

313 EAST 58TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1856-57

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1351, Lot 6.

On March 31, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 313 East 58th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation, and 21 letters were received supporting designation. The owner of the house, The Humane Society of New York, has informed the Commission that it is opposed to the designation of its building.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Set back behind its front yard and half hidden behind a tree growing out through its foundations, this charming little two-story house is far removed in time from the traffic speeding past on its way to the Queensboro Bridge. As a result of the 1930 construction of a new approach to the Bridge, the house is now situated a few feet below the sidewalk. No. 313, together with its neighbor No. 311, have escaped the wrecking ball, and both are excellent examples of the modest, semi-suburban houses which dotted the uptown side streets of mid-19th century New York. No more startling contrast can be imagined than that provided by the towering business structures and apartment houses which now surround them.

The history of the property goes back to 1676, when the land on which the house stands was granted by Governor Edmund Andros to John Danielson. In Colonial times, a tavern called "The Union Flag", which served travellers on the Eastern Post Road (now replaced by the approach to the Bridge), stood nearby, to the northeast of number 313 East 58th Street.

Three windows wide, with an entrance door at the right, the building is only two stories high. It has painted brick walls and painted stone and wood trim. It was built in 1856-57 by Hiram G. Disbrow, mason-builder, as his own residence.

Though completely vernacular in character, reminiscences of the Greek Revival period of the 1840s appear at the doorway, with its square, simply paneled pilasters, in the simple window treatment at the second story and in the row of dentils under the roof of the porch. More typical of the 1850s, when the house was built, are the French doors which open onto the porch, the tiny brackets which appear over the doorway, in the frieze section, and the larger paired console brackets supporting the roof cornice. The muntined windows of the second story are of the double-hung sash type, with plain lintels and sills.

Comments about the House

In a letter to the Commission, Adolf K. Placzek, Avery Librarian, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University School of Architecture said: "This is a rather rare example (and becoming rarer everywhere from year to year) of a perfectly scaled, classically conceived small townhouse, the sort of house every neighborhood should be proud of and depend on. It is a little gem of human proportion. While it is not as glamorous as some of the buildings we are trying to save, in terms of the fabric of our town, it deserves our real concern. I recommend and I do hope that it can be saved."

Francis Keally, a past president of the Fine Arts Federation and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, wrote the Commission about this house: "Its porch, the tall windows and the entrance door behind it, all in all make a delightful composition to the eye." Daniel M. C. Hopping wrote that the fact that 313 East 58th Street has a porch is "noteworthy". "The porch associated with country residences is practically non-existent on Manhattan Island. This surviving example of 'Little Old New York' in my estimation without question should be designated for this reason, if for no other."

Writing about this house, Geoffry N. Lawford, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, commented: "I have often passed it and enjoyed its simple detail, its good proportions and its intimacy of scale. It is a worthy example of the simplest form of domestic architecture from the middle of the 19th century of which far too few are left, and it should most certainly be preserved." E. James Gambaro, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, wrote as follows: "Buildings such as this one expressing the architecture of the past are the best possible index to the temper of the times in which they were constructed. They will always be of interest to present and future generations because in addition to recording events and city living of the 19th century, they also reveal the psychology of past generations."

Mrs. Charles J. Irwin wrote the Commission: "I believe the little house is well worth preserving. With its companion house, #311 (already a Landmark), it presents a tiny bit of semi-rural old New York. Both these houses are the only free-standing ones in this part of Manhattan except for the older Abigail Adams Smith house at 421 East 61st Street. As president of the Colonial Dames of America which maintains the Abigail Adams Smith house, I feel that it is most important that any surviving examples of early New York architecture, any reminder of the way 'our city' looked during the Civil War, any break in the monotony of glass and concrete towers should be cherished."

In urging the designation of 313 East 58th Street, Councilman Carter Burden wrote the Commission: "It is indeed a pity that today's youth and even my own children will have to rely on old daguerreotypes in museums in order to know something of their New York City heritage -- to know that New York was not always a city of glass mountains and slum tenements -- but once contained charming homes which dictated a mode of living so different from that experienced today."

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 313 East 58th Street 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 house at 313 East 58th Street is a dignified example of vernacular architecture, that this modest two-story brick dwelling has withstood the changes of the surrounding community, having been carefully preserved, and that it is a charming reminder of the residential architecture of a bygone day.

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 313 East 58th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1351, Lot 6, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.