensibilities of Elsie de Wolfe with its lighter color scheme and simpler, caned Louis XVI-style furniture. Furthermore, the women retained many objects from their previous homes, so creating more personal areas that were not strictly formal. These residential rooms recall spaces in de Wolfe's Irving Place townhouse before she transformed it in 1898. The contrast between the Walker townhouse's conventional living spaces and its modern, de Wolfe-inspired salon highlight the Walkers' recognition that architectural and interior design choices can promote a successful, progressive company on the one hand and also satisfy the desire to maintain a more traditional personal lifestyle on the other. Still, the Harlem residence and salon demonstrate the Walkers' increasing cultural sophistication and the beginnings of Leila's more independent aesthetic. A survey of the interiors validates the observation by the contemporary journalist Frances Gaskins that, in the Harlem mansion, "Everything was bought without regard to cost, but with considerable regard to good taste."30 This statement would prove even more apt for Madam's suburban retreat, Villa Lewaro.

Villa Lewaro

Madam Walker aspired to building a grander monument than her Harlem mansion in the suburbs of New York. Only a few months after arriving in New York, she decided to commission a new and even more luxurious home. Negotiations to purchase the Flushing, Long Island, estate of a former bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church had fallen through and Madam sought to build a mansion of her own. Though business prospered, she was not quite content living in the city full-time and she told Lelia that she was not "satisfied in living in anybody else's home."31 After all, the Harlem residence was Lelia's project; accordingly Madam Walker made her a gift of it. In August 1916, she signed the deed for a property at 67 North Broadway in Irvington, New York.

Irvington and its environs were a playground of New York's white elite. Within a couple of miles of the property on which Madam Walker was to build were two historic nineteenth-century dwellings, Washington Irving's Sunny Side (1835) and Jay Philip Gould's Lyndhurst (1838, expanded 1864). Further north were notable estates such as Frederick W. Vanderbilt's in Hyde Park (1899)32 and John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Kykuit (1906-1913). By deciding to build her house in such prestigious surroundings, Madam Walker asserted her business and personal success and declared her right to live among powerful white entrepreneurs. Indeed, Madam had her mansion situated close to the street, instead of at the rear of the property, out of public view, as her predecessors in Irvington had done. When the Hudson Valley rich and famous discovered the identity of their new neighbor, they were taken aback. As progress on the house continued, however, they realized they had little to worry about, for Madam's three-story historicist mansion fits its environment perfectly (Fig. 13). (The house still stands today, as discussed below.)

The Irvington mansion was christened Villa Lewaro, combining the first two letters in each of Leila Walker Robinson's names (she was married to John Robinson from 1909 to 1914), by her friend the singer Enrico Caruso, who included the word "Villa" because the house reminded him of estates in his native Italy.33 Walker again hired Vietmers Tandy as architect; his Beaux-Arts training is evident in the mansion's strong Mediterranean and classical elements. The symmetrical eastern entrance façade of the house is characterized by a two-story, semicircular portico flanked by two blocks. The portico entablature is supported by Ionic columns and features a dentiled cornice of timbered oak34 and a stone balustrade at the roof line. While also restrained, the rear, western façade is more elaborate (Fig. 14). Stairs lead from each end of the balustraded second-story terrace to a landing and a lower porch before flanking the swimming pool at ground level. The bilateral symmetry of the east and west façades is altered along the central axis through the dwelling. At the north, a covered porte cochere projects from the main
body of the house (see Fig. 13). At the south is a semicircular conservatory. Again, Madam Walker obtained the services of Miller and Reed as the general contractor. Villa Lewaro was begun in the fall of 1916; Walker moved in on June 13, 1918. Though Lelia's role in the construction and design of the Harlem townhouse was vital and the decision to construct the villa developed out of that project, Villa Lewaro was primarily Madam Walker's domain.

