

LESCAZE HOUSE, 211 East 48th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1933-34; architect William Lescaze..

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1322, Lot 107.

On September 23, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Lescaze House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing was continued to November 25, 1975 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the two hearings. Mary Lescaze, owner of the house, has given her approval of the designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Lescaze House of 1933-34, designed by William Lescaze for his own use as a combined residence and architectural office, is an embodiment of the theory and practice of one of the most influential exponents of modern architecture in the United States. His goal -- the creation of an architecture expressive of the spirit and life of the 20th century and of each client's individual requirements -- is fully realized in this house by an harmonious design of deceptive simplicity, determined by a rational, functional plan, and developed through the use of the newest available technology, materials and methods of construction. The sudden appearance on East 48th Street of this startlingly "modern" facade of 1934, set between deteriorating brownstones of the post-Civil War period, had a dramatic impact upon the streetscape and the neighborhood. Ripples of excitement spread far and wide following the immediate publication of the house in the foremost architectural journals of the day.

William Lescaze (1896-1969) was one of a number of prominent European-born architects who played a significant role in the establishment of American architectural pre-eminence from the 1930s on. Born in Geneva, Switzerland, he deliberately eschewed traditionally-oriented architectural schools, choosing instead to study under Karl Moser at the Polytechnic School in Zurich, which he entered in 1915. Lescaze often acknowledged his debt to Moser, who advocated a fluid and liberal approach to design problems, rather than an authoritarian and historical one, and a concern for the relation of a building to the total urban environment. In 1919, armed with his diploma, Lescaze went to France, first to Arras, where he found himself in conflict with his academically-oriented employers in dealing with urgent post-war housing needs, then to Paris, where he worked for Henri Sauvage, a specialist in construction procedures and a pioneer in prefabrication.

It was with this solid training and background that Lescaze, at Moser's suggestion, came to the United States in 1920 to work for the architectural firm of Hubbel & Benes in Cleveland. He returned to Europe for a visit in 1921 re-establishing contact with those architects in whose work he was most interested, including Bruno Taut. In 1923 he opened his own office in New York City, doing minor alterations, some interior design work, and the Capital Bus Terminal of 1927, on the West Side (demolished by 1932).

His first important commission -- which he brought with him in 1929 to his new partnership with George Howe -- was for the Oak Lane Country Day School in Philadelphia sponsored by the Leopold Stowkowskis. The simple, flat wall surfaces, pierced by openings the location and size of which were solely determined by the disposition of rooms within, clearly expressed the interpenetration of exterior and interior which is so evident in his own house. The contrast between angular and curved plan elements is another characteristic feature, carried over from his Bus Terminal of 1927. The most significant product of the Howe-Lescaze partnership, which was dissolved in 1935, and the building which established their reputation, was the PSFS Building (Philadelphia Savings Fund Society) of 1929-32, a commission which Howe had brought to the partnership from his Philadelphia firm of Mellor, Meigs & Howe. The original

plans of 1926 were completely restudied by Lescaze. PSFS, the second air-conditioned skyscraper in the United States, was a prophetic structure. In the words of William Jordy, in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians of May 1962, this skyscraper was "the most important structure between Sullivan's work of the nineties and the Seagram Building at the end of the fifties." The design of PSFS was a defiant challenge to the more conservative contemporary work of the time, such as Shreve, Lamb & Harmon's Empire State Building of 1930-32. It marked the first appearance, on a monumental scale, of a design concept which was generally known in this country as the "International Style." Lescaze had even earlier demonstrated his knowledge of and interest in this new design concept. His Bus Terminal of 1927 with its rounded corner entrance is clearly related to the 1926-27 Housing project in Holland by the Dutch "International Style" architect, Oud.

More important for the design conception of the Lescaze House -- the first truly "modern" residence in New York City -- were the projects, ideas and work of his compatriot, Le Corbusier, with whom he shared his first love -- painting. The geometric precision, machine sharpness of edges, the angularity, the flat planar surfaces of Corbusier's Citrohan projects of the early 1920s, the smooth untextured surfaces, the two-story expanse of glass extending across almost the entire facade, and the absence of extraneous applied ornament provided an inspiration for Lescaze. The Citrohan houses were published in Corbusier's widely read book, Vers une architecture (1923) and exhibited in Stuttgart in 1927, when Lescaze first met this pioneer planner and architect. Certain other elements, typical of Le Corbusier's houses of the late 1920s were also significant for the Lescaze house: the horizontal grouping of windows to form continuous "ribbons" across the facade, the utilization of flat roofs as outdoor living areas (in the treatment of the two-level sun decks above Lescaze's office behind the house), and the introduction of curved elements at the facade to soften the strict rectilinearity of the building. Le Corbusier's often mis-translated statement, "We must look upon a house as a machine for living in or as a tool . . ." was actually humanistic in intent, as Vincent Scully has pointed out. This attitude provided a cornerstone of Lescaze's own philosophy. In the section addressed to architectural students in his book, On Being an Architect (1942), after counseling on the job training for students in preference to long years of study at school, Lescaze appended a basic bibliography, including Wright, Sullivan, Mumford and, most especially, "all of Le Corbusier that you can get hold of."

