

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 29, 1980, Designation List 131
LP-1053

149-151 EAST 67TH STREET BUILDING (Former Mount Sinai Dispensary); Borough of Manhattan. Built 1889-90; architects Buchman & Deisler and Brunner & Tryon.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1402, Lot 24.

On July 19, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 149-151 East 67th Street Building (Former Mount Sinai Dispensary) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing was continued to September 11, 1979 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. No witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This very handsome neo-Italian Renaissance style building at 149-151 East 67th Street was built in 1889-90 to serve as a dispensary for Mount Sinai Hospital. The hospital originally faced the dispensary from its site on the south side of East 67th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues. The dignified and elegant architectural expression of the clinic -- itself very much a product of late 19th-century social ideals -- is an important element in the group of stylistically diverse monumental civic and institutional buildings on this East Side block.

Mount Sinai Hospital, the oldest Jewish hospital in the city, was founded as the Jews' Hospital in 1852 by a group of eight prominent Jewish citizens led by Sampson Simson, best known as Aaron Burr's confidential secretary. Established as a sectarian hospital "to afford surgical and medical aid, comfort, and protection in sickness to deserving and needy Israelites,"¹ it also cared for non-Jews in case of emergency. Beginning with the influx of wounded soldiers from the Civil War and injuries connected with the 1863 Draft Riots in New York City, the hospital began operating as a non-sectarian institution, changing its name to Mount Sinai Hospital in 1866. The name evoked the Jewish origins of the hospital but removed the connotation of sectarianism that hindered the hospital in its early attempts to solicit public funds and private contributions. The hospital first occupied a site on West 28th Street, but as the city's growth encroached on what had once been open space surrounding the building, a new site was thought desirable. Repeatedly in the 19th century American hospitals sought open land which was believed to provide a healthier atmosphere, although by the end of the century this was recognized as impossible for urban hospitals. An explosion of a steam boiler within 100 feet of the hospital in 1867 gave the impetus for a move uptown to a more peaceful site. In 1867 the board of the hospital began looking at a site on Park Avenue at 65th Street, an area which was rapidly becoming a center for hospitals and charitable homes. The Presbyterian Hospital already occupied a site at 70th and Park Avenue, and in 1870 the City gave land at Park and 67th Street to the Hahneman Hospital. In 1868 the city granted Mount Sinai Hospital twelve lots on East 67th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues. A new hospital was erected there from the designs of Griffith Thomas between 1870 and 1872. French Second Empire in style, the hospital also employed a modified pavilion plan which had its origins in French hospital design.

New York hospitals had long recognized a need to serve patients who did not require hospitalization but could not afford the services of a private doctor. The idea of the dispensary seems to date back at least to mid-18th century London,

where a clinic was established in Red Lion Square, Holborn as early as 1769.² From its beginning the Jews' Hospital had attended to minor illnesses, but it was not until 1872 that the directors announced in the Annual Report the intention to establish "an infirmary for the treatment of out-door patients."³ Organized into four sections -- Internal Medicine, Surgical, Gynecological, and Children's -- Mt. Sinai's Dispensary began its life in 1875 in two rooms in the basement of the building. Indeed Mt. Sinai was the first New York hospital to establish a separate clinic for children, an indication of the trend towards specialization in both medicine and health care which was only then beginning in American hospitals. The "out-door" department quickly outgrew its two rooms; by 1877 it occupied four rooms in the basement. Dispensaries by this time were fairly common adjuncts to major hospitals, and many were established independently in neighborhoods distant from a hospital, such as the Manhattan Dispensary founded in Harlem in 1862. By the 1880s the "out-door" departments of the Upper East Side hospitals were characterized by over-crowded conditions and a heavy demand on their services. In 1882 Mt. Sinai's Dispensary handled nearly 39,000 consultations and 40,000 prescriptions, a nine-fold increase from its first busy year.⁴ A new building was required which would not only permit more space but would remove the clinic from the hospital. Separate dispensary buildings were constructed at most of the area's hospitals during these years. The German Hospital (later Lenox Hill Hospital) established its dispensary in 1884; Presbyterian Hospital's followed in 1888 and Hahnehan's in 1891. In 1889 the directors of Mt. Sinai Hospital leased land across 67th Street to construct a new building for its dispensary which had expanded both its staff and departments. Most importantly an Eye and Ear Department had been established, headed by the well-known Dr. Carl Koller, famous for his discovery of the usefulness of cocaine as a local anesthetic in 1884.