Within the walls of Villa Lewaro, Walker could assemble all the trappings of sophistication, wealth, culture, and intellectual stimulation that had attracted her to New York. In her thirty-four-room showcase, she had more than enough space to display the items recommended by Richter and Kolbe and probably supplied by the antique furniture dealer Frank R. Smith. The basement contained the kitchen, the laundry room with an electric washing machine and a built-in steam dryer, the pantry, the servants' dining room, the organ power room, the vault for valuables, as well as a gymnasium with showers and both the Battle Creek Electric Light Bath and Electric Chair, physical therapy inventions of Dr. J. H. Kellogg. Madam Walker inserted modern conveniences in the recreation and service areas of her house, while the upper floors were furnished for public use and family living.

The first floor was designed to entertain and impress Walker's guests. Oak floors were present throughout, and each room was treated in a distinct style. From the porte cochere, guests entered the marble-floored foyer where the marble stairs to the second floor were visible to the left (east). Flanking the foyer to the east was the "Italian Style" paneled library, which contained a walnut suite consisting of a table, slipcovered couch, and two armchairs as well as a bookcase and side chair, both mahogany pieces in Chippendale style. The room served as a repository for the Walkers' impressive book collection. Across the foyer from the library was the breakfast room. From the foyer, steps led down into the living room. It featured a coffered ceiling with carved medallions and a fireplace on the north wall. The wall was lined with tapestries and...
FIGURE 15
Dining room, Villa Lewaro (furnishings not original to the house). From Preservation 50, no. 3 (May-June 1998): 69. Photo: Mick Hales.

FIGURE 16
Drawing room, Villa Lewaro (furnishings not original to the house). From Preservation 50, no. 3 (May-June 1998): 64. Photo: Mick Hales.

Painted, like the ceiling, by an Italian artist; the floor was covered with a Tabriz carpet and several other valuable rugs. In the center of the room was an oak table displaying a Cartier bronze sculpture and Madam’s calling card savers. At the east, the living room contained glass doors to the portico. Directly across from the front door was the entry to the dining room (Fig. 15). The barrel-vaulted ceiling was painted with scenes of water creatures. The room originally contained a Hepplewhite dining suite, buffet, and china cabinet. Decorated in rose, buff, and moss green, this room opened onto the rear terrace. Between the breakfast room and dining room was the butler’s pantry with its icebox and dumbwaiter. Beyond the living room, through doors on either side of the fireplace, was Walker’s Neoclassically inspired drawing room, also called the music room or Gold Room, which occupied the entire south side of the house (Fig. 16). Gold leaf adorned the walls and ceiling. It was present on the Cornish capitals of the twenty-four pilasters lining the room, on the wall paneling, on the brackets in the ceiling, and in the ceiling painting. In the center of the ceiling was a recessed oval with a trompe-l’oeil painting of the sky and an Italian crystal chandelier. The oval was flanked by two rectangular fields with a diaper pattern delineated in gold leaf. Murals were painted in the semicircular overdoors around the room. In addition to the chandelier, the room featured recessed lighting. The drawing room had parquet floors and was furnished with new objects of art as well as pieces that Madam had brought with her from Indianapolis—
including her gold-trimmed Chickering concert grand piano and her Mexican onyx table and oak settees. The pièce de résistance of the drawing room was the Estey organ. Villa Lewaro was essentially built around this because its system of pipes had to be hidden in the walls: the pipes looked too “Gothic” to expose. Even the organ grilles matched the symmetry and style of the room. Beyond the drawing room was the tile-floored conservatory, where wicker furniture was placed for comfort.

