

OCTAGON TOWER, Roosevelt Island (formerly Blackwell's Island and then Welfare Island), located approximately opposite East 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed in 1839, architect A.J. Davis; additions in 1847-48 and 1879. Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 25, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Octagon Tower and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. While expressing reservations, the representatives of the Roosevelt Island Development Corporation have agreed to the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Octagon, located at the northern end of Roosevelt Island, served as the administrative center and main entrance hall of the New York City Lunatic Asylum, one of the first institutions of its kind established in this country. Designs for the Asylum were prepared in 1834-35 by the noted New York architect, Alexander Jackson Davis, and the building was opened in 1839. Davis' plans called for a much more elaborate scheme than was actually built by the City; the Octagon was to have been one of a pair within a great U-shaped complex, ordered around a central rectangular pavilion. As built, the single Octagon, from which two long wings extended, became the focal point of the building. Much admired in the 19th century for its architectural excellence, the Octagon now stands alone, the imposing geometric clarity and simplicity of its design fully revealed.

The City of New York purchased Blackwell's Island, as Roosevelt Island was called in the 19th century, in 1828 with a view to institutional development; it was believed that the pleasant island surroundings would be conducive to both physical and mental rehabilitation. The island Penitentiary was begun in 1829, and the Lunatic Asylum was constructed at the end of the following decade. An Almshouse, Workhouse, and numerous charity hospitals were also built on Blackwell's Island during the course of the century. The Lunatic Asylum was erected in response to the desperate need for proper accomodation of the insane. Previously, these cases had been assigned to a few overcrowded and poorly maintained wards in Bellevue Hospital. In the middle years of the 19th century, the attitude towards the treatment and care of the insane underwent significant and progressive change. Recognition that they required medical assistance, not merely custodial restraint, led to the founding of such institutions as the New York City Lunatic Asylum. That this change in attitude was, however, only gradually accomplished is well demonstrated by the fact that, in the early years of the Lunatic Asylum, patients were supervised by inmates from the Penitentiary under the direction of a small medical staff. The physicians in charge deplored this situation, and a suitable staff of orderlies and nurses was finally hired in 1850. Physical activity and labor as well as entertainment were prescribed as therapeutic for mental disturbances.

Thus, the male patients of the Lunatic Asylum who were willing and able, worked in vegetable gardens or built sea walls in order to reclaim land, while female patients aided in housekeeping chores and worked as seamstresses. A library--for the most part the result of donations from publishing houses and private citizens--was formed, and weekly dances were held. At the recommendation of a resident physician, even a billiard table was purchased.

The Asylum was, however, plagued with difficulties, primarily due to overcrowding and financial inadequacies. In the early years the diet of the patients was inadequate, and scurvy was a relatively common disease. Typhus and cholera epidemics afflicted the patients and staff alike in the 1860s. When Charles Dickens visited the United States in 1842, he was taken on a tour of the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum where he much admired the architecture, calling the building "handsome" and the Octagon an especially "elegant" feature; but he further commented in his American Notes (1842): ". . . everything [at the Asylum] had a lounging, listless, madhouse air which was very painful." Through the perseverance of the resident physicians and other concerned New Yorkers, conditions were gradually improved. Additional buildings were constructed to ease overcrowding and to separate violent patients from less serious cases. The facilities in general were made more pleasant and comfortable. By 1875 a contributor to Harper's Weekly magazine was able to write that "very few sane persons inhabit more healthy and convenient chambers."

In 1894 it had been determined that municipal facilities could no longer adequately care for the great numbers of indigent insane. Ward's Island also in the East River was consequently ceded to the State of New York, and all New York City mental patients were transferred to hospitals there. The Lunatic Asylum was renamed Metropolitan Hospital and became a general hospital with special emphasis on the treatment of tubercular patients. In the 1950s the buildings on the island were abandoned for new quarters in Manhattan. By the late 1960s the island redevelopment project of the New York State Urban Development Corporation, threatened the old Asylum with demolition. Fortunately it was decided, on the basis of recommendations made by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and a report prepared by the noted architectural historian, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, to preserve the central Octagon. Demolition of the two wings which projected at right angles to the south and west was completed in 1970, and temporary preservation measures were taken for the Octagon under the direction of the New York architect, Giorgio Cavaglieri, who also restored two other buildings on the island, the Blackwell House and the Chapel of the Good Shepherd.