The new building also was intended to house the expanding Nurse's Training School, organized in 1881 and first located in a private house at 850 Lexington Avenue. It too was growing rapidly and by the end of its first year had expanded into an adjacent rowhouse. From its beginnings the dual benefit of the dispensary to the public and to medical students had been recognized as "contributing to the advancement of medical science and aiding the student in the study of his profession."⁵ The new building was to house the clinic on the first two floors and the Training School in the four floors above. As Hirsch and Doherty have noted:

The juxtaposition of the School and the Dispensary helped make possible the development of the District Nursing Service...Mt. Sinai's forerunner of the modern Home Care Program.⁶

The Dispensary also provided "the real impetus to the clinical research that was to distinguish Mt. Sinai in the years to come."⁷

The new building, erected in 1889-90, was connected to the hospital buildings by a tunnel under 67th Street. Unlike the hospital it was entirely fireproof, a precaution the wisdom of which was confirmed by a tragic fire in the Presbyterian Hospital on December 19, 1889. The design of the building was the joint work of two architectural firms: Buchman & Deisler and Brunner & Tryon. The exact contribution of each is not certain. Albert Buchman and Gustav Deisler, who had begun their partnership in 1887, achieved particular prominence in the 1890s for commercial designs, especially along lower Broadway. Several of their buildings are included in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District. Albert Buchman (1859-1936), trained at Cornell and Columbia Universities, later worked in association with Mortimer J. Fox in the first decade of this century. Residential commissions by this firm may be seen in

the Metropolitan Museum Historic District. In 1917 Buchman Joined Ely Jacques Kahn, in the partnership for which he is best known and which proved the most fruitful. His first partner, Gustave Deisler, was trained in Stuttgart and Munich. Given their prominence in the design of commercial buildings, it is possible that their contribution to the Dispensary was its iron structural frame.

The newly founded firm of Brunner & Tryon also was destined for prominence. Arnold W. Brunner (1857-1925) was one of the leading architects of the first quarter of the 20th century, especially important for his vast civic complexes which brought the style and civic ideals of the City Beautiful Movement to numerous cities around the country. He was most closely connected with the designs of governmental complexes in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Cleveland, Ohio, but served as a planner and advisor in many cities including Buffalo, Denver, and San Francisco. His partnership with Thomas Tryon (1859-1920) was formed in the late 1880s after Brunner returned from an extensive European tour. The partnership seems to have enjoyed Jewish patronage from the start. In addition to work for Mt. Sinai Hospital, they also designed the original Temple Beth-El, which stood at Fifth Avenue and 76th Street, and the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue on Central Park West, a designated New York City Landmark. Brunner & Tryon's partnership was dissolved in 1898. Brunner went on independently to win the 1901 competition for the new Mt. Sinai Hospital complex, which brought him national attention. The new hospital on the block bounded by 100th and 101st Streets and Fifth and Madison Avenues has grown into one of the world's major hospitals and medical research centers, but the core by Brunner can still be seen. The Hospital moved to the new complex in 1904. It included a new building for the dispensary as well as new accommodations for the Nurse's Training School. The original dispensary building on 67th Street has since served a variety of purposes. Until 1929 it was a clinic for the Neurological Institute of New York. It served the government of Poland from 1936 until 1959 when it was sold to its present owner, Catholic Charities of New York, who use the building for educational purposes.