It was characteristic of Lescaze that he strongly disapproved of the term "International Style," not only because it mistakenly implied that modern architecture was unique in its international character, but because he felt it demeaning to call that vital impulse, the Idea, which manifested itself in architecture a "style," as though it were a "bag of tricks" which could be applied at will to a building. This was a misunderstanding of the creative function of the architect, which was to design buildings from the inside out, in response to the needs of human beings living today. A bitter attack on eclecticism is couched in amusing language:

A friend of mine, a banker, wakes up in a Louis XV bedroom, breakfasts in a Spanish dining room, rides down in a Chinese Elevator, drives to Wall Street in a Lincoln and works all day in a Renaissance Room and seems almost totally oblivious to all of them. It doesn't seem to make sense. A little more sense might provide a little more happiness.

He concludes this article, in the American Architect of December 1935, by calling for the support of an "intelligent, informed public" so that architects "can produce cities, towns, buildings that work and that give pleasure in their use and in their appearance. And then will the modern architecture of today become the classic architecture of tomorrow."

The William Lescaze House and Office is a fulfillment of his prophesy. It is a "classic" -- a prototypical building which, having survived over forty years in a world of vertiginous change, still retains its validity -- aesthetically, urbanistically, structurally and humanistically.

The apparent simplicity of the facade, crisp, smooth and flat in character is deceiving. It is the result of the sophisticated analysis of proportional relationships -- the precise balancing of solids and voids -- and the avoidance of any non-functional, superfluous detail. The design, clearly expressing the functional separation into office and residential space, was also the result of careful consideration of the architect's own personal and practical needs. The plan of the interior is directly reflected by the organization of the exterior fenestration and doors. The workmanship is superb. The austere gray stucco facade (originally painted off-white) is dominated by huge glass-block panels at the third (bedroom) and fourth (living room) floors, encompassing almost the entire width of the building and separated by only a narrow strip of wall. A high stoop at the left side, sheltered by a canopy, leads up to the doorway of the Lescaze residence. To the right of the doorway at the second story is the service area, lighted by a narrow band of "ribbon" windows with casements which accent the curve of the facade. The dining room faces the patio at the rear. Just below street level, and recessed to the plane of the facade of the 1865 brownstone, was the entrance to the Lescaze office which extended almost to the rear of the lot, below the residence and patios. A handsome solid glass brick wall shields the office from the street.

Because the house incorporated many new features -- including the combination of commercial and residential space, the use of glass blocks and bricks as a structural material, and central air-conditioning -- Lescaze encountered opposition to his original application, submitted in August of 1933 to the Building Department. Lescaze indicated his intention was to alter the existing brownstone on the site, which had been built in 1865 as one of the two last houses of a brownstone row by two builders, Elias and Daniel Herbert. There was to be no significant change in dimensions or height, except that the facade was to be extended forward to the building line. The space on the first floor was also expanded to almost twice its original depth by a one-story extension with a two-story addition behind it. Occupancy was to be changed from a one-family residence to a combination residential and commercial use, with an architect's office in the former basement, and family residence on the three upper floors. This application was first disapproved on zoning grounds. Clarification of twelve items in the plans, re-submitted in December, was requested by the City, of which the most interesting pertained to ventilation and to the use of hollow glass block windows. In a January, 1934 amendment to the earlier plans, the architect explained that a complete system of mechanical ventilation and air-conditioning was to be installed, and reconsideration was requested regarding the use of hollow glass block, for which details were filed, indicating that the block was to be used for windows only, with lawful brick spandrels at the floor. Approval was finally given on February 13, 1934 and the house was largely completed by June 1934, when the architect and his wife moved in. Mrs. Lescaze still resides there.

The structural use of glass blocks and glass bricks, questioned by the Building Department, apparently appeared here for the first time in the City, although Lescaze claimed priority in the entire country in The Making of an Architect:

When we built our house in 1934, glass bricks had not yet been used in this country. Unbelievable but true. I had seen a few of them in Europe, and they seemed to me an excellent new material to do a job I was anxious to have done. They added to the amount of daylight without adding to the fuel bill, they let daylight through yet obscured the uninteresting view of the nine-story apartment house across the street, and they deadened street noises. An enterprising manufacturer agreed to make the first American glass blocks for us in his plant in Illinois. But what an epic battle we had with the Code! It lasted at least three months, back and forth. Three months of agony.

The blocks and bricks stood out on the sidewalk for quite some time after delivery, awaiting approval from the Building Department, which finally came in 1934. The semi-vacuum type of hollow glass blocks provide privacy, insulation from cold and heat (more important than ever in the current energy crisis), and protection from dirt and noise. In addition they are a permanent building material, requiring little or no maintenance. The Macbeth-Evans Company, founded in 1899 in Pittsburgh, is credited with their manufacture in a two-page advertisement featuring the Lescaze House in the Architectural Forum of December 1934.

