

Streetscapes/John Seekircher, Master of Casement Repairs

For an Artisan, Thousands of Windows, Little Time

He likes suburbs best, and says he's never replaced a window.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

"SEEKIRCHER — who else?" says Paul Buck, of Buck/Cane architects, when asked whom he had retained to repair the casement windows at the 1920's Fieldston School in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.

There are thousands of steel casement windows around New York City, and John Seekircher wants to repair them all — one by one. Mr. Seekircher, who is 45, established his old-fashioned, hands-on business a quarter century ago and from the beginning he has struggled, not to expand his niche, but to keep it small.

His business, Seekircher Steel Window Repair, is in Scarsdale, N.Y., the heart of casement-window country, where a drive down any street of prewar houses can make him wince in pain or smile with pleasure. "How can somebody do that — what were they thinking?" he blurts out, passing a brick Tudor, intact except for the new, plate-glass windows. "But look at that one, it's got the texture, it's part of the house," he says about a comparable house with the characteristic swing-out, multipaned sash.

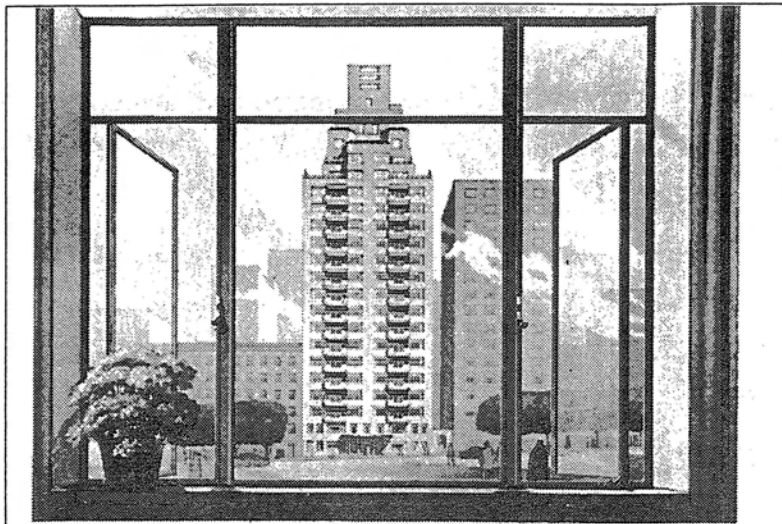
Casement sashes were the earliest operable windows in America, in wide use in the 17th century. But the frames sagged and the double-hung window — two fixed frames sliding up and down in tracks — must have seemed a big advance. It replaced the casement by the mid-18th century.

At the turn of the 20th century steel-frame construction permitted larger window openings, and fire-prevention measures encouraged the use of metal windows, especially after advances in hot rolling technology made possible sections narrow enough for window construction. At the same time, rising interest in more picturesque styles — particularly the English cottage — encouraged interest in casement windows with small leaded panes.

Articles in decorating and architectural magazines after 1910 promoted not only the picturesque quality of casement windows, but also their greater effectiveness at catching breezes, since a double-hung window is always at least half closed.

But casements presented problems with screens and curtains, and tended to permit rain damage in a way double-hung windows did not.

Writing in *House Beautiful* in 1915, Caroline Gardner noted that "if you own 59 casements, as does a woman I know, you have to work like an ambulance nurse to save the plaster." But she defended their romantic quality: "Imagine Juliet, in her exalted mood, stooping to crawl through the



Apartment House, 120 E. 79th St., New York. Another view from the same building. Photographed by J. Flood York.

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opening of a double-hung window to meet Romeo!"

Metal casement windows swept into the residential market by the 1920's, aided by national advertising by the big, centralized production firms. In New York City apartment houses banks of casement windows — produced with the narrow profile of steel — offered much more light than a comparable bank of wooden windows. They became so popular that in 1928 *The New Yorker's* apartment critic, "Penthouse" (Marcia Zimbalist), wrote, "I am getting very cranky about these small-paned casement windows whose use is so rapidly increasing." She thought they cut down on views.

The modernism of the 30's and 40's favored casements, although without the small leaded panes. In the 50's steel was often supplanted by aluminum, but both types are still produced.

Mr. Seekircher first took notice of steel casement windows in 1975, when he worked for Steel Casement Service in Yonkers for two months. Despite the name, the owner made only marginal attempts to repair steel casement windows before selling a new,

conventional window. "I knew that the windows could be repaired," says Mr. Seekircher, "but my boss said you could make more money replacing it. I just thought that was stupid — anybody can rip something out and throw it away."

After college, Mr. Seekircher got work as a boilermaker at Metro-North. While there his experience with steel windows stuck with him. "We were brought up not to throw anything away, we took care of our stuff," he says, and he began fixing steel casement windows locally on the side.

"IN the first 10 years it was a constant battle to convince people that the windows are worth keeping — the utility companies had come up with these unrealistic energy audits, and people wanted to believe it — nobody challenged them," says Mr. Seekircher.

But in the last 10 years, he says, people have seen that the energy savings were illusory, and that removing the historic windows actually diminished the property value, especially in a single-family house.

He went into in steel casement repair full

Left, a 1947 ad for metal windows with ventilating wings used at 120 East 79th Street. Right, John Seekircher oversees the restoration and repair of a metal cathedral window in a house in Harrison, N.Y. Brother Bobby is on the ladder.



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

time in 1988. Last year the company repaired 8,000 windows, usually charging about \$80 a unit. In Manhattan, he has done big buildings like Riverside Church, the Parc Vendome and the Rockefeller Apartments, but his heart is really in suburban work. In Manhattan, he says, "there's a lot of corruption, a few buildings I lost because I wouldn't pay anybody off."

Mr. Seekircher's brother, Bobby, and his nephew, Paul, work for him, along with several others. On a recent day in Westchester County, his crews were at work at two sites, a sprawling Tudor where the occupants hadn't opened the windows in 30 years and an Italian palazzo where the crew was rebuilding two large double-door assemblies, a three-day project with Bobby welding the built-up sections into place and Paul helping.

He stores salvaged hardware and several hundred entire windows in a barn and nothing gratifies him more than being able to supply a "new" old window for an expansion project.

Mr. Seekircher holds most new windows in low regard, even the most expensive

ones. "That's why they call them replacement windows — because you're going to have to replace them," he says. He says he sees an emerging epidemic of seal failures on these high-tech installations.

Although almost everyone in the preservation industry has sought to expand their businesses, by this time Mr. Seekircher, who has worked in 14 states, could have branched out as a new window supplier or even a general contractor. But he has also defined himself by what he won't do: he doesn't paint, he doesn't do the leadwork (although another brother, Billy, has a leaded-glass company), he "won't touch" aluminum and he has never had to replace a window.

Rather, he likes watching people's eyes open when he polishes the hardware to a golden shine, working "like a chiropractor" to bend the windows back into line and splinting salvaged steel sections into rusting frames. Looking back on two decades of his single-minded mission Mr. Seekircher says the business "just grew and grew."

"These windows, they're like my kids," he says.