

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0269

HENRY VILLARD HOUSES (in part), 24-26 East 51st Street, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1882, completed 1886; architects McKim, Mead & White and Babb, Cook & Willard.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1286, Lot 48 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated and that part of the Courtyard owned by the owner of 24-26 East 51st Street.

On May 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Henry Villard Houses and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 22). 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

Nowhere in New York City does there exist another unified group of brownstone residences of such magnitude as this cluster standing on Madison Avenue. This great complex of Italian Renaissance town houses is skilfully welded into one U-shaped unit, surrounding a courtyard originally planned as a turn-around for carriages. Designed in the manner of a Sixteenth Century palace, these buildings represent the epitome of brownstone architecture of their day. Stately and dignified in appearance, they express - in their formality - a fine architectural design. This "House of Mansions" represented an early break with the picturesque tradition of the Romantic Styles. It inaugurated the new formalism of the Renaissance, introduced here for the first time by the architects, McKim, Mead & White.

The street fronts are all unified by the bold (rusticated) stonework of the basement and first floor, with smooth wall surfaces (ashlar masonry) for the floors above. A stone band course signalizes each floor at window sill level, while a projecting cornice effectively crowns the entire composition. The third floor windows, handsomely enframed, are reminiscent of those of the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, while some of the second floor windows display striking individual balconies carried on console brackets. The north and south doors facing the courtyard are complemented, in their elegance, by the welcoming arched loggia on the east side. The entrance to the courtyard is between two square uprights surmounted by balls between which a graceful arch of scrolled wrought iron is bridged to carry the central lantern.

An addition designed by Babb, Cook & Willard was made in 1886 involving 24 East 51st Street in the Northeast corner of the property. Using the same brownstone building material as was employed in the earlier construction, they also continued the second floor bandcourse molding into the new extension. An imposing two-arched porch dominates the raised first floor entrance. An L-shaped stone stairway is contained within a low wall, capped by a florid iron railing. The handsome wood paneled doors, with side lights and the arched transom above, contain some very attractive grille work.

Henry Villard (1835-1900), who built this group of Houses and occupied one of them, was a journalist, railway promoter and financier. He was born in Rhenish Bavaria and emigrated to America in 1853. As a correspondent, he covered the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the Pike's Peak gold discovery and the Civil War. In 1881, with his love for journalism and as a man of wealth, he acquired a controlling interest in the New York Evening Post. During the years 1879 to 1883 Villard was probably the outstanding railway promoter in the United States. He held many important posts and was president of the Northern Pacific and chairman of the board until 1893, when his railway career came to an end. He married Helen Francis Garrison, the only daughter of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist. Oswald Garrison Villard, their son, was publisher and editor of Nation Magazine.

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 Henry Villard Houses have 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 Henry Villard Houses are a magnificent example of Italian Renaissance architecture, that this harmoniously combined complex of houses is unique in New York City, that the buildings are stately and dignified in appearance and that in their style and character they represent a fine expression of architectural design and overall planning unequalled in the City.

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 that part of the Henry Villard Houses which is located at 24-26 East 51st Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1286, Lot 48 which contains the land on which the described building is situated and that part of the Courtyard owned by the owner of 24-26 East 51st Street.