

19 EAST 70TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1909-10; architect Thornton Chard.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1385, Lot 15.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 19 East 70th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 22). Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation, and the representative of the owner asked that the item be continued. The hearing was continued until March 26, 1974 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the March hearing, one witness spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation including the representative of the owner.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This extremely elegant and architecturally distinguished residence was designed by Thornton Chard (1873-1951), a New York architect, in a simplified but sophisticated version of early Italian Renaissance style. Chard had attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1901 and, upon his return from Europe, opened an architectural office in the city. His small but selective practice in this city and state spanned some three decades. His client, for whom the house was built in 1909-10, was Dave Hennen Morris and his wife Alice. Mr. Morris later served as United States Ambassador to Belgium during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term.

The properties on this block were held by the Estate of James Lenox until 1907, when they were transferred to the New York Public Library--Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. The Lenox Library building which stood on this block was completed in 1875; in 1911 the collections were removed from the location on Fifth Avenue and 70th Street, and the Lenox Library building was subsequently replaced by the Henry Clay Frick mansion. However, the Foundations began selling the properties on the north side of East 70th Street in 1909, and this new residence was among the first to be built on the block. Fifth Avenue and its side streets above 59th Street had already been well developed in the 1880s and 1890s, so for this land to have remained open until 1909 was quite unusual. The wealthy New Yorkers who bought these lots commissioned houses for themselves, thus continuing a well-established residential trend in the development of this area.

No. 19, an imposing six-story house, now occupied by the Knoedler Gallery, is considerably wider than the adjoining town houses. It presents a smooth, well-finished limestone front to the street and a facade of refined simplicity; this effect is enhanced by a judicious use of well-chosen architectural ornament generally derived from 15th century Italian Renaissance sources.

The facade is pierced by three deeply recessed openings at each of the upper stories and by a graceful arcade at street level. Projecting elements, notably balconies at the parlor floor and third story and a strong roof cornice, enliven the street facade, providing an extremely effective play of light and shade over the smooth, polished surfaces. The carefully adjusted proportions of architectural elements, which gradually decrease in size as they rise from the street floor arcaded loggia to the fourth story, add greatly to the overall appearance of the building.

The ground floor is dominated by a graceful arcaded loggia supported on two polished Tuscan columns and is enhanced by voussoirs delineated by a delicate molding. Behind the loggia, a low simple iron railing encloses a stairway leading down to the basement, which has been placed so as not to extend beyond the building line. This was also an innovative feature of another house designed by Chard, in association with his partner Stockton B. Colt, which was praised in the Architectural Record of 1911. Located at 68 East 56th Street, this fine neo-Federal house still stands, although the original Doric loggia has there been replaced by a shopfront.

A second outstanding feature of No. 19 is the handsome stone balcony with paneled balustrade which extends across the front at the former parlor floor. Three dignified French windows, aligned with the three arches of the loggia below, open onto the balcony which is supported by console brackets. These brackets, carved in a foliate design, are carefully related both to the spandrels of the arches below and to the paneled posts of the balustrade immediately above them. The central position of the third story window is emphasized by a small, charming stone balcony supported on console brackets of the same design as those below. Five attractive stylized panels, worked in pierced floral pattern, are set into the balustrade and provide a striking foil to the smooth ashlar wall. The fourth floor windows are separated by paneled wall sections, but linked to each other by a continuous molded bandcourse which serves as a sill for the three windows.

The building is crowned by a handsome, strongly projecting roof cornice in the Renaissance tradition. It rests on two foliate brackets, which repeat the graceful leaf design of the brackets supporting the balconies below. The roof cornice is adorned by modillions which are carved in the same design and a row of dentils. A wide fifth story window is set into a sloping, copper-clad roof which, in turn, is crowned by a richly ornamented cresting with alternating foliate and anthemion motifs.

The economy of means and careful refinement of architectural features, which are so clearly apparent in this building, are a reflection of Chard's training and travel abroad. The smooth wall surface and sparing use of delicate detail reflect a familiarity with the work of "reform" architects of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in England, France and Germany who simplified and transformed Classical and Renaissance traditions. Thus, after his brief exposure to the more ornate, academic design taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Chard refined and adapted these traditions to his own taste, exhibiting an independence which gives 19 East 70th Street a special character.

In 1915, the Architectural Record published photographs of the interiors of this distinguished house; these interiors exhibit the same smooth wall surfaces as the exterior, with moldings reduced to a minimum. The pictures of the rooms, which were decorated in a style influenced by the Directoire period in France and the period of Robert Adam in England, illustrate the skill and talent of this architect. His insistence on simplicity to achieve a desired effect is related not only to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but also to progressive architectural trends of the early 20th century, both abroad and in this country.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 19 East 70th 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 19 East 70th Street House is an elegant and architecturally distinguished residence, that it is a fine example of the architecture of its period, that the graceful arcaded loggia and handsome balconies and roof cornices are derived from 15th century Italian Renaissance tradition, that these features enliven the facade by providing an extremely effective play of light and shade over the smooth, well-executed limestone wall surface, that this house displays an economy of means and careful refinement of architectural detail to achieve its effect, and that this outstanding house adds greatly to the dignity and character of the fine row of town houses on the north side of the street.

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 19 East 70th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1385, Lot 15, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.