The second floor of the house contained private spaces. A long hallway divided the floor into wings. On the left was Lelia’s wing, which included her room in baby blue and ivory, a sun parlor, and a bathroom. On the right was the guest wing, with three bedrooms, each with its own bath. Madam’s suite occupied the south wing and consisted of her bedroom, bath, a boudoir or sitting room, and a smaller bedroom. In her rose and moss-green bedroom was Madam’s canopied, four-poster bed, which had traveled with her from Indianapolis, and a fireplace with a gilded wave pattern on the surround. The boudoir featured a twelve-piece, ivory-enamed mahogany chamber suite in Louis XVI style and an Aubusson carpet. A private sun porch over the conservatory could be reached from Madam’s bedroom. A second sun porch over the porte cochere was accessible from the second-floor stair hall. Also off the stair hall was a sewing room with drawers, cabinets, and a closet of red cedar. The bathrooms were equipped with modern conveniences. At least two
of the bathrooms (possibly Madam’s and Lelia’s) each had an enameled cast-iron bath, a large lavatory, a dental lavatory, a siphon-jet water closet, and a shower and “needle” bath with, according to the specifications, “white Carrara glass” partitions and a plate-glass door.

The third floor was a multifunctional area with North Carolina comb-grained pine floors. There were the servants’ quarters, a nursery for visiting children, and a billiard room with a “ Flemish oak pool table” and ten matching high-back chairs. In addition, Villa Lewaro was operated with a low-pressure steam heating system, an electric light and bell system, and central vacuum cleaning.

Villa Lewaro as Ideal Home

Madam Walker’s mansion was a tasteful insertion into the Hudson Valley. Its grandeur and references to historical styles inside and outside placed it on the same footing as its Hudson Valley neighbors. Its appearance would not have suggested to any observer that it belonged to a black female millionaire. Villa Lewaro is more original, however, in that it does not conform to classical styles as directly as do McKim, Mead & White’s mansion for Frederick W. Vanderbilt in Hyde Park, N.Y. (Fig. 17), and other neighbors, which are firmly based on historical precedents. The floor plans of such houses were perfectly symmetrical, and often contained rooms whose entire contents were imported from Europe. Walker’s interiors were more lightly suggestive of historical styles. She was also not afraid to mix new furnishings from Europe with the mail-order pieces from her previous residences. The effect was not like that of the eclecticism prevalent in interior design at the end of the nineteenth century, however. Villa Lewaro’s interiors were intended to serve not just as living spaces but as inspiration to blacks. Madam Walker maintained to Lelia that the prime agenda in her construction and decoration of her Irvington mansion was to “convince members of my race of the wealth and business possibilities within the race, to point to young Negroes what a lone woman accomplished and to inspire them to do big things.” She may have been inspired by the late nineteenth-century movement to create the ideal home, and she gave it a race-conscious agenda. While the house embodied high-style design, its more conservative elements made it typical for someone of any race or either sex who had achieved success. Thus, Walker’s building program reflected a broader socioeconomic issue, which included the possibilities of increasing wealth in the black community. It also represented the rise of the African-American single-family home—though of course at a grand scale.

Within the black community there was a growing sense of accomplishment that came with home ownership. Most African-American commentators applauded Madam’s progress and admired her new home, but a few criticized what they thought was its “undue extravagance.” In 1933, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) encouraged “Negroes to love home, and to create homes (we do not mean mansions, but places in which children may be born and have the proper cultural background).” While not an overt stab at edifices such as Villa Lewaro, which had been sold a few years earlier, this statement encouraged acceptance for more modest residential aspirations. More accessible to blacks might have been homes such as Frederick Douglas’s Cedar Hill or The Oaks, home of Booker T. Washington.

Frederick Douglass resided at Cedar Hill, his Washington, D.C., home, from 1877 to his death in 1895 (Fig. 18). During Douglass’s lifetime, Cedar Hill contained a parlor, library, sitting room, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor and five bedrooms on the second. The house may survive today (in addition to its importance as the home of the nationally known abolitionist) because, for blacks, it was an attainable example of African-American domesticity and an appropriate model of “architecture as a tool for reclaiming [black] history,” according to the scholar Barbara Burison Mooney. In July 1918, at its annual meeting, the NACW held a special gathering to burn the mortgage of
Cedar Hill. Madam Walker, who had given the largest donation, $500, to the fundraising campaign, co-presided over the mortgage-burning ceremony. Here was a clear example of Walker’s advocacy of architectural preservation to promote black history and architecture to express black achievement.

