

59 East 79th Street Building (John H. Iselin Residence), Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1908-09; architects Foster, Gade & Graham.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1491, Lot 27.

On June 19, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 59 East 79th Street Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 22). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. No witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The stylistically unusual town house at 59 East 79th Street, built in 1908-09 for John H. and Caroline Iselin, was designed by the architectural firm of Foster, Gade & Graham with an eclectic combination of Northern Renaissance and French Classic forms. The building is representative of the large town houses erected on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the early years of the 20th century as this area became the most fashionable residential quarter of the city.

The Upper East Side of Manhattan began to be developed as a residential neighborhood in the 1860s when simple brownstone rowhouses were constructed in the area. These homes were built on speculation and sold to middle-class families. Until the last years of the 19th century the Upper East Side remained a stable middle-class community. Most of the city's wealthiest families still lived below 59th Street, but as commercial activity expanded in that area the elite families moved farther north. During the twenty-five year period between about 1890 and the beginning of World War I, opulent town houses replaced the older brownstone residences. Grand mansions were built on Fifth Avenue and stylish new town houses appeared on the side streets east of the Avenue. Many of the old houses were demolished to make way for new dwellings, while others had their original facades replaced by stylish new fronts. The John H. Iselin Residence is typical of the town houses constructed during this period of intensive redevelopment. Two earlier brownstone houses, built c. 1877, stood on the site. These were purchased by John and Caroline Iselin in 1908. They then commissioned the architectural firm of Foster, Gade & Graham to replace them with a single new residence.

The firm of Foster, Gade & Graham was organized in 1901 by Mortimer Foster, John A. Gade, and Robert D. Graham. They were active in the design of residential buildings until 1912 when Graham left the firm. The houses designed by Foster, Gade & Graham generally exhibit an eclectic mix of stylistic forms, particularly the combination of Northern Renaissance and French-inspired details on variegated brick and stone facades, as seen at 59 East 79th Street, as well as at 35 West 54th Street.

The family of John H. Iselin, a socially prominent lawyer, lived at 59 East 79th Street until 1919. In 1919 Norman Davis (1878-1944) moved into the house. Norman Davis had been a successful broker in Cuba before entering the employ of the Treasury Department in 1917, as an expert on foreign loans. In succeeding years Davis acted as an emissary for Presidents Wilson, Coolidge, Hoover, and Roosevelt. For President Wilson, Davis served as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, Under-Secretary of State, and Acting Secretary of State. Davis was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Ambassador-at Large and in 1938 Roosevelt appointed him chairman of the American Red Cross. In 1942 Davis was appointed to the Civilian Defense Board, and in 1943 he was elected president of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Iselin Residence is a five-story structure faced with buff brick that is enlivened by limestone detailing. The house has an English basement plan with a granite base and an entrance set above a short flight of steps. Both the segmental-arched entrance with its iron and glass doors and similar window opening to the left are recessed within smooth stone enframements. On the second floor, tall crisply-carved stone enframements enclose paired, French-inspired panels carved with garlands which are located above the window openings. These openings were probably originally fitted with French windows (now replaced by multi-paned casement windows) that led onto stone balconies that are ornamented with Northern Renaissance strapwork panels.

The shorter third-floor windows are recessed within enframements similar to those below. A blank, recessed stone panel set above these windows gives further emphasis to the third story. Each vertical pair of windows on the second and third floors is unified by a continuous band of stone blocks that are keyed to the brickwork. This contrast between the brick facade and the keyed stone enframements resembles a design effect created by Henry Hardenbergh in his Northern Renaissance-inspired designs, such as the rowhouses at 15A-19 and 41-67 West 73rd Street (1882).

A raised paneled beltcourse separates the lower floors of the house from the fourth story with its keyed window enframements. A stylized key stone at each enframement gives emphasis to this story, preventing it from being obscured by the shadow of the denticulated stone cornice that runs above. This cornice supports a parapet and a mansard roof through with project stone dormers with segmental-arched pediments. With the exception of the replacement of all of the original windows by casements, probably in 1941 when the town house was converted to apartments, the building retains all of its original detailing and serves as a reminder of the important period in New York City's history when the Upper East Side was being built up with private residences for the affluent.

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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 59 East 79th Street Building 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 59 East 79th Street Building is a handsome residence designed in an eclectic manner typical of its period of construction and it is a fine example of the town houses being built for wealthy New Yorkers during the early 20th century; that it was the home of important New Yorker's including John H. Iselin and Norman Davis; that it is reminiscent of an important period in New York's history; that stylistically it makes use of an unusual combination of Northern Renaissance and French Classic details; and that it is part of an impressive group of four contemporary residences.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provision 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 59 East 79th Street Building Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1491, Lot 27, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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