

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 3, 1981, Designation List 139
LP-1101

5 West 54th Street House (Dr. Moses Allen Starr Residence), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1897-99; architect R.H. Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 30.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 5 West 54th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing was continued to January 8, 1980 (Item No. 2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 20 witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters and petitions have been received supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome, meticulously detailed town house was built in 1897-99 for Dr. Moses Allen Starr, one of America's leading neurologists. Designed in the neo-Renaissance style using principals of Beaux-Arts composition by the noted architect Robert H. Robertson, the building is a distinguished example of the elegant residential architecture that once characterized the West Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and is one of an ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street.

Midtown Manhattan remained open farmland until the first half of the 19th century when shanty towns, rubbish dumps, stockyards, and factories began to appear above West 40th Street. The landscaping of Central Park, commenced in 1857, helped spur development of midtown, and during the building boom that followed the Civil War, the West Forties and Fifties became lined with brick and stone residences. These new houses ranged from lavish Fifth Avenue mansions commissioned by such individual clients as the Vanderbilts to middle-class dwellings erected on a speculative basis.

The house at 5 West 54th Street occupies part of the original site of St. Luke's Hospital (1858), which fronted on West 55th Street at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue. The hospital dominated the east end of the block until new quarters were erected on Amsterdam Avenue and 113th Street in 1896. That same year, construction began on the University Club, designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White and located on the northwest corner of West 54th Street and Fifth Avenue. During the next few years several fashionable town houses were constructed on the north side of 54th Street. Together with the University Club, a designated New York City Landmark, they typify the fine residences and private clubs that transformed the Fifties near Fifth Avenue and Fifth Avenue itself into an exclusive neighborhood at the turn of the century--part of the continuing northwood residential trend in Manhattan. Many of the buildings were designed by New York's foremost architects for the city's most prominent and wealthy citizens.

Dr. Moses Allen Starr (1854-1932) was one such notable New Yorker. Born in Brooklyn, he was educated at Princeton University, Columbia University, and in Heidelberg and Vienna. In 1896 Dr. Starr was elected president of the American Neurological Association and served as Professor of

Neurology at Columbia from 1889 to 1915. He was a pioneer in brain surgery research as well as a distinguished teacher and author. In 1912 his career was marked by the sensation he caused at a meeting of the Academy of Medicine, where he attacked the theories of Sigmund Freud, with whom he had worked as a student in Vienna.

In 1897, Dr. Starr commissioned Robert Henderson Robertson to design a residence at 5 West 54th Street. Robertson (1849-1919) was an eminent figure in his profession, well known as a designer of ecclesiastical, public, and commercial buildings, as well as domestic architecture. Robertson graduated from Rutgers College in 1867 and apprenticed in the architectural office of Henry Sims in Philadelphia. Later he worked in the New York office of George B. Post and in 1876-80 was associated with William A. Potter. Among Robertson's most notable works were the Union Theological Seminary on Park Avenue (designed with W.A. Potter in 1884 and since demolished), the impressive St. Lukes Episcopal Church (1892) located in the Hamilton Height Historic District, and the Park Row Building (1899), once the tallest building in the world. Robertson also designed the Academy of Medicine on West 43rd Street in 1890, a building that may have influenced Dr. Starr to choose Robertson as architect for his own residence.

Many of Robertson's designs, particularly those for commercial buildings and town houses, exhibit the architect's taste for classically-inspired massing and detail. The Starr house is a model of classical refinement and restraint. The narrow, three-bay, four-and-one-half story residence is small by comparison to its neighbors, the Lehman house at 7 West 54th Street and the University Club, but it is distinguished by elegant detailing and pleasing proportions which are characteristic of the neo-Renaissance style. The rusticated limestone ground floor is dominated by an impressive entrance approached by a low stoop. Fluted Ionic pilasters with Scamozzi capitals supporting a modillioned entablature frame double glass doors. These doors are distinguished by striking metal grillework patterned with floral motifs and pairs of griffins. The upper stories, diminishing in height, are of buff-colored brick detailed with stone trim. The second story, or piano nobile, shows the most elaborate detail and is distinguished by a centrally-placed stone cartouche and large flanking windows framed by Ionic Pilasters and heavy entablatures. The decorative, carved panels that span the base of the windows are an unusual and handsome feature. Three simple windows with bracketed sills light the third floor, which is separated from the story above by a molded string course. Keystones mark the fourth story windows while a handsome modillioned cornice crowns the residence. At attic level a stone balustrade fronts three dorner windows, crowned by copper-clad broken segmental-arched pediments with urns which pierce a mansard roof. Except for minor additions to the front stoop and the addition of small air conditioning vents, the exterior remains remarkably intact. The metal and glass barrier on top of the roof is a later addition.

In the years following World War I, the mansions of Fifth Avenue and the fine residences on the adjacent side streets in the Fifties began to give way to commercial and apartment house development. Most of the town houses which survived were altered for commercial use on the ground floors.

A portion of 54th Street west of Fifth Avenue was a rare exception to this trend.

In 1943, Dr. Starr's widow, Alice Dunning Starr, sold the residence to Robert Lehman who lived at 7 West 54th Street. Leman donated it to the U.S. Government. It was converted to a rest home for U.S. World War II veterans and called "Freedom House." In 1948 Freedom House was purchased by Faberge Inc. who occupied it until 1970 when the company moved to a new location. Since 1974, the structure has been occupied by John S. Lastis Inc.

The current owners have carefully restored the interior and renamed the building Petrola House. With its elegant neo-Renaissance design it is a distinguished reminder of the fine residences that lined the blocks west of Fifth Avenue during the turn of the century.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 5 West 54th Street House (Dr. Moses Allen Starr Residence), has 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 5 West 54th Street House (Dr. Moses Allen Starr Residence) is a handsome neo-Renaissance town house designed according to the principles of Beaux-Arts composition; that it is a distinguished example of the residential architecture that once characterized the Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; that it was designed by the prominent architect Robert W. Robertson; that the house, exhibiting the architect's taste for classically-inspired massing and detail, is a model of classical refinement and restraint, distinguished by the elegant detailing and pleasing proportions characteristic of the neo-Renaissance style; that it forms part of a handsome ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street; that it was built for Dr. Moses Allen Starr, one of America's leading neurologists; and that with its distinguished architectural features it is a reminder of the exclusive neighborhood of the Fifties and Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century.

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 5 West 54th Street House (Dr. Moses Allen Starr Residence), Borough of Manhattan, and designate Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 30, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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5 West 54th Street
Built 1897-99

Architect: R.H. Robertson