

130-134 East 67th Street Apartment Building, Borough of Manhattan
Built 1907; architect Charles A. Platt for Rossiter & Wright.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1401, Lot 54.

On June 19, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 130-134 East 67th Street Apartment and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. No witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

Description And Analysis

This distinguished apartment house composed in the manner of an imposing Italian Renaissance palazzo was designed as a pendant to the nearly identical adjacent apartment house, already a designated New York City Landmark, on the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 66th Street. Built in 1907 from the designs of the noted architect Charles A. Platt, who worked here in conjunction with the architectural firm Rossiter & Wright, the building is an important early example of the luxury cooperative apartment house, then a relatively new type of residence for wealthy urban dwellers.

Although multiple-family dwellings were common for working class families from the late 1830's, the idea of an apartment house for affluent residents was first introduced in New York City only in 1869 with the Stuyvesant Apartments which stood on West 18th Street. They were designed by the prominent architect Richard Morris Hunt who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where apartment dwelling was a well-established manner of living for all classes of tenants. New Yorkers, however, were somewhat hesitant about the idea at first. Although apartment houses continued to be constructed in the 1880's and 1890's, their dominance of residential Manhattan is a 20th-century phenomenon. As late as 1907, in an article concerning these buildings on Lexington Avenue, the New York Times noted that "With the growing scarcity of dwellings, the time is surely coming when we will have our neighbor's 'houses' above and below us, instead of an adjoining lots."¹

The idea of the cooperative apartment house seems to date from around 1880 when the architectural and building firm of Hubert, Pirsson and Company erected the first of a series of so-called Hubert Home Clubs. These featured duplex apartments, elevator operators, and doormen, all intended "to reproduce as closely as possible the atmosphere of the private house,"² still the residential ideal of most city residents. However, this idea did not spread and rental

arrangements continued to predominate in the early apartment buildings of the 1880's and 1890's. Thus, when William J. Taylor formed the Corporation Building Construction Company in the early 1900's to sell shares in new apartment buildings, it was considered a pioneering effort with great promise for solving the housing problem on all levels. The New York Times even reported that the idea was being considered by tenement house builders.³ Taylor's first effort was the building of studio apartments at 39-41 West 67th Street developed in collaboration with the architectural firm of Pollard & Steinam. The incorporation of two-story high studios and one-story domestic rooms on two levels gave the name studio apartments to these early duplex arrangements, many of which were in fact specifically intended for artists. In 1905 construction was begun of a new apartment house at 131-35 East 66th Street. Again Taylor entrusted the execution to Pollard & Steinman, although the actual design distinguished by its exceptional grace and refined proportions and details, was the work of the architect Charles A. Platt. This building consists of duplex units of the type used on West 67th Street, although in the plan of this building many large double-story living rooms were built instead of studio spaces. So successful was the cooperative arrangement in this building, that the developer took title to the adjoining lot on the southeast corner of 67th Street and Lexington Avenue, as well as another property on the northeast corner of Lexington and 67th Street in 1907. Both of these soon were developed with cooperative apartment houses. This type of building was recognized as encouraging a higher standard of design and construction than purely speculative rental buildings, because the developer's costs were already met by the members of the cooperative, known as the building's "founders". The Times article on this new concept of apartments noted that all financing charges were avoided and speculative risk eliminated because "the shareholders pay the various installments of their subscriptions in accordance with the schedule of payments of the builder...."⁴ In fact, the second building on Lexington Avenue, at the southeast corner of 67th Street, was so successful that every share in the building was sold before the foundations had even been finished. The building was constructed quickly, being completed within the same year in which work began.

The site of the two apartment houses designed by Platt are part of the former site of Mount Sinai Hospital. The mansarded Second Empire style building of the hospital, erected in 1870-72 from the designs of the architect Griffith Thomas, was demolished when the Hospital moved uptown to Fifth Avenue and 100th Street in 1904. The block was then subdivided and sold to individual developers.

