

GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan.

The property bounded by Park Avenue South from East 21st Street to the northern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, the northern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, the eastern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, East 21st Street, Gramercy Park North, Gramercy Park East, the northern property line of 34 Gramercy Park East, the western property line of the northern extension of 34 Gramercy Park East, the northern property line of the northern extension of 34 Gramercy Park East, the entire eastern property line of 34 Gramercy Park East, East 20th Street, the eastern property line of 31 Gramercy Park South (148 East 20th Street), a portion of the eastern property line of 145 East 19th Street, the rear lot lines of 147 and 149 East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 149 East 19th Street, East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 146 East 19th Street, the rear lot lines of 146 and 144 East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 153-155 East 18th Street, East 18th Street, Irving Place, the rear lot lines of 18 through 16 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the eastern property line of 119-121 East 19th Street, East 19th Street, a portion of the western property line of 119-121 East 19th Street, the rear lot line of 13 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the western property line of 13 Gramercy Park South, the rear lot lines of 12 and 11 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the western property line of 11 Gramercy Park South, the rear lot lines of 10 and 9 Gramercy Park South, the western property line of 9 Gramercy Park South, East 20th Street, the rear lot lines of 7 through 1 Gramercy Park West, East 21st Street to Park Avenue South.

On April 12, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Gramercy Park Historic District (Item No. 33). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Mr. Sherman Drake, president of the Gramercy Park Association, representing four hundred members. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters and other communications favoring designation were received by the Commission from residents of Gramercy Park including a statement from the Board of Trustees of Gramercy Park.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Gramercy Park has always represented a distinct and notable neighborhood in the City of New York. The Park is a private square, the second and last created in the City; the first, Hudson Square or St. John's Park, which Trinity Parish laid out, has long since gone. Today the Park, beautifully planted and carefully maintained, is generally restricted to owners; the original deed provides that each of the lot holders has a key.

The Park, originally planned as an attractive inducement for real-estate development early in the nineteenth century, has established the character of more than the square. From the first, it was a residential neighborhood of large houses for prominent people and the glamour of the Park reached out into the nearby streets.

Because it is unique now for its private park and because of its exceptionally rich heritage of over a century's residential architecture, we propose today the designation of the Gramercy Park Historic District: consisting largely of the Park, and those streets to the south which have, to an unusual degree, maintained their purely residential use.

Early History

The history of Gramercy Park dates back to 1831 when Mr. Samuel B. Ruggles, a lawyer and real estate operator, purchased the marshy Crommesshie (later corrupted to Gramercy) area from the estate of James Duane, a Revolutionary patriot and first Mayor of New York City after the Revolution.

Ruggles' project involved the creation of 66 lots for a park which was approximately 520 x 184 feet in extent. It was to be deeded to the owners of the lots that were to surround the enclosed green area. The enclosure consisted of an iron fence with a gate of iron which was built in 1832. The first planting in the park was begun in 1844.

Ruggles was not directly involved in the construction of the dwellings surrounding the Park. He planned that the area be developed only as a residential neighborhood and that the owners of the original 66 lots surrounding the Park be responsible for its care and maintenance. Soon after the transfer of the Park to the trustees in the 1840's, some lot owners began to build their handsome houses around the Park. To aid access to the area, streets to the north and south

were cut through, one named Lexington Avenue, in memory of the first battleground for American Independence and Irving Place after Washington Irving. Leading New Yorkers began to move there. Stuyvesant Fish, a leader of New York society, came there in 1887; Samuel Tilden, a Presidential candidate and a Governor of New York State, lived there from 1874 to 1876. James Harper, a Mayor of New York, lived there; and Edwin Booth, the noted actor started the Players Club there in 1888 - where he kept a room for himself for many years.

Architectural Importance

Gramercy Park Historic District is set in the midst of the activity and complexity that is New York. It is a graceful, quiet square surrounded by many nineteenth century structures of true architectural distinction. While many of the original houses have been remodeled, the changes have been made with a certain grandeur; the Players Club was remodeled by Stanford White and the National Arts Club was remodeled from two houses by Calvert Vaux.

