

OTTO KAHN HOUSE, a part of The Convent of the Sacred Heart, 1 East 91st Street, Manhattan. Built 1913-18; architect J. Armstrong Stenhouse, in association with C. P. H. Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1503, Lot 1.

On April 28, 1970, and May 26, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held public hearings on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Otto Kahn House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the hearings. Three representatives from The Convent of the Sacred Heart spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Built for Otto H. Kahn (1867-1934), banker, philanthropist and patron of the arts, this imposing residence, occupied since 1934 by The Convent of the Sacred Heart, was begun in 1913 and completed only in 1918, after the termination of World War I. It was designed by the noted British architect, J. Armstrong Stenhouse, with C. P. H. Gilbert acting as associate architect. Upon its completion, the Kahn residence, located directly opposite the Carnegie Mansion, was hailed by "The New York Times" as a noteworthy addition to the Carnegie Hill area.

In its grand scale, distinguished design and superb construction, the Otto Kahn House is the finest Italian Renaissance style mansion in New York City.

It provided a gracious home for one of the best known financiers of the period and a splendid setting for his magnificent art collection. The dignity and restraint of its design are an expression of the refined taste of the architect, reflecting the architectural traditions of the Italian High Renaissance. Otto Kahn's role as patron of the arts is reflected in a citation by the Chamber of Commerce, following Kahn's death, which compared his Fifth Avenue house and his country residence at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, with the palaces of the Medici.

Otto Kahn was born in Germany and was the son of a banker. He pursued this career, first in Germany and then in London before establishing himself in the United States in 1893. Always active in musical affairs, he is best remembered for his bold fight to save the Metropolitan Opera Company of which he was chairman of the board: first in 1908, when he brought over Giulio Gatti-Casazza and Arturo Toscanini from La Scala in Milan--launching the period of the Metropolitan's greatest artistic success--and again in 1931, during the Depression, when he made a personal appeal for funds. He was, in addition, a generous supporter of arts and culture. He was a backer of Eva LeGallienne's Civic Repertory Company and the Provincetown Playhouse; he was also responsible for bringing to America such avant-garde companies as Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, Max Reinhardt's Repertory Company and Messager's Orchestre du Conservatoire. Otto Kahn also served as a trustee of Rutgers, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Carnegie Institute. He was, at the time of his death, considered by many to be the greatest patron of the arts in the United States.

The Otto Kahn House, occupying the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 91st Street, is four stories high above a deep basement and built of gray limestone. In 1919 Leon V. Solon appropriately described this neo-Italian Renaissance building in the Architectural Record: "Great dignity and simplicity characterize the exterior of the Kahn residence. In general concept it conforms to the principles that govern design in many of the Italian Renaissance palaces, insofar as the treatment of the masonry is concerned and the relative decorative importance of superimposed tiers of windows."

The two main facades rise virtually unbroken from a high rusticated base. The architect introduced the Continental device of placing a carriageway behind the exterior wall of the house on 91st Street. Two massive wood-paneled doors set in arched entrances, close off the carriageway from the street. The actual entrance to the house is from within the carriageway. The first floor wall and that inside the carriageway are punctuated by windows with handsome iron grilles. A niche at each end of the carriageway and a coffered ceiling add further interest.

The rusticated second story, which forms a true piano nobile, has balustraded windows with alternating triangular and segmental-arched pediments. Paired pilasters between the windows add further contrast to the rusticated wall surface. The third and fourth floors are faced with smooth masonry and are separated by a string course at sill level of the fourth floor windows. The third floor window enframements have cornices, while the fourth story windows have simple "eared" enframements. The portions of the north and east facades of the building which are visible from the street are similar in design to the two more prominent facades. Crowning the whole is a modillioned roof cornice with a roof balustrade above.

Facing Fifth Avenue at the north side of the house is a rusticated one-story terrace extension surmounted by a balustrade. This terrace, which is now partially enclosed by three walls, has the character of Italian courtyard. A low rusticated wall extension on the east end conceals the service functions.

The unity and coherence of the architectural elements in the Kahn residence create a forceful composition. The use of such a pure Italian Renaissance design was unique in New York City at a time when many of Kahn's contemporaries were building mansions that incorporated far more elaborate forms and details. Its restrained dignity is an appropriate expression of Kahn's personality and of his philanthropic and artistic interests.

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 Otto Kahn 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 Otto Kahn House is the finest Italian Renaissance style mansion in New York City, that it belonged to a great patron of the arts, that it was almost unique at the date of its erection in its simplicity and purity of detail, and that, although it is prominently located on a Fifth Avenue corner site, it is most notable for its restrained and quiet dignity.

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 Otto Kahn House, 1 East 91st Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1503, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.