Early studio cooperative buildings were known for their prominent residents, combining a mix of affluent professionals and the successful and prominent artists they tended to patronize. Platt himself lived in a luxurious apartment at 131-135 East 66th Street with Renaissance style furnishings befitting the exterior of this building, which he himself had designed. The apartment house on East 67th Street, although it varies from its neighbor externally only in detail-- most notably the entry portals-- was designed with a very different internal layout. It combined very large duplexes with smaller more conventional apartments and had none of the high studio apartments which were such important and widely emulated features of the buildings on East 66th Street and West 67th Street. Although Charles Platt designed both structures, the slightly later 130-34 East 67th Street Apartment Building was the commission of a different architectural firm, that of Rossiter & Wright. Erick K. Rossiter (1854-1941), the more important member of the firm, was himself one of the "founders" of the building. Parisian born, he had been educated at Cornell University and served as a draftsman in several New York architectural firms before establishing his own practice in partnership with Wright. Later he formed the partnership of Rossiter & Muller which was very active as designers of public buildings throughout New York State and New England.

The best known early resident of the building was the artist Kenyon Cox (1856-1919), another "founder." Active as a painter, illustrator, and art critic, Cox is perhaps best known for his stylized symbolic murals for major public buildings in the 1890's and early 1900's, notably those in the Library of Congress and the Appellate Court House on Madison Square in New York. Like many of the fashionable artists of his day, Cox was born of a prominent family and trained in the most popular ateliers in Paris. Cosmopolitan, versatile, and active in established artistic institutions, he was able to maintain an elegant life-style equal to that of many of his clients.

Charles A. Platt (1861-1933), the designer of the building, was certainly a product of the same milieu. The son of a well-to-do New York lawyer, he turned to architecture only late in life after having established himself as a painter and etcher. He had studied in the Paris atelier of Julian and had also worked under the prominent Academic painters Boulanger and Lefebvre, between 1882 and 1885. Returning to New York after successes at the Paris Salon, Platt specialized in landscape paintings and in etchings which reflect a certain Whistlerian influence. In 1888 Platt began spending his summers at Cornish, New Hampshire, where Augustus Saint-Gaudens had already established a summer home and studio. Soon an artistic colony was gathering there composed not only of Platt but Kenyon Cox, T. W. Dewing, and Maxfield Parrish among others. After a tour of Italian gardens with his brother William, Platt became somewhat of an expert on the villa style and its accompanying luxurious gardens, many of which are recorded in his publication Italian Gardens of 1894. Beginning with his own summer "villa" at Cornish, Platt slowly began

practicing architecture and developing the style of restrained elegance which characterizes his work. He was concerned with creating a harmonious relationship between the house and its landscape, often an Italian garden skillfully laid-out by Platt. His fame spread largely by personal contact and he soon became known as an architect to the well-to-do. In the first two decades of the century he built some fifty estate houses and gardens in the wealthy suburbs of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Although Platt's style was a personal one, informed by his own artistic training, it reflected the popularity of the neo-Georgian, Colonial Revival, and Italian Renaissance manners in contemporary domestic design. The elegant Renaissance detailing of his apartment houses reflects a desire to transfer this image to a new style of upper-class urban living. His style was distinct but always satisfied the tastes and desires of his affluent clients.

Platt also designed a number of monumental civic and institutional structures in restrained Italian Renaissance and neo-Georgian styles. Most of these, such as his rebuilding of Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., continued the successful intergration of architecture and landscape design. Even his Florentine Renaissance style Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. (1923) is set in the ample surroundings of the Mall. In New York City he created a number of buildings which demonstrate his ability to design in an urban context, respecting surrounding buildings and in confined sites. Apart from the McMillan Memorial Fountain (1912) in Bryant Park, the majority of his urban commissions were for wealthy private clients, most importantly Vincent Astor. Between 1911 and his retirement in 1928 Platt designed a great number of houses and apartment buildings as well as the original Waldorf Hotel and the Astor Building at Broadway and Vesey Streets for the Astor Estates. He also designed a house for Henry S. Morgan on East 36th Street and the Sara Delano Roosevelt Memorial House (1908), a designated New York City Landmark, in the neo-Georgian style.