These buildings still have the appearance of fine private houses of over a century ago and blend with the quiet atmosphere of the Park. The square represents an attempt to preserve a bit of nature within the mass of stone which fills the blocks of the City. While skyscrapers in adjacent streets and tall apartment houses were later erected on the north and east sides of the park and have taken the place of many of the original houses, a majority of the square's Anglo-Italianate, Greek Revival and Gothic Revival houses of the nineteenth century remain. They display much fine ornament with handsome lintels, molded cornices and stately entranceways. The small gardens and planting in front of many of these houses, with their shady trees, unite these structures with the Park. Proper proportion and a sense of human scale allow the individual to feel at home with these low lying structures and to sense their harmony and elegance.

A district, such as the Gramercy Park Historic District, represents a remarkable cross-section of American architecture covering the wide range of styles which have manifested themselves from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, over a century of architectural growth and expansion. It tells the story of urban residential development through examples which were among the best produced anywhere in the City for each period.

Buildings in the District

Facing directly on the Park at its western end, are five town houses dating from 1844 to 1850. These structures represent a variety of architectural styles, ranging from Greek Revival, at numbers 3, 4 and 5, with their simple mouldings and decorative cornices to the more ornate Italianate houses at Numbers 1 and 2, with their windows framed in a series of segmental arches. Despite the differences through the remodeling of their architecture, they nevertheless appear as a harmonious group. This unity results primarily from the uniform height of the buildings, the continuous horizontal accent of their windows, the uniformity of their cornices, extending the entire length of the group, and the sense of age which dominates them all. This element of unity is further enhanced by the use of brick and the fact that they all have three windows in their width.

Of special note are the cast iron porches at Numbers 3 and 4. Their opulent Greek Revival design is attributed to the architect Alexander Jackson Davis, and they add a memorable elegance and gaiety to the simple facades. These iron porches, located near the middle of these five houses act as an element of focus and add the final note to the unity of this handsome group. In addition to the cast-iron porches, the richly moulded doors and entranceways at Numbers 3 and 4 are items of special note. Number 4 was the home of James Harper, Mayor of New York City from 1844 to 1847.

At No. 1 Gramercy Park West, once the home of the famous surgeon, Dr. Valentine Mott, there is an Ionic portico; though a later addition, its simple lines and fine design are charming for this house built in 1849. The roof of the portico rises to the height of the balconies of the structures on either side and thus creates a continuous, unified horizontal line.

Complementing the elegance of the westerly side of the District, the southern portion extending from Park Avenue South to Irving Place is lined with staid brownstone and brick dwellings. These houses again appear as a unified group due to the alignment of height and facades. This side of Gramercy Park, however, has much more variety within its basic unity, in terms of the variety of its architectural styles and the varying colors and textures to be found there.

At Number 11 we have a fine example of Anglo-Italianate design built about 1855-'56. In this house there is a continuous upward progression from that which is clearly defined and elegant at the bottom to that which is simpler and more austere at the top. This can be clearly seen beginning with the blocks of masonry

at the first floor progressing up to the smooth surfaces of the four upper stories or from the long, rectangular first floor windows with their elegant pediments to the simpler windows above. Though the original stoop has been removed, the house retains its architectural style.

At Number 9 a fine entranceway enhances this sympathetically remodeled house, built in 1847-8. The Corinthian pilasters on each side of this entrance lead the eye up to the wrought iron lamp immediately above the doorway. The impressive lamp and attractive lacework of iron are similar to those at Number 3, and this repetition of detail creates an element of unity between these houses.

At Number 15 stands the National Arts Club, former home of Samuel J. Tilden. The structure is an impressive expression of Victorian-Gothic architecture replete with horizontal belt courses and pointed arched windows all done in vari-colored stones with certain bands of the stonework displaying leafy ornament and the heads of famous authors. In 1874 Calvert Vaux, one of the architects of Central Park, designed Mr. Tilden's house from two houses built in 1845.

Number 16, the Players Club, is one of the most distinguished buildings on the square. The house was originally Gothic Revival, built in 1845 but it had a splendid portico and other details added by Stanford White in 1888. It is one of the few works in the City that can be directly attributed to this well known architect. The house was bought from the widow of Congressman Clarkson N. Potter by Edwin Booth who had it remodeled for the Players Club. Booth kept the room in the Club and lived there until his death in 1893.

Finally it should be noted, in regard to this southerly section of the Park, that the newer apartment houses find harmonious unity with the older brownstones in that they generally conform in decoration and materials to the older structures. The small gardens along this southern area, the continuous use of wrought iron and the repetition of architectural forms with the proper scale and proportion unify this section of Gramercy Park with the western side and other parts of the square.