The building, six stories high and five bays wide, is distinguished by its handsome proportioning of beautifully executed Quattrocento details -- possibly designed by Brunner calling upon his European training -- and the contrasting colors and textures of its materials. The rusticated base is faced with Bellevue stone in alternating courses of rough-faced and narrow smooth-faced bands. Above, the upper stories are of closely-laid salmon-colored pressed brick set off by white terracotta trim and ornament. At the ground floor the central three bays have round-arched windows with voussiors keyed to the bands of rustication. The entrances at either side of the ground floor -- originally one for the clinic and one for the Nurses' Training School in the upper stories -- have slightly projecting portals with handsomely carved panelled pilasters and Corinthian capitals. The motifs and refinement of detail reflect the style of the early Florentine Renaissance. Within each portal, a fine play of light and shadow is created by the delicate moldings of the arch, low relief cartouches and ribbons carved in the spandrels, and the dentil course in the surmounting cornice. A smooth-faced entablature terminates the rusticated base, its projecting cornice functioning as a sill to the five round-arched windows at the second floor. These are spaced to form a central group of three windows with two flanking single windows -- a rhythm established at the ground floor and even more emphatically articulated at the upper stories. These double-hung windows with semi-circular transoms have arched enframements which echo those of the entrances, but they have simplified ornamentation. The arches are crowned by anthemia, and the pilasters have panels with circles and semi-circles. A cornice terminates this story and delineates the separation between the lower stories which

housed the clinic and the upper stories where the Nursing School was housed on four floors. The first three of these upper stories are treated as a single element. The central three bays have paired double-hung windows with rectangular transoms. Richly ornamented terra-cotta panels are set below the windows at the fourth and fifth stories. The entire composition is then enframed by a terra-cotta border of vines and medallions. The single windows in the side bays of each story have round-arched surrounds. These double-hung windows are capped by scalloped shells, a common early Renaissance decorative element. A cornice with a plain frieze terminates the central section of the facade.

The attic story is very richly ornamented. Its six square windows with eared enframements break the rhythm of the lower stories, giving a strong horizontal termination to the facade which is accentuated by the deep projecting cornice with its elegantly carved, closely-spaced brackets. Handsome terra-cotta panels with cartouches are set between the attic windows lending further ornateness to the uppermost portion of the building.

The handsome neo-Italian Renaissance dispensary building with its fine detailing and delicate ornamentation tangibly expressed the pride Mt. Sinai Hospital took in its efforts to bring medical care to a large urban population. Designed by two New York architectural firms, Buchman & Deisler and Brunner & Tryon, who went on to later prominence, it is a fine example of the elegance which could be achieved using the neo-Italian Renaissance style. Now serving educational purposes, the building is an important element in the group of four late 19th-century institutional buildings on this block of East 67th Street.

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FOOTNOTES

1. J.F. Richmond, New York and Its Institutions (New York: E.B. Treat, 1871), p. 382.
2. Tina Levitan, Islands of Compassion, A History of the Jewish Hospitals of New York (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 32.
3. Quoted in Jane Benedict, The Story of the First Fifty Years of Mount Sinai Hospital, 1852-1902 (New York: Mt. Sinai Hospital, 1944), p. 50.
4. Benedict, p. 71.
5. Quoted from the 1872 Annual Report in Benedict, p. 50.
6. Joseph Hirsch and Beth Doherty, The First Hundred Years of Mount Sinai Hospital of New York, 1852-1952 (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 63.
7. Hirsch and Doherty, p. 63.

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 149-151 East 67th Street Building (Former Mount Sinai Dispensary) 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 149-151 East 67th Street Building (Former Mount Sinai Dispensary) is a handsome neo-Italian Renaissance building with fine detailing and delicate ornamentation; that it was designed by two young New York architectural firms, Buchman & Deisler and Brunner & Tryon, who went on to later prominence; that it was built to serve as the dispensary for Mount Sinai Hospital then located across East 67th Street; that while many hospitals built dispensaries to serve outpatient needs, this is one of the few surviving 19th-century dispensary structures in the city; that the elegant design tangibly expressed the pride Mount Sinai Hospital took in its efforts to bring medical care to a large urban population; and that the building is an important element in the group of four late 19th-century institutional buildings on this block of East 67th Street.