While Walker was not involved in the preservation of Booker T. Washington’s house in Alabama, it serves as an interesting point of comparison to her homes and for the discourse on black housing, particularly given Washington’s and Walker’s personal and professional relationship. At Tuskegee, Washington promoted vocational education for the advancement of black men and women. He believed that higher housing standards would give blacks higher social and economic clout, thereby enabling them to make progress in a racist and segregated society. Thus, students in the department of mechanical industries were taught carpentry, brickmasonry, plastering, plumbing, and mechanical and architectural drawing. They were responsible for numerous buildings on the school’s campus, including Booker T. Washington’s home, The Oaks (Fig. 19). Constructed from 1899 to 1902, the home was Washington’s command center and the school’s social center. After his death in 1915, his widow Margaret Murray Washington resided there until 1925. The Oaks is a two-story Queen Anne-style dwelling. The plan exhibits large rooms arranged asymmetrically around a long stair hall. Though appointed with Victorian furnishings, like Cedar Hill, The Oaks contained more luxurious and elaborate interior decoration. For example, the main public rooms were ornamented with friezes, such as the one in the library highlighting the Washingtons’ European trip, made the year that construction began on their house. Cedar Hill and The Oaks were both well-known residences of prominent black intellectual leaders. The identity of these sites is specifically associated with the lives and careers of Douglass and Washington. When constructed, they were not intended to impart a particular socioeconomic or aesthetic message. The Walker houses, however, emphasized the role of architecture as an emblem of high social and economic achievement.

Like Walker, Washington grew up in a wooden cabin left over from the days of slavery. Both excelled, however, though by different means, in obtaining lifestyles that could be exemplary for other blacks. Though smaller and less identifiable in style, Walker’s Indianapolis house was quite similar to The Oaks. Both were brick structures, which signified stability and middle-class wealth, and they featured contemporary home decor. As houses that reflected national trends in the development of middle-class housing, Cedar Hill and the Oaks, and other black-owned residences of their caliber, enabled owners to counter prejudices and racism by appropriating the trappings of standard, carpenter-built domestic architecture. Views such as that expressed by the NACW were also sentiments in late nineteenth-century women’s literature aimed at a white audience. In the same vein as white Americans, blacks sought to adopt the ideal middle-class dwelling as their own in order to share mainstream ideas of American domesticity and, therefore, respectability.

Madam Walker was able to do this on a larger scale by overcoming adverse financial and personal obstacles and developing a sense of self in the development of her architect-designed homes while imitating the physical properties and cultural values of prominent white American houses. Walker’s method of developing a personal identity was tied to her complete assimilation of the culture of affluent white Americans, one of the few options available to her generation.

Madam C. J. Walker died on May 25, 1919; she had been able to enjoy Villa Lewaro for less than a year. In that time, however, she could see her dream realized, far removed from her days as a washerwoman and laundress. Villa Lewaro was a significant step above her Harlem townhouse; it was meant for leisure and had no aspects of her business tied to it. The residence did not even include an office for Madam. Her European-styled rooms were fashioned for pleasure. They also displayed her more refined sensibilities. Years earlier she had hired Alice Kelly to help her improve her speech, penmanship, grammar, and etiquette. Now Walker hired various designers, including Frank Smith and Richter and Kolbe, to inform her design decisions. While she needed the assistance of
others, she knew the kind of image she wanted to project. By incorpo-
rating the ideals of historicism and classicism inside and outside Villa
Lewaro, she was able to create a home that would be acceptable to those
already established in Irvington. The restrained ornamentation of the
exterior also made her presence more palatable to whites and less
ostentatious to blacks. After all, she said, it was for the black community
that the house had been built. Walker had emphasized that she consid-
ered the house a Negro institution. As Madam left her company in the
charge of women, she bequeathed her home to Lelia. After A'Lelia's
death, the house was to be sold to a black organization.