Gramercy Park South, from Irving Place to Third Avenue, continues with townhouses dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, combined with apartment houses of a later date. Some of these houses have delicate pastel colors of pink and blue. Simple lintels and cornices create an interesting horizontal accent contrasting with the verticality of the windows.

Number 86 Irving Place, which is on the corner of the Park, though built in 1845 was later remodeled for Stuyvesant Fish and was a house famous for its hospitality and lavish entertainment. There is a very attractive iron work balcony on the parkside and the shutters of this house, with their fine louvers, give a remarkable emphasis to the facade and the parkside.

At 144 East Twentieth Street is the Friends Meeting House, a fine expression of Italianate form, having an aura of restrained distinction. It has a curved, pedimented doorway and the segmental-arched windows provide a harmonious repetition of forms. The facade of the Meeting House is crowned by a pediment with a handsome raking cornice. An interesting feature of this pediment is the interruption of the main horizontal cornice by a blind, segmental arch in low relief. The Meeting House was designed by King and Kellum and completed in 1859. The presence of the simple classic forms on the newer apartment houses in this street allows them to blend with the older structures.

The north side of Eighteenth Street between Third Avenue and Irving Place is composed of a series of nineteenth century structures remodelled in the nineteen twenties. The variety of materials including stucco and brick, the ornamented decoration and the handsome windows create a sense of vitality and variety. The block is composed of a series of grouped structures, each group designed in a particular style and thus appearing as a unit. Most notable of these are numbers 135 through 143 -- a group of narrow townhouses built in 1855 in the Anglo-Italianate Style and still retaining their original design. At number 151, built in 1853-4, there is a roof cornice with a delicate Adamesque design of scrolls, swags, and volutes, adding an air of elegance to this otherwise simple facade.

At the corner of Eighteenth Street and Irving Place is Pete's Tavern, a tavern and bar dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century and frequented by O. Henry and other notables. With its outdoor cafe and simple blocklike form, it is a memorable structure reminiscent of the period which produced it.

Irving Place from Eighteenth Street to Gramercy Park South on its eastern side is composed of a series of brick and brownstone houses with some apartment houses of a later date displaying a general uniformity of height with slight contrasts of materials.

The ground floor of the apartment house at No. 76 Irving Place is also noteworthy as an example of French Beaux Arts design. The apartment house, built in 1899, at the corner of Irving Place and Nineteenth Street, represents Classical American architecture at the turn of the Century. The windows are framed in terra cotta. At Number 80, the cast iron railings, wrought iron balconies and handsome round-arched windows make a fine addition to the street. This house was built in 1853-4.

The east side of Irving Place between Nineteenth Street and Gramercy Park consists of several remodelled apartment houses and a handsome townhouse. Simplicity of form characterizes the architecture here in terms of window lintels and doorways on the apartment houses in this block. Especially noteworthy is the handsome entranceway at 86 Irving Place, which is located on the corner of Twentieth Street facing the Park. As previously mentioned, this house - with its brick exterior, simple shuttered windows and simple cornice - is a fine example of the best of the brick tradition of the mid-nineteenth century.

Nineteenth Street between Irving Place and Third Avenue with its rows of trees and patches of greenery reflects the atmosphere present on Gramercy Park itself. This quiet street known as the "Block Beautiful" has a charm and variety with various architectural styles, textures, patterns and colors intermixed. Flowers and greenery lend an added attraction. It resulted from the remodelling of mid-nineteenth century town houses in the Italian manner of the nineteen twenties including some attractive interlopers such as the five-story Tudor house at number 135 with its mullioned windows, Gothic arches and combination brick and stone facade. The one story structure at number 124 has an interesting copy of a stepped Dutch gable. At numbers 144 and 146 stand two small Greek Revival houses remodelled in a restrained manner. The use of color adds a sense of liveliness and variety to many of these simple facades. Numbers 127 and 129 are among the most interesting structures in the area. These former stables make use of Gothic forms as seen in the pointed windows and pseudo-battlements (crenellations). The decorative cornice at number 129 and the interesting moldings above the windows provide an attractive exterior appearance. The unity of this street, on both its north and south sides, results from the charm of all the houses, the element of greenery and the use of wrought iron for railings and gates. These features relate the street to Gramercy Park.