The apartment houses on Lexington Avenue are thus among his earliest New York commissions. They were enthusiastically received not only for the novelty of their interior arrangements and financing, but also for their noteworthy architectural refinement. One appreciator felt that they offered "a peculiarly enlightening lesson to the architectural student in their good proportions, their simplicity, and their refined detail. They are models of taste and distinction, where edifices of the sort are lacking in nothing as they are lacking in just those qualities." 5 Faced in finely-worked limestone, the apartment building at 130-134 East 67th Street reflects the common adaptation of the tripartite facade organization of the Italian Renaissance palazzo to tall urban buildings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At East 67th Street, the first three of the building's eleven stories are treated as a base articulated by a smooth-faced and shallow pattern of very regular rustication crowned by

a bold ovolo molding. Molding courses also articulate the upper stories into distinct horizontal bands which give the two facades a readable and comprehensible scale. These qualities assure the monumental presence of the building even when juxtaposed against the huge scale, bold forms, and tremendous expanse of unarticulated brick wall of the Seventh Regiment Armory, a designated New York City Landmark, across Lexington Avenue.

The most prominent features of the 67th Street facade are the twin porticos which mark the main entrances. Their baseless Greek Doric columns support a full entablature with crisply-carved triglyphs and alternating lion's heads and anthemia on the cymatium of the cornice. These massive porticos rise to the height of two stories and lend a sense of stern monumentality to the building. Their entablatures serve as the balconies for the windows on the third story which are fronted by iron railings.

Above the third story, the facade is of very closely laid smooth-faced limestone. The windows are grouped to give a sense of rhythmic progression across the facade which further modifies the mass and large scale of the building block. A subtle central emphasis is achieved by the use of tripartite windows in the central bay in place of the single double-hung windows which predominate on this facade. The facade is not, however, symmetrical. Over the left-hand doorway many of the windows rise uninterrupted through two stories to accommodate the duplex arrangements of the apartments behind. These windows feature a handsome combination of thick and thin mullions and circular leaded panes.

On Lexington Avenue the facade is symmetrically disposed about a central axis, marked by an expanse of unarticulated wall, indicating that the entrance is to be found in the 67th Street facade. Here the windows are arranged in decreasing width toward the center. The molding courses and cornice of this facade continue the principal lines of the earlier apartment house next door at 131-135 East 66th Street, making an impressive composition along the entire blockfront.

The use of a large eared enframing incorporating the windows of three stories in the second and fifth bays of the Lexington Avenue facade also echoes one of the principal features of the earlier apartment house by Platt, at 131-135 East 66th Street. The subtle differences in the two facades are hardly noticed with a passing glance. Most prominent is the differing composition of the monumental projecting cornices which terminate both facades. At 130-134 East 67th Street handsome modillions support the cornice rather than the massive blocks of the somewhat more elaborate cornice of 131-135 East 66th Street. This cornice returns on the plain brick facade of the courtyard elevation off Lexington Avenue. The bold cornice, scaled to the height of the facade, handsomely crowns this dignified structure at 130-134 East 67th Street, the quiet monumentality of which expresses the gracious life

accommodated within.

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FOOTNOTES

1. "Cooperative Building Seeking A Wider Field," New York Times, February 10, 1907, V, p. 16.
2. Alpern, Andrew, Apartments for the Affluent (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), p. 1.
3. New York Times, Feb. 10, 1907, V, p. 16.
4. Ibid.

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- Monograph of the Work of Charles A. Platt, with an introduction By Royal Cortissoz. New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, 1913.
- Obituary of Charles A. Platt. American Architect, 143 (November 1933), p. 125.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 130-134 East 67th Street Apartment Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 130-134 East 67th Street Apartment Building is a distinguished apartment house composed in the manner of an imposing Italian Renaissance palazzo; that it was designed by the distinguished architect Charles A. Platt as a pendant to the nearly identical adjacent apartment house on the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 66th Street; that the building is

an important early example of the luxury cooperative apartment house, then a relatively new type of residence for affluent urban dwellers; that this apartment building is among Platt's earliest New York City Commissions; that it is distinguished by its carefully detailed limestone facades, massive twin entrance porticos, and bold cornice; and that with the adjacent Platt-designed building it creates an air of quiet monumentality, expressive of the gracious life accommodated within.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 131-134 East 67th Street Apartment Building, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1401, Lot 54, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.