A'Lelia Walker

As Madam Walker's only child, Lelia (Fig. 20) was in a unique
position to make an impact on society. While Madam C. J. Walker was
concerned with influencing economic and political conditions for Afri-
can-Americans on a national and even global level, Lelia chose to
advocate more fully for the social and cultural life in Harlem. Though she
did not shirk her responsibilities to the Walker Company, as a grown
woman she finally had the ability to pursue her own interests. Yet, the
erlder Walker still had control over Lelia after her death. In her will,
Madam specified her daughter's living arrangements and tied Lelia's fate
to that of the house and its contents until her daughter's death, at which
time they were to revert to the estate. Madam stipulated, "it is my express
wish and desire that my daughter occupy the Irvington property as a
home, and that the same property be forever maintained out of said trust
fund as a monument to my memory."55

Of course, Lelia must have appreciated the legacy for what it meant
to her mother and to the company's reputation. After all, Villa Lewaro
was the scene of a lavish reception following the $40,000 wedding of
Lelia's adopted daughter Mae Walker (the former Fairy Mae Bryant) in
1923. Lelia also hosted occasional parties at Villa Lewaro.56 She was
more content with city life, however. As Madam had given her posses-
sion of the Harlem house, she spent most of her time there. After all, it
was at her instigation that the property that had been purchased and mostly
under her supervision that it had been designed and decorated. The
Walkers' first interiors were conservative, containing reproductions in
historicist styles. Examples of Lelia's exotic tastes, more so than her
mother's, however, were visible, such as the abundant use of Oriental
rugs in her bedroom. During Walker's lifetime, the structure served as a
residence and place of business, but during the 1920s it also served as a
base for important figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Dark Tower

In the 1920s, Lelia began to assert her independence. The death
of her mother in 1919 removed the conservative constraints on Lelia's
taste. She was able to express her personal design sensibility, establish an
identity separate from that of her mother and the Walker Company, and
affirm her cultural roots and uniqueness. After several failed marriages
(John Robinson, 1909-1914; Wiley Wilson, 1919-1925; James Kennedy,
1926-1931), Lelia retained Walker as her surname. She changed her first
to A'Lelia in 1922 as part of a self-transformation, however. This
rebirth was manifested in A'Lelia's distancing of herself from Villa
Lewaro and in her association with artists, writers, and other figures of
the Harlem Renaissance. Through various interactions with these friends
and acquaintances, A'Lelia was convinced to sponsor a salon for poetry
and art in the residence of the Harlem townhouse. In keeping with the
spirit of the times, the salon was to serve as a gathering point for
supposedly like-minded advocates of avant-garde developments in black
art, music, and literature. A'Lelia was the perfect benefactress for this
endeavor: she was outspoken, glamorous, and wealthy. Thus, the Dark
Tower group was initiated in October 1927 (Fig. 21). Gatherings filled
the entire breadth of the back of the townhouse.57 Fitting the agenda of
the salon, the paneled walls were embellished with the writings of two
important figures. On the right side was inscribed Langston Hughes's
"Weary Blues"; across from it was Countee Cullen's poem "From the
Dark Tower," which inspired the salon's name. Though a contemporary
photograph depicts a room that seems unsounding, the decoration of the
salon was unique. It was furnished with dark rose-colored tables and
chairs that matched the wood of the piano. Also present were rose-hued
curtains, wine-colored candelstics, and a sky blue Victrola.58

