

GRAND ARMY PLAZA Fifth Avenue at 59th Street (The property bounded by the western curb line of Fifth Avenue, the northern curb line of West 58th Street, the eastern curb line of the unnamed roadway west of the Pulitzer Fountain and the General Sherman Monument and the southern curb line of the unnamed roadway north of the General Sherman Monument), Borough of Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1247, Lot 34 and Block 1111, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the General Sherman Monument is located.

On May 30, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Scenic Landmark of the Grand Army Plaza, Borough of Manhattan (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Grand Army Plaza which lies between 58th and 60th Streets at Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, was named "Grand Army Plaza" on February 10, 1923 by a resolution of the Board of Aldermen. The plaza, one of the most dignified and famous open spaces in the City, is designed in the form of an ellipse on a north-south axis and is bisected by 59th Street. The southern section contains the elegant Pulitzer fountain, and the northern section contains one of the best known works by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the statue of William Tecumseh Sherman.

The inception of the plaza is connected with that of Central Park and evolved from the rectangular cut in the Park at the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 59th Street which Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux had incorporated in their 1858 "Greensward" plan. Rather than have carriages entering the East Drive of the Park assemble on Fifth Avenue or 59th Street and block traffic, the cut served as a standing area for them. The plaza, at that time, did not extend south to 58th Street; this was done some time prior to 1868.

The design of the plaza became a controversial subject in 1863 when Richard Morris Hunt submitted a proposal for the treatment of the Central Park gates. His suggested handling of the Fifth Avenue entrance at the plaza was one of the more elaborate of his plans. In addition to a fountain within the plaza itself, the north side was to have an entrance to the East Drive, 200 feet wide, consisting of three roads and two walks separated from each other by rows of shade trees. Pedestals surmounted by ornamental sculpture were to be placed at the head of each row. On the west side of the plaza, Hunt envisioned a semi-circular terrace 100 feet in diameter with a central, 50-foot column crowned with sculpture representing the seal of New York. At its base would be a basin with statues representing the North (Hudson) and East Rivers on either side of the figure of Henry Hudson standing on the prow of a ship. There were to be steps twenty feet wide on either side of this basin that led up to the terrace which would project into the Park over the slopes near the Pond. Cascades with fountains would descend in a semi-circle into the Park to a large, circular basin above which would be a 30-foot niche containing a statue of either Columbus or a symbolic figure of the Ocean. The water from this basin would drain into the Pond which was just below it.

Hunt's entrances differed rather sharply from the gates that Vaux and Olmsted had incorporated in their "Greensward" design. Basically, their entrances were groups of shade trees enclosed within iron railings. They objected vehemently to Hunt's designs for the gates on the ground that they were antithetical to the democratic and rustic nature of the Park. The serious consideration which was given to Hunt's gates may have prompted Vaux and Olmsted to revise their scheme for the more important entrances in 1868 and give them a slightly more formal treatment.

Attention was once again focused on the plaza in 1898 when Karl Bitter, the noted sculptor, recommended a design for the area as a "City Beautiful" study. He advocated a unified treatment for both sections, the square in front of the old Plaza Hotel and the area between 59th and 60th Streets. Bitter planned two symmetrical sections, similar in shape to those of the Place de la Concorde in Paris surrounded by sidewalks and with a central promenade. Balustrades were

to line the two long sides of these sections and would be interrupted by stone benches and pedestals for statues. The dominating elements of Bitter's project were to be "baroque" fountains at the 58th and 60th Street ends of the plaza.

No action was taken on Bitter's plans until 1912 when Joseph Pulitzer bequeathed \$50,000 to the City for the erection of a fountain "like those in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, France" at or near the plaza entrance to Central Park. After the Parks Commission granted permission to Pulitzer's son to erect the fountain at the 58th Street end of the plaza, the plan had to be submitted to the Art Commission of New York City of which Bitter was a member. Bitter disapproved of the location of the fountain in the plaza on the grounds that the plaza should be treated as a single unit and should not be developed piecemeal. He was able to persuade the Pulitzer estate to agree with him and, as a result five architectural firms were invited to submit designs for the fountain and the entire plaza.

The design that was accepted was the one submitted by Thomas Hastings of Carrère & Hastings, one of New York's most notable architectural firms and responsible for some of our most striking civic structures. The Staten Island Borough Hall, the New York Public Library and the grand approaches to the Manhattan Bridge testify to the importance the firm gave to the setting for a building. Hastings' design for the plaza, which closely followed Bitter's earlier plan provided a sophisticated and urbane setting for the buildings which surrounded the plaza when it was first completed and continues to do so for those which now surround it.

Hastings' 1913 design placed the Pulitzer fountain at the southern end of the plaza at 58th Street and Augustus Saint-Gaudens' statue of William Tecumseh Sherman at the northern end near 60th Street. The Sherman statue was moved six feet west of the site at which it was unveiled in 1903 in order to align it with the fountain. Oriental plane trees were to be planted along the long sides of the islands, parallel to stone balustrades that separated the sidewalk from the formal planted areas flanking the center promenade. Trees were also to be planted on the east side of Fifth Avenue, the south side of 58th Street and in front of the Plaza Hotel. Two free-standing ornamental pillars once stood in front of the fountain on the central promenade.

The large Pulitzer fountain rises in a series of five concentric tiers, the top two of which are polygonal in contrast to the three lower curved basins. Bitter's statue of Abundance, rising from a small circular basin, crowns the fountain. Stepped down scallop fonts surmounted by mythical figures metamorphosing into cornucopias, flank the east and west sides of the fountain.

The Sherman statue, which is considered by many to be the finest work by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, stands on a rose-colored granite base designed by the architect Charles McKim of the firm of McKim, Mead & White. Saint-Gaudens had contracted to do a statue of Sherman in 1892 but it was not until May 30, 1903, after many changes in the original concept of the work that the wild equestrian figure of General Sherman led by Victory was unveiled.

Although the effectiveness of the north-south axis of the plaza has been diminished by the addition of an open space to the east, the main character of the plaza itself remains little changed from the original Bitter-Hastings design. It lends dignity and elegance to the buildings which surround it and creates a graceful and civilized ambience for them. It is now the formal accent marking the change in the nature of Fifth Avenue from a commercial street to a residential boulevard and it is a tastefully restrained entrance to the broad open space of Central Park.

FINDING AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, landscape architecture, sculpture and other features of this plaza, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Grand Army Plaza 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, Grand Army Plaza was laid out in accordance with a carefully prepared plan that it is an excellent example of the influence of the "City Beautiful" movement, that it contains two of the finest works by the notable American sculptors, Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Karl Bitter, that it is a sophisticated and urbane addition to the character of Fifth Avenue, that it is a tastefully restrained entrance to Central Park, and that it creates a graceful and civilized ambience for the people of New York.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 Scenic Landmark, Grand Army Plaza, Fifth Avenue at 59th Street, Borough of Manhattan, which consists of the property bounded by the western curb line of Fifth Avenue, the northern curb line of West 58th Street, the eastern curb line of the unnamed roadway west of the Pulitzer Fountain and the General Sherman Monument and the southern curb line of the unnamed roadway north of the General Sherman Monument and designates as its Landmark Site Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1274, Lot 34 and that part of Lot 1 in Block 1111 which contains the land on which the General Sherman Monument is located.