

THE ARCH AND COLONNADÉ OF THE MANHATTAN BRIDGE APPROACH, Manhattan Bridge Plaza at Canal Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1912-15; architects Carrère & Hastings.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 290, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On September 23, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Arch and Colonnade of the Manhattan Bridge Approach and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). 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

The Manhattan Bridge Approach, a monumental gateway to the bridge, occupies a gently sloping elliptical plaza bounded by Canal, Forsyth and Bayard Streets and the Bowery. Originally designed to accommodate the flow of traffic, it employed traditional forms of arch and colonnade in a monumental Beaux-Arts style gateway. The triumphal arch was modeled after the 17th-century Porte St. Denis in Paris and the colonnade was inspired by Bernini's monumental colonnade enframing St. Peter's Square in Rome. Carrère & Hastings, whose designs for monumental civic architecture include the New York Public Library and Grand Army Plaza, in Manhattan, were the architects of the approaches to the Manhattan Bridge and designed both its Brooklyn and Manhattan approaches.

The design of the Manhattan Bridge, the the third bridge to cross the East River, aroused a good deal of controversy. After the triumph of Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge (1867-83), the Williamsburg Bridge (1896-1903) was considered quite ugly. The 19th-century schism between "unscientific" architects and "inartistic" engineers had become apparent. The popular practice of calling in an architect to "beautify" the exterior of a structure that had been designed without regard to aesthetic principles was vehemently attacked by architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler and architect Henry F. Hornbostel. They found an ally in Gustav Lindenthal, who on becoming Bridge Commissioner in 1901, had early designs for the Manhattan Bridge redone and engaged Henry Hornbostel as architect. The new design, considered by many an advance in artistic engineering, involved the use of eye-bars as chains, a structural system whose feasibility was disputed. Although scientific authority favored the new design, city officials favored the older cable construction, and a new Bridge Commissioner, George Best, and a new architectural firm, Carrère & Hastings, were appointed. They continued the enlightened approach of their predecessors, restudying in 1904 the Hornbostel designs, and incorporating them where possible into their own designs. Carrère & Hastings also worked closely with the engineers of the Bridge Department, then under Chief Engineer O. F. Nichols. The bridge was formally opened to traffic on December 31, 1909.

The following year Carrère & Hastings drew up preliminary plans for improving the Manhattan approach to the Manhattan Bridge; in 1912 more fully developed plans for the elliptical plaza, culminating in a monumental arch and colonnade, were approved by the Art Commission. The approach was designed to accommodate eight lanes of tracks for both subways and surface railroads, while providing for other vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Landscaped areas adjacent to the plaza completed the ensemble. The sculptures decorating the arch were designed by C. A. Heber and Carl Runsey in 1913 and 1914. The Brooklyn approach to the Manhattan Bridge, designed and built at the same time as the Manhattan approach, had as its main feature two granite pylons flanking the roadway. Each had a sculptural group, one symbolizing Manhattan and the other Brooklyn, designed by Daniel Chester French, now installed flanking the main entrance of the Brooklyn Museum.

Although the appropriateness of the classical arch and colonnade as a gateway to a modern steel suspension bridge has been criticized by modernists, when its plans were published in 1913 The New York Times hailed it as the "most artistic treatment of a bridge entrance attempted on this continent." This architectural treatment was chosen to emphasize the importance of this bridge as a gateway from Manhattan to Brooklyn and on through Flatbush Avenue to the ocean. The desire for neo-classical civic monuments, such as this, can be traced to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. The Exposition captured the imagination of the American public, and many of the country's leading architects, including Carrère & Hastings, who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, were well prepared to design buildings and civic monuments in this eclectic style. The success of the Exposition inspired the "City Beautiful" movement at the turn of the century, which favored neo-classical architecture set in great civic centers, linked by wide avenues and incorporating formal parks. In New York, this interest in civic beautification led to the establishment of the Municipal Art Society, of a New York City Art Commission with powers of review over public buildings and works of art, and to the introduction of the New York Improvement Plan of 1907--the City's first general urban plan since the Commissioners' Plan of 1811. Primarily aesthetic in orientation, the 1907 plan recommended the creation of plazas, parks, and wide vistas at major intersections, while attempting to deal with problems of transportation.

A huge circular plaza was designed to connect the entrance to the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges from which traffic would radiate out onto principal streets. Although the plan was never implemented, its precepts are evident in the design of the Manhattan Bridge approach and the approaches to the other East River Bridges that were redesigned during this period under an ambitious program of improvements undertaken by Bridge Commissioner Arthur J. O'Keefe. The new approaches were designed to better accommodate increased traffic, provide for new subway and rail crossings and, occasionally, space for parking. Along with efficiency these approaches were to be as beautiful as possible, and plans generally included landscaping with trees, shrubbery and flowers. For O'Keefe and many of his contemporaries, bridges were an ornament to the city, and he felt that the construction of these plazas would "mark an era in aesthetic treatment of the entrances," hitherto neglected in this country.