In his use of various types of glass in his house, Lescaze carefully differentiated between their properties. Clear glass, set into casements of aluminum, was used in the kitchen and at the rear of the house where privacy was not a factor. In the master bedroom on the second floor, the ribbon windows are partially cantilevered, in a graceful curve, to take advantage of the morning sun from the east and the view of Turtle Bay Gardens. The hollow block type greatly reduces the transmission of heat, and is always used on walls while the solid glass brick, noted for its great strength, generally was used as paving. Lescaze inserted areas of glass brick in the pavement of the terraces at the rear of the house to bring light into his architectural office below, but he also used it vertically on the front wall of the office to provide security and privacy.

The use of glass brick or block as a structural building material, pioneered in this house, was quickly adopted by other architects. It appeared on the facade of No. 212 East 49th Street, and at No. 219 East 49th Street, designed by Morris Sanders in 1935. Both these houses followed the Lescaze example of combining office space below with residential quarters above. Lescaze continued the use of the glass block he had pioneered in his own house in two fine houses on the upper East Side: the Kramer house of 1937 at 32 East 74th Street, and the Norman House of 1941 at 124 East 70th Street.

The enormously large glazed areas of the facade are not only interesting technically and as a functional design feature, but expressive of the architect's desire to give life to the street -- in contrast to the Victorian brownstone, shuttered, curtained, and draped. The house was even more dramatic at night than in the daytime: it glowed with light, transmitted through the semi-vacuum glass blocks at the upper stories, with a more muted effect below, where solid glass bricks were used.

The design of the house was also influenced by a second technological innovation -- the first installation of a central air-conditioning system in a private residence in New York City -- at a time when year-round climate control for office buildings was still being debated. Certain rooms in the Lescaze house and office were not originally air-conditioned: casement windows provided ventilation for the kitchen at the second floor and for the infrequently used guest room at the third story. The air-conditioning system included the installation of compressors in the basement and on the roof, above the living room. Thermostatic controls were provided by the Johnson Company of Milwaukee which ran a display advertisement in the December 1934 issue of the Architectural Forum, featuring two photographs of the Lescaze house, "An Office By Day," "A Residence By Night."

A lengthy and profusely illustrated article on the house appeared in the same issue of the Forum which noted that this endeavor to transform a conventional New York City brownstone, to make it conform with contemporary ideals of living, offered a case history of the greatest importance, demonstrating the "great possibilities for the reclamation of much deteriorated housing if the slogan about walking to work can be amended to read, 'walk downstairs to work.'"

There is no doubt that, by imaginative planning, Lescaze stimulated architects to rethink the possibilities offered by the city lot, even when limited to such a narrow site as this, which is only 16 feet 7 inches wide. By opening up the interior of the house to as much light as possible, including the installation of a large skylight over the center of the living room, and by extending the usable living space outdoors at the rear of the house, Lescaze anticipated later trends in urban planning.

Lescaze always maintained that a building must be of its own time, not an imitation of the style of the past. A quotation from Walt Whitman appears on the frontispiece of his book, On Being An Architect: "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on spectres in books." When faced with the problem of designing his house, set between two brownstones of the post-Civil War period, he was uncompromising, even to the extent of originally painting the stucco surfaces an off-white. He did create an harmonious relationship with the flanking row houses by retaining their modest scale and cornice line and, to a certain extent, the window alignments. The contrast between his house and No. 209, before its acquisition and alteration by Lescaze in 1941, may be seen in a photograph of 1938 in Berenice Abbott's book, Changing New York (1939), republished in 1973 with the title New York in the Thirties.

The interiors of the house are light and airy, with an easy flow of space. Neutral, light colors were chosen by Lescaze for their capacity to reflect the sun. With the exception of a few unimportant items and the piano, the furnishings and accessories were almost all designed by Lescaze specifically for this house, as was the indirect lighting. Gilles Barbey, writing in the Swiss periodical, Werk, in 1971, commented that the feeling of the interior is still contemporary, and that simplicity remains the dominant feature, observations which are equally applicable to the exterior. That one can still speak of the contemporaneity of a house designed over forty years ago is an indication of the classic, ageless quality of this remarkable building.

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 Lescaze House 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 Lescaze House and office building is an embodiment of the theory and practice of one of the most influential and articulate exponents of the modern movement in architecture, that his goal -- the creation of structures which were expressive of the life of the 20th century -- was fully realized in this house through imaginative development of the narrow site and rational planning which functionally separated residential from office space in accordance with his personal requirements, that the apparent simplicity of the design is the result of a sophisticated analysis of proportional relationships, that the smooth surface, crisp articulation and deliberate avoidance of ornament is related to design concepts of the "International Style," that Lescaze made use of the newest available technology, pioneering the use in the residential architecture of the City of structural glass block and glass brick and of central air-conditioning, that the house is still a striking feature of the street, that it provided other architects with an interesting lesson in urban rehabilitation, and that the Lescaze House and office is a "classic" of New York City's residential architecture.

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 Landmark the Lescaze House, 211 East 48th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1322, Lot 107, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.