

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 14, 1970, Number 1
LP-0271

CARTIER, INC. (formerly the Morton F. Plant House), 651-653 Fifth Avenue, including 4 East 52nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1903, completed 1905; architect for 651-653 Fifth Avenue, Robert W. Gibson; architect for 4 East 52nd Street, Charles P. H. Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 69 in part, consisting of a parcel beginning on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 52nd Street, with a frontage of about 50 feet on Fifth Avenue (known as 651-53 Fifth Avenue), thence easterly from said corner 130 feet on the southerly side of East 52nd Street (known as 2 & 4 East 52nd Street) to a point, thence southerly about 35 feet to a point, thence westerly about 99 feet to a point, thence southerly about 15 feet to a point, thence westerly about 30 feet to the east side of Fifth Avenue.

On June 23, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Cartier, Inc. and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 40). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Michael H. Thomas, President of Cartier.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This six story Renaissance building is a handsome example of the successful conversion of a former Fifth Avenue town house into a distinguished commercial establishment. The wedding of architectural dignity with merchandising elegance was meritoriously achieved in stylistically good taste and character. The masonry facade, which was composed with rigid compositional discipline and formal restraint, has excellent details and good scale which combine well with the quality of work done during the installation of the store fronts and give the building an air of harmonious gaiety and vitality that is refreshing.

The Fifty Second Street elevation is especially impressive. Dominating the facade is a handsome decorative architectural feature composed of an ornately carved balcony, supported by heavy console brackets at the second floor with four fluted Doric pilasters rising two stories above the balcony and supporting the handsome low pitched pediment. The framing around the windows is especially commendable, particularly the second floor windows which are flanked by columns resting on a low balustraded wall. The fifth floor attic windows are ingeniously set in the profusely decorated frieze just below the rich cornice and the building is crowned by a balustrade at the roof line.

Morton F. Plant (1852-1918) built this fine town house which was so skillfully remodelled as the Cartier building. He was vice-president of the Plant Investment Company and attained distinction as a yachtsman, part owner of the Philadelphia baseball club in the National League, and sole owner of the New London Club in the Eastern League. Of his many gifts to hospitals and other institutions the most notable were the three dormitories and the unrestricted gift of \$1,000,000 to the Connecticut College for Women.

Cartier purchased the house in 1917 and considerable alterations were made over the years. The present Cartier firm was established by Pierre Cartier in New York in 1908 and moved to its present location in 1917. Pierre Cartier's grandfather, Louis Francois Cartier, founded the French Cartier firm in Paris in 1847. The London Cartier firm was founded in 1902 by Alfred Cartier, the son of Louis Francois Cartier. Louis Francois Cartier's grandfather had been a jeweler in the courts of Louis XV and XVI.

In his statement to the Commission favoring designation of the building, Michael Thomas, President of Cartier's said: "The well balanced combination of Italian Renaissance influenced with English Georgian undertones is a subtle reminder in this era of glass and bronze, of the heritage of luxurious mansions, often overlooked on Fifth Avenue today.... At Cartier, we feel the ambiance and elegance built into every corner of this townhouse, reflect the integrity and stability we stand for.... In summation, the Cartier store has been and will continue to be a unique example of dignified modern commercial use, without significant exterior alteration, of a fine building originally constructed for residential purposes and located in the prime midtown area." In his testimony, Mr. Thomas referred to the purchase of the house from Mr. and Mrs. Plant for a double strand of matched, graduated Oriental pearls. At the time 1917, the strand of Oriental pearls were said to have been worth \$1,000,000. After Mr. Plant's death, Mrs. Plant was remarried to Mr. John Rovensky. In January 1957, following Mrs. Rovensky's death the pearls were sold for \$151,000.

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 Cartier, Inc. 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, Cartier, Inc. represents a dignified commercial establishment housed in a former Fifth Avenue town house, that the transformation was achieved with distinction and elegant taste, that the building has unusual architectural character and distinction and that it is a reminder of a bygone era, the period when the luxurious mansions of Fifth Avenue were being built.

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 Cartier, Inc., 651-653 Fifth Avenue, including 4 East 52nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its Landmark Site the following portion of Lot 69 in the Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287: the parcel beginning on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 52nd Street, with a frontage of about 50 feet on Fifth Avenue (known as 651-53 Fifth Avenue), thence easterly from said corner 130 feet on the southerly side of East 52nd Street (known as 2 & 4 East 52nd Street) to a point, thence southerly about 35 feet to a point, thence westerly about 99 feet to a point, thence southerly about 15 feet to a point, thence westerly about 30 feet to the east side of Fifth Avenue.