Although it was unusual to use a triumphal arch for a bridge approach, triumphal arches were popular in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century for parades and memorials. These were often temporary structures and included the Dewey Arch erected in New York in 1889 by the National Sculpture Society to commemorate Admiral Dewey's return from the Spanish American War, and the Victory Arch of 1918 in Madison Square designed by Thomas Hastings. Today, there are three triumphal arches, all designated New York City Landmarks, remaining in New York City: the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch at Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, the Washington Square Arch, designed by Stanford White as a temporary structure and, due to its enormous popularity, rebuilt in stone; and the Manhattan Bridge Approach.

The triumphal arch of the Manhattan Bridge approach, built of rusticated white granite is dominated by a central arched opening thirty-six feet by forty feet spanning the roadway. The archway is flanked on either side by pylons against which are set engaged obelisks embellished with sculptural decoration in relief above a pedimented doorway. This sculpture, like the form of the arch as a whole, was inspired by the decoration of the Porte St. Denis. Designed by C. A. Heber in the Beaux-Arts tradition, these allegorical sculptures are dominated by a winged male figure on one side and a winged female figure on the other, both executed in high relief, with three groups of trophies above, in low relief. The interior of the barrel-vaulted arch is richly coffered and the frame of the archway is embellished with heraldic decoration. A cartouche with a fantastic animal head forms the keystone. A frieze of Indians hunting buffalo is set above the arch, just beneath the cornice. Inspired by the frieze of the Panathenaic procession on the Parthenon and transformed to an American theme very popular at the time, it was designed by Carl Rumsey, a sculptor known for his energetic portrayal of Indians, animals and horsemen. The arch terminates in a modillioned cornice and a low classical attic which features lions' heads in the central area above the archway. An interesting feature of the design is the careful cutting of the stonework, varied in treatment from base to attic.

An elliptical colonnade, extending approximately half the length of the plaza and rising to a height of thirty-eight feet, envelopes and defines the space of the plaza. Each colonnade is composed of thirty-one foot Tuscan columns resting on pedestals facing the ellipse. Behind the columns are lower rusticated piers on the outer faces of which there are smooth thirty-one foot pilasters along the outer edge of the colonnade. Surmounting the piers, in the intercolumniations of the colonnade, are slabs carved with heraldic ornament. Flanking the six columns at each end of the colonnade are smooth pilasters attached to rusticated piers which, at one end, connect the colonnade to the arch and, at the other, are joined to a pier which forms the termination of the colonnade enhanced by a pair of columns at its outer end. A simple rosette above each column decorates the entablature. Crowning the colonnades at each side above each column are modillioned cornices and balustrades.

In the 1960s the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway threatened to destroy the Manhattan Bridge Approach. In 1961 Robert Moses applied to the Art Commission for permission to demolish the "ornamental and architectural masonry" of the plaza, claiming that its removal was necessary to the reconstruction of the bridge to provide connections to the expressway on both sides of the river. Since plans for the connections were at an advanced state when Moses applied to the Commission, removal of the approaches was considered inevitable. The Art Commission grudgingly approved Moses' request with the stipulation that some of the most valuable decorative architecture should be moved to other sites at city expense. The Brooklyn Museum offered to accept and display the Daniel Chester French sculpture from the Brooklyn Plaza and the Rumsey frieze of Indians hunting buffalo. Fortunately, when modernization of the bridge was undertaken in the early 1960s, the arch and colonnade were not removed, for the Lower Expressway project was stopped in 1969, and the "inevitable" removal of the Manhattan Bridge Approach was unnecessary. The French sculptures, removed in 1963 because traffic problems necessitated reconstruction of the Brooklyn Approach, were cleaned, placed on new pedestals and moved to the Brooklyn Museum entrance in 1964. More recently, a small portion of the east colonnade of the Manhattan Bridge Approach has been removed due to the construction of the new subway. When work is completed, the colonnade will be reconstructed and restored to its former glory.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this structure, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Arch and Colonnade of the Manhattan Bridge Approach 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 Manhattan Bridge Approach provides a monumental gateway from Manhattan to the bridge, that it was designed by the noted architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings in the classical Beaux-Arts style of the early 20th century, that the design successfully adapted features inspired by the 17th-century Porte St. Denis in Paris and Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's Square in Rome with concepts of urban planning advocated by the City Beautiful movement and to traffic requirements, and that, when the work in connection with the new subway is completed, the entire approach, including the arch and the colonnade, will be restored to its former glory.

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 structure the Arch and Colonnade of the Manhattan Bridge Approach, Manhattan Bridge Plaza at Canal Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 290, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.