The Octagon has a complicated history of alteration and modification, which has carefully traced by Jane B. Davies, an authority on the work of A.J. Davis. The original 1834-35 design by Davis was in what he termed the "Tuscan Style". The Octagon was to have had a low-pitched hip roof with wide eaves and a central skylight. Construction of the Asylum had barely begun, however, when the City Council ordered work halted because of disagreements over the design. In 1837 work was resumed, but Davis' great U-shaped plan was reduced to a single octagon joined to a single east-west wing. The upper portion of the Octagon was altered to include a crenelated cupola and the architectural detail was changed to the Greek Revival style. Davis had intended that the Octagon should house a kitchen and dining hall, day rooms, a laundry, and baths. It now became the administrative center and main entrance as well as the living quarters for the Resident Physician. This phase of construction was completed in 1839, under the supervision of two master-builders, as Davis was apparently no longer associated with the project. In 1847-48 a north-south wing was built repeating the style of the earlier east-west wing. Architect Joseph M. Dunn was commissioned in 1879 to alter the Asylum. He raised the wings one story in height and, to retain the visual prominence of the Octagon, added a dome-like convex mansard roof with neo-Grec detail. To further enhance the Octagon, a new main entrance was constructed with a double staircase.

The Octagon, executed in the gray "granite" (actually gray gneiss) quarried on the island in the 19th century, is a smooth-walled, crisply faceted structure, relying for its dramatic effect on the clarity of its geometry and the boldness of its silhouette. The fenestration is especially notable as the earliest surviving example of the "Davisean window"; paired windows appear at each floor, separated by heavy mullions and by simple stone transverse members, creating a very modern feeling of continuous verticality. The main entrance of the Octagon, at first floor level, is approached by a double staircase of stone which was originally covered by a wooden porch, and has heavy wing walls adorned by recessed panels. The walls of the building are free of any ornament and are crowned above

the third floor by a simple projecting metal cornice with boldly scaled dentils and a paneled frieze beneath. At the center of the roof is the simple octagonal cupola surmounted by its dome-like octagonal roof. This tall, convex mansard roof is crowned by a heavy cornice and pierced by two tiers of dormer windows. The rectangular windows are enframed by neo-Grec pilasters and pediments, and smaller dormers with oval windows appear above.

The plan of the Octagon is composed of a central rotunda surrounded by four rooms, separated by corridors which radiate outward. The rotunda contains a spiral staircase constructed of cast iron with wood Ionic columns encircling the high central stairwell--an especially beautiful space, described by Henry-Russell Hitchcock as one of the grandest interiors in the City.

Although the silhouette and proportions of the Octagon have been altered by the addition of Dunn's mansard dome, the major credit for the design of the structure may be assigned to Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892), a native New Yorker and highly successful architect, who worked throughout the United States. In the early years of his career Davis was in partnership with the prominent architect Ithiel Town (1784-1844) with whom he designed the New York Customs House (now Federal Hall National Memorial), a designated New York City Landmark. During the period of his association with Town, Davis designed the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum, as well as the State Capitols of Indiana, North Carolina, Illinois, and Ohio, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, and the Patent Office in Washington D.C. His commissions were, however, not limited solely to public buildings; he was also responsible for numerous commercial buildings, churches and domestic structures, and was the author of two books, Views of the Public Buildings in the City of New York (c.1830) and Rural Residences (1837). While Davis was a highly competent practitioner of the Greek Revival style--in his early twenties he made an intensive study of Greek detail--he was also well versed in many other styles, as his original "Tuscan" design for the Lunatic Asylum demonstrates.

The architectural historian, Talbot Hamlin, has praised Davis' "consistent feeling for logical planning." The original symmetrical plan made by Davis for the New York City Lunatic Asylum took into account efficient supervision of patients, ease of circulation and ample provision for good lighting and ventilation in the wards. Davis' plan was a variant of the influential "panoptic plan," which was centralized with radiating wings, developed in Great Britain by Jeremy Bentham (1742 -1832), a philosopher and jurist interested in prison reform. While only a portion of Davis' original proposal for the Lunatic Asylum was actually built, the plan still functioned very effectively. Davis' New York City Asylum project was also significant in that it served as the prototype for his North Carolina Hospital for the Insane at Raleigh.

Dr. R.L. Parsons, Resident Physician of the Lunatic Asylum during the 1860s, remarked in his annual report of 1865 that the Octagon "has a symmetry, a beauty and a grandeur even, that are to be admired." These qualities are still in evidence, not only to the visitor to Roosevelt Island, but also from Manhattan where the picturesque silhouette of the Octagon is a prominent feature of the island's skyline.

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 Octagon Tower 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 Octagon is a building of imposing design, remarkable for its geometric clarity and for the picturesque beauty of its silhouette, that its expressive use of stone work is enhanced by the use of simple detail, that it was designed by one of the most prominent architects in the United States during the mid-19th century, as part of a much larger proposed scheme for the New York City Lunatic Asylum, that it is the sole surviving portion of this institution, which was one of the first of its kind established in this country, and that it is part of a hospital plan which was both progressive and influential in its time.

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 Octagon Tower, Roosevelt Island, located approximately opposite East 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 on which the described building is situated.