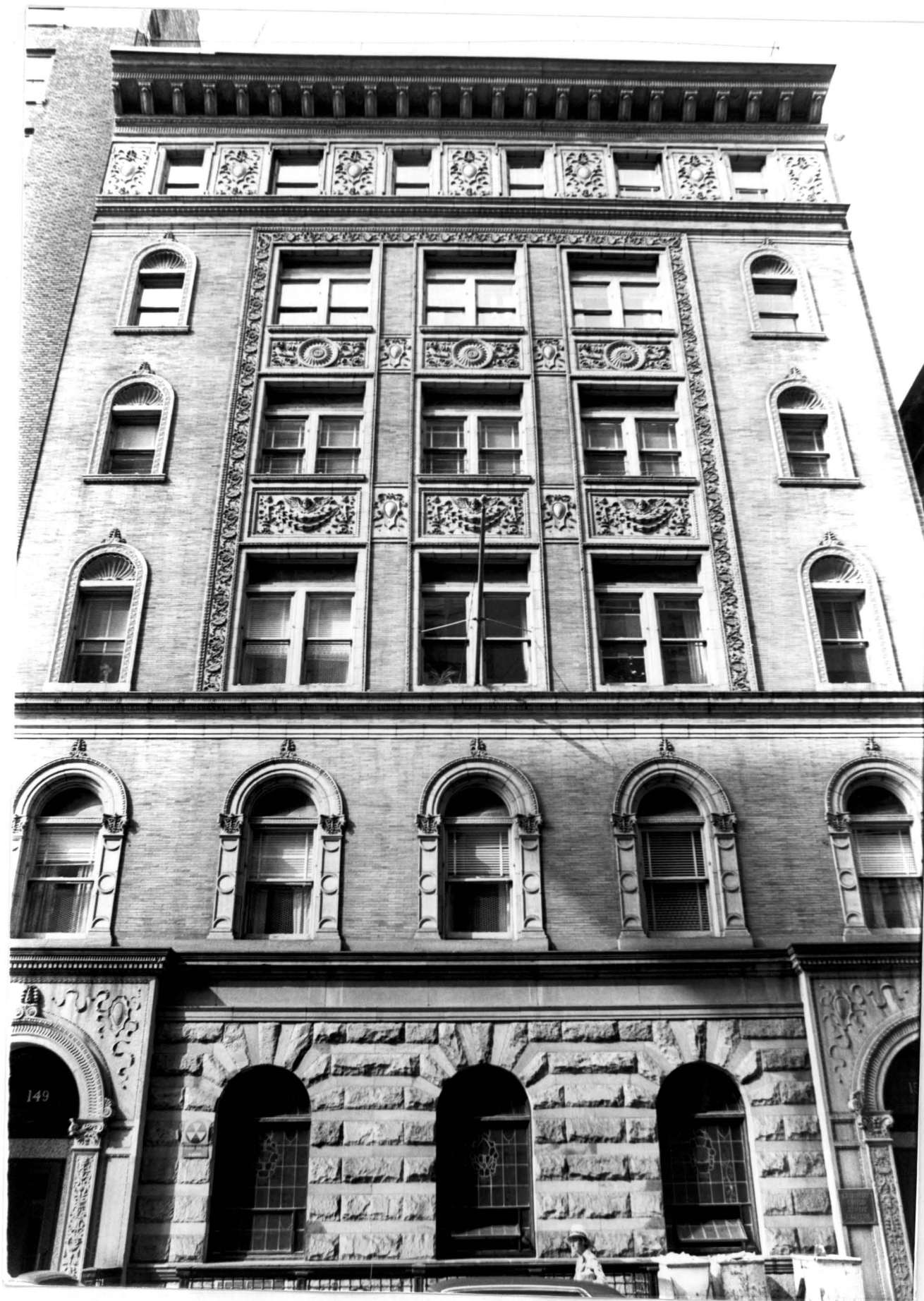
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 149-151 East 67th Street Building (Former Mount Sinai Dispensary), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1402, Lot 24, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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149-151 EAST 67th STREET BUILDING

Photo Credit:
Gina Santucci

Architects: Buchman & Deisler and Brunner & Tryon

Built: 1889-90