Calvary Church, at 21st Street and Park Avenue South, has been somewhat altered since James Renwick, Jr. designed it in 1846. Calvary Church is one of the fine, small Gothic Revival churches in the City. Unlike Grace Church, also by Renwick, it was built of brownstone. This was the church of the George Frederick Jones family, and here they brought the little Edith Newbold Jones who became Edith Wharton. The novelist was born in 1863 at 14 West 23rd Street, and this was the neighborhood church. It was the then rector's daughter who introduced Edith Wharton to Goethe, the German poet who was to become her favorite writer.

Recent History

The Gramercy Park Historic District is a unique area in the midst of an immense City. This district is today serene and coherent because it reflects the quietness of a park -- and also of another century. It is an area in which the original beauty was so great that it has been able to resist, to a remarkable degree, changes which could have destroyed it. Unlike any other district in New York, Gramercy Park, which was planned as a fashionable residential neighborhood, has always remained a fashionable residential neighborhood. The steady march of expensive real estate, always going uptown, skirted around this small oasis, leaving its value intact.

Despite an abortive effort in 1890 and 1912 to run a cable car route through the Park, connecting Irving Place and Lexington Avenue, and the development of some apartment houses and hotels in the area, the district nevertheless survives as a graceful expression of its time.

On the periphery of the Gramercy Park Historical District, a busy industrial and commercial area of tall buildings looms up on the skyline. In spite of changes over the years, the Gramercy Park Historic District still maintains a quiet, withdrawn charm which proves the soundness of its basic plan. This Park, which Samuel Ruggles created in the early nineteenth century, resulted in a residential area which remains viable today, long after the death of the society for which it was designed.

Comments on the District

Writing about New York, various authors have commented on the unique character of Gramercy Park.

John B. Pine in his book "The Story of Gramercy Park" published in 1921 said, "The laying out of Gramercy Park represents one of the earliest attempts in this country at 'City Planning'." He added, "As a park given to the prospective owners of the land surrounding it and held in trust for those who have made their homes around it, Gramercy Park is unique in this City, and perhaps in this country, and represents the only neighborhood, with possibly one exception, which has remained comparatively unchanged for more than eighty years -- the Park is one of the City's Landmarks."

Charlotte Devree, in an article in the New York Times, "Private Life of a Park" (December 8, 1957), compared the Park to "a Victorian gentleman who has refused to die". She continued, "There is nothing else quite like Gramercy Park in the country. It is the City's only privately owned Park, and there is not another so venerable or so centrally located in any big city."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Gramercy Park Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City, and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Gramercy Park Historic District represents an early instance of town planning, that it contains the only privately maintained park in the City, that the Park is beautifully landscaped, that it is a residential area which has, to a remarkable degree, retained much of its original character, that it represents an interesting cross-section of architectural development dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, that its houses are in many cases outstanding examples of their time, displaying many handsome details and much fine ironwork and that the Park area is today unique.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 an Historic District the Gramercy Park Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, consisting of the property bounded by Park Avenue South from East 21st Street to the northern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, the northern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, the eastern property line of 273-277 Park Avenue South, East 21st Street, Gramercy Park North, Gramercy Park East, the northern property line of 34 Gramercy Park East, the western property line of the northern extension of 34 Gramercy Park East, the northern property line of the northern extension of 34 Gramercy Park East, the entire eastern property line of 34 Gramercy Park East, East 20th Street, the eastern property line of 31 Gramercy Park South (148 East 20th Street), a portion of the eastern property line of 145 East 19th Street, the rear lot lines of 147 and 149 East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 149 East 19th Street, East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 146 East 19th Street, the rear lot lines of 146 and 144 East 19th Street, the eastern property line of 153-155 East 18th Street, East 18th Street, Irving Place, the rear lot lines of 18 through 16 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the eastern property line of 119-121 East 19th Street, East 19th Street, a portion of the western property line of 119-121 East 19th Street, the rear lot line of 13 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the western property line of 13 Gramercy Park South, the rear lot lines of 12 and 11 Gramercy Park South, a portion of the western property line of 11 Gramercy Park South, the rear lot lines of 10 and 9 Gramercy Park South, the western property line of 9 Gramercy Park South, East 20th Street, the rear lot lines of 7 through 1 Gramercy Park West, East 21st Street to Park Avenue South.