The highlight of the salon was a custom-designed "Skyscraper"
bookcase by Paul T. Frankl (1886-1958), partly visible against the wall in
Fig. 21. The Viennese-born designer had immigrated to New York City
permanently in 1920 and established a shop on East 48th Street; he was
known for his promotion of modern designs that were uniquely Ameri-
can, based on his search for new forms in design and architecture.59
Frankl became best known for his "Skyscraper" furniture, so-called
because its setback levels were reminiscent of those in New York's most
recent tall buildings.60 The extent of his involvement with the interiors
of the Harlem address is unclear, but he also designed a ceiling lighting fixture that also appears in the photograph of the Dark Tower gathering (Fig. 21). A'Lelia would not have patronized such a prestigious figure had she not been willing to pursue an in-depth relationship. It appears that from the beginning of the Frankl-Walker connection, A'Lelia would brook no opposition when it came to furnishing her home in the manner she saw fit. Frankl writes in his autobiography:

In the drafting room one day the phone buzzed frantically, summoning me to come downstairs in a hurry. The galleries were crowded with socialites as I walked in, and comfortably seated behind a screen hastily set up were the subjects of the turbulent excitement. Two colored ladies were waiting to see me. Removing

the screen, I welcomed them as I would other visitors. My dark-hued callers, I was to find out, were Mrs. A'Lelia Walker and her secretary. . . . She asked me to do over her town house in Harlem.

"I want to make it into a club where people of all nationalities can meet, discuss their problems, get acquainted and learn to know each other. . . . I want it to be as new as it is in spirit," she went on, "and I trust we can count on you to help us. It is all for charity—mine, not yours." And with this she turned to her secretary and had her make out a check, high in the four figures, wanting to be sure that we were taking on the job.52

Despite cost and what should have been the impossibility of hiring a white Jewish designer in an increasingly Jim Crow society, A'Lelia was determined to have her rooms decorated with Frankl's modern designs.53

Perhaps to escape the demands of the Walker Hair Salon as well as the Dark Tower, A'Lelia also purchased a small pied-à-terre at 80 Edgecombe Avenue.54 The unit was in an apartment building completed by Grosnberg and Leuchtag in 1915.55 A'Lelia's one-bedroom suite included steam heat, a private bath, and electric lights, while the building was furnished with a doorman and porters to guarantee privacy.56

Undoubtedly, Frankl furnishings worked in this interior as well. Some of
A'Leila's modern design sensibility is evident in what little is known about the apartment. It featured rose and green taffeta draped from the living room ceiling, her extensive collection of ornamental elephants, and a custom-made mahogany studio couch.68 This couch was possibly an item that A'Leila Perry Bundles, Mae Walker's granddaughter, recalled seeing years later in her grandfather's home as a child. She described it as a large, dark piece with stepped sides on which she and her brother would play. This piece was evidently designed by Frankl as part of his "Skyscraper" series.

A'Leila's commission of an avant-garde designer like Frankl to contribute to her interiors was an assertion of her newfound independence and an interest in modern design that was unusual, for this was a time when most Americans were not buying modern furniture. In 1928, Frankl's gallery was the most prominent (and expensive) outlet for modernism in New York City. The alliance between A'Leila and Frankl was unique given the scarcity of both designers and clients who supported modern design. Frankl's work embodied an ideal aesthetic for someone like A'Leila who, through her development of her own identity, was offering a new model for blacks. As opposed to her mother, who had borrowed the symbols of the status quo to escape a negative history, A'Leila promoted a new and bright future through her patronage of modernism. She was so proud of her "Skyscraper" bookcase that it appeared on all of the Dark Tower stationary (Fig. 22). The logo was also featured on the announcement of the Dark Tower's disbanding in 1928. A'Leila was more interested in the social aspects of the Harlem Renaissance than its intellectual matters. As such, she had opened the salon to serve as a sort of home for writers and artists. The prices that she had begun to charge for refreshments among other amenities in order to keep the salon open without incurring personal expense, however, were too costly for struggling artists, and A'Leila was forced to end gatherings due to lack of patronage and for other financial reasons.69

Conclusion: The Ideal Black Interior

The Dark Tower closed in October 1928 after only a year, but its space could still be rented for banquets, meetings, and parties until A'Leila rented the Walker townhouse to the City of New York in late 1929.69 Villa Lewaro fared better, but its fate was certainly not what Madam had had in mind. Due to the economic status of the country during the Great Depression, no black organization was able to afford to purchase the villa after A'Leila's death. Madam's intentions to create a grand showplace backfired when its upkeep proved impossible to maintain. After fifty years as a convalescent home for women, and several years of neglect, it returned to the African-American community as a private residence in 1993. Ironically, the Harlem townhouse was demolished in 1949 for the construction of the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library.

In the construction and decoration of her homes, Madam C. J. Walker's purpose was twofold—to express values representative of mainstream white society for all blacks to appropriate, but in a manner that underscored her personal financial and social status. She chose styles and furnishings associated with the elite such as the Neo-Renaissance and the Neo-Georgian, but did not completely conform to convention as she included older, less valuable furnishings in her homes, objects purchased before the peak of her career and without the aid of designers. Whereas the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts completely separated their business from their home life, she closely tied her houses to the image of her company. Even Villa Lewaro, a site for relaxation and retreat, was used openly to promote not only the company but the lifestyle such a successful enterprise could buy. Madam Walker's residences were an important symbol to her and she fully realized the significance of the prestige that home ownership conferred. Her will stipulated that a trust fund be established to help blacks acquire modern homes.60 On the other hand, A'Leila Walker was more independent in her personal design sensibility. She broke from convention both as a New Yorker who promoted and patronized modern design, and as a black woman who did so.

In creating the ideal black interior, the Walker residences represent a progression and divergent strategies. First, in Indianapolis, Madam Walker established herself as a well-to-do black businesswoman. By attaining the trappings of white wealth, she was able to acquire stature, dignity, and identity. In Harlem, primarily under A'Leila's guidance, the Walker image was imbued with cultural sophistication and the beginnings of an identification with modernity. At this point, the driving force behind the Walker image was transferred from mother to daughter. For Madam Walker, Villa Lewaro was the culmination of her aesthetic ambitions—an equivalent of the homes of the white elite with whom she competed and a prototype for successful blacks to follow. A'Leila furthered her mother's agenda of creating statement-making places to establish and refine her own tastes, but they were separate from those of Madam Walker and the business. A'Leila overcame racism, sexism, and her mother's rise from poverty by meeting modernism as an equal, not by adopting traditional European taste. A patron of modernism, if not a
Harlem Renaissance artist in her own right, she opened the doors for blacks and whites alike to support this new approach to living.

Still, A'Leia's appropriation of modernism was comparable to her mother's revival styles. The Harlem Renaissance was born through the ability of black writers, musicians, and artists to portray themselves and other blacks in modern ways that stressed personal and racial ownership. A'Leia tried to use design as a comparable conveyer of her identity. In an attempt to appropriate a modern idiom for herself, she saw Frank's "Skyscraper" house as her "Dark Tower," for example, and it featured prominently in the visual art that she created for the salon. At a gathering, members of the Dark Tower proudly posed before the house-case, an emblem of their modern ideas. It was not created by blacks with a specific racial agenda, however; indeed, a custom-made item of furniture could not embody black identity as effectively as Harlem Renaissance poetry, music, and art. On the other hand, Frank's "Skyscraper" style may have appealed to A'Leia because of its very neutrality, its absence of white historical connotations as well as "exotic" markers. Unlike her artist friends, she was never a full advocate of the ideas behind the Harlem Renaissance; like her mother, she assimilated to a certain extent. Yet she too sought the most innovative contemporary means available to exhibit her status and unique personality. In any case, there was then no source in the United States for a black aesthetic of architecture or decor. A distinct African-American visual design culture would not emerge in the country until the 1960s.

Madam and A'Leia—each in her own way—expressed various personal and social agendas in the design and decor of their residences, and they did so with means and foresight available to no other African-Americans, and to few women of their time. In a period of transition for the black race, Madam and A'Leia offered forward-thinking African-Americans two different, yet effective, models for creating a black identity through what each considered the ideal black interior.

NOTES

1. At the time of her death in 1919, Madam Walker's estate was actually valued at $600,000, although many newspapers labeled her a millionaire. Today that dollar amount is approximately $66,000,000. See A'Leia Porter Bundles, On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker (New York, 2001), 127.

2. Ibid., 56.

3. "Hair culture" was a contemporary term used to describe an individual who cared for hair products to improve the health of hair. In Madam Walker's case, her goals were intended to edify and make hair grow. Hair culture like Pope-Turbo and Madam Walker also provided means for their clients to see products through salons, agents, or self-help groups. The agents who would be identified today as barbers, were also called hair culptures.

4. Ibid., 49.

5. The Madison C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company maintained that name and thrived until its sale. The company grew to include a cosmetics line shortly before Madam Walker's death and, despite A'Leia's increasing lack of interest in the company, it prospered during the late 1920s and the 1930s, was expanded in 1929, and survived despite decreasing revenue during the Great Depression.


7. Ibid., 248.


10. Sources such as Bundles, On Her Own Ground, and Beauty Lovers, Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C. J. Walker (New York, 2001), are unclear as to whether the Walker's purchases such as the Tiffany chandeliers were authentic pieces or reproductions. Given their wealth, however, they would have been able to afford genuine pieces and antiques.

11. Description of interiors from Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 143; and Lowery, Her Dream of Dreams, 232-33.

12. Lowery, Her Dream of Dreams, 255.


15. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 170.


17. Ibid., 169.


22. Ibid., 126.

23. Ibid., 125, n. 9.


27. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 171.

28. Ibid., 172.

29. Ibid.

30. Garza, "Queen of Gotham's Colored 400," 76.

31. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 234.


33. Ibid., 221.


35. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 176.

36. An ad in which Smith lists the Walkers as his clients appears in the July 1918 issue of The Messenger.

37. Description of the interiors from her specifications and/or Bundles, On Her Own Ground, unless otherwise noted.

38. Lowery, Her Dream of Dreams, 399. The light bath was a wood cabinet in which the user would sit, imitated by the arched saplings produced and magnified by the bulbs and mirrors lining the box. The Electric Coach massaged the body with mild electric currents. Both machines were employed at the Battle Creek Sanitarium and sold commercially through the Battle Creek Equipment Company from the end of the nineteenth century. See The Battle Creek Sanitarium, Battle Creek, Michigan (Battle Creek, Mich., 1890), 18-19; and articles commemorating the centennial of the Health-Inducing (Federal) Center, Battle Creek, Michigan, Scene Magazine 28, no. 4 (May 2003), available at http://www.dihl.net/bi/ fandelstein/pat/Faustino26.pdf.


40. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 235; and Lowery, Her Dream of Dreams, 395.

41. Ibid.

42. The "General Specifications" provide for three bathrooms on the second floor, but at the time of the National Historic Landmark Nomination, five are noted.


44. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 235.

45. Ibid.


53. Again, see Mooney, "The Comfortable Taste Framed Cottage," 68.

54. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 449-52.

55. Lowery, Her Dream of Dreams, 372.

56. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 283.

57. Ibid., 281.

58. Ibid., 306-7.

59. Ibid., 287.


63. Before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, the association of Jewish liberals and civil rights advocates was common. In all likelihood, A’Lelia would have been aware of this relationship and she may have patronized Frankl accordingly. For his part, Frankl would have been eager to work for such a well-paying client.

64. A’Lelia’s unit was apartment 21.

65. Adams, Harlem Lost and Found, 256.

66. Ibid.


68. Ibid., 286-87.

69. Ultimately, the city demolished the residence in 1949 for a branch of the public library. Its name, the Countee Cullen Library, is the only element that remains from the history of the site.

70. Bundles, On Her Own Ground, 270.