

SOFIA BROTHERS WAREHOUSE (originally Kent Automatic Parking Garage), 34-43 West 61st Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1929-20; Firm of Jardine, Hill & Murdock.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan. Tax Map Block 1114, Lot 1.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Sofia Brothers Warehouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were five speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Art Deco Sofia Brothers Warehouse was designed by the firm of Jardine, Hill & Murdock as one of two Kent Automatic Parking Garages. Built in 1929-30, the garage used a patented automatic parking system in which an electrical "parking machine" engaged cars by their rear axles and towed them from the elevator platform to parking spots. As the use of automobiles increased after the First World War, the creation of parking facilities became a necessity in urban areas and the design of garages a new field for architects.¹

However, in September of 1931, the Kent garage enterprise failed, and the company was reorganized without the Kent Brothers. The building was operated as a garage until 1943, when the Central Savings Bank (holder of the mortgage), sold it to the Sofia interests, who removed the garage apparatus blocked up the original vehicular entrance on Columbus Avenue, and converted the building to a storage warehouse. The architect of the alteration was George S. Kingsley.

The Sofia Brothers Warehouse occupies a prominent site on Columbus Avenue near the southern edge of the Upper West Side. It was only towards the end of the 19th century (in the 1870s) that the development of New York City extended north of 59th Street into the then-rural Upper West Side. Though the rectangular street grid had been superimposed over the entire island as early as 1811, it wasn't until the construction of the Ninth Avenue El that the Upper West Side experienced large-scale urban expansion. While older village centers existed at Harsenville near 72nd Street and Bloomingdale at 86th Street, rowhouses for affluent residents were built near public improvements such as Riverside Park and Drive. Other houses and tenements were constructed near the elevated railway stops at 72nd, 81st and 93rd Streets.

Throughout much of the 19th century, the West Side, south of 60th Street, was the home of Manhattan's black population. By 1900, the black community had spread as far north as 64th Street, west of Broadway. The area between 60th and 64th Streets, consisting mostly of dilapidated tenement housing, small industrial buildings, and groups of stables, was known as Columbus Hill because of its proximity to Columbus Circle until it became the scene of bloody racial riots involving veterans of the Spanish-American War and was renamed "San Juan Hill." This area served as a transitional zone to the more exclusive rowhouse blocks to the north. The continued presence of the Ninth Avenue El did not enhance the desirability of the San Juan Hill neighborhood as a place to live. An attempt was made to change the neighborhood's image by changing the names of Ninth and Tenth Avenues to Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues.

As the 20th century progressed, the neighborhood changed to light industrial uses. The 1936 tax map shows gas stations, garages, auto dealerships, and factory service centers lining the streets from West 59th to West 70th Streets, especially between Amsterdam and West End Avenues. The Sofia Brothers Warehouse, then the Kent Parking Garage, was erected adjacent to the Packard Motor Car Company warehouse and showrooms. The area retained its fragmented character until the erection of Lincoln Center in the 1960s just to the north and related redevelopment of the Upper West Side during the past two decades.

The Kent Parking Garage, now the Sofia Brothers Warehouse, was designed in the increasingly popular Art Deco style which..."through the late 20s and early 30s...was being applied to an ever greater range of building types."² It seems likely that for this location the client sought an Art Deco design with its implications of modernity and progress to indicate the innovative nature of the new parking system housed within the building.

The Art Deco movement on the Upper West Side had been first manifested in such apartment buildings as No. 336 Central Park West at 94th Street (1928, Schwartz & Gross), the Master Apartments on Riverside Drive at 103rd Street in (1928, Helmlé, Corbett & Harrison and Sugarman & Berger) and the Eldorado on Central Park West at 90th Street (1929, Margon & Holder). The Kent Parking Garage dates from 1929-30. Other major Art Deco buildings of 1929 are the Daily News Building on 42nd Street by Howells & Hood and the Salvation Army Building on 14th Street by Voorhes, Gmelin & Walker.

The firm of Jardine, Hill & Murdock, which designed the Kent Automatic Parking Garage, was the successor firm to D & J Jardine, later, Jardine, Kent & Jardine, and Jardine, Kent & Hill. The Jardine firm was especially active in the last quarter of the 19th century in the design of rowhouses, apartment buildings, and commercial buildings, including the cast-iron B. Altman & Co. store at Sixth Avenue and 19th Street. The successor firm continued in the commercial tradition, designing a number of Manhattan office buildings including No. 50 East 42nd Street (1915), No. 465 Fifth Avenue (1917), No. 335 Broadway (1925), No. 341 Madison Avenue (1926), and No. 40 Worth Street (1927). These buildings, which are faced with brick and terra cotta, are articulated by a variety of Renaissance-inspired detail. An unusual mixed-use structure of 1929-30 at 123 West 57th Street houses both the Calvary Baptist Church and the Salisbury Hotel. Here the firm chose to use Gothic detail to enhance the facade. For the Kent firm, Jardine, Hill & Murdock also designed a parking garage built in 1928 at 209 East 43rd Street, (still extant but refaced in 1961) which displayed modest Renaissance-inspired detail in keeping with the dignified character of Midtown Manhattan. The Kent Garage on Columbus Avenue of the following year is the only known design by the firm in the Art Deco style.

The impressive 24-story brick and terra-cotta Sofia Brothers warehouse building is located on the corner of Columbus Avenue and 61st Street and features setbacks on its main Columbus Avenue facade at the 15th, 21st, and 23rd stories. A major feature of the Columbus Avenue facade is the entrance through which cars were originally driven. This entrance has been given an elaborate two-story treatment of ornamental polychromatic terra cotta of chevrons and medallions which is based, like much Art Deco design, on Aztec motifs. The upper stories are simply articulated with orange brickwork, black horizontal brick bands delineating the stories, and slightly projecting vertical brick piers defining the central window bays. The windows contain twelve-paned metal sash. Some have been replaced by one-over-one sash. The spandrel areas of the windows from the 15th story up are unified by paired horizontal or vertical bands of black brick. The crenellated parapet areas of each setback, including the roof, are capped by cream and royal blue colored terra-cotta and cast stone ornament, echoing that of the main entrance.

The 61st Street facade is a sheer, 24-story wall nearly devoid of windows. Although the stepped-back profile of the tower was originally meant to be symmetrical³, the stepback on the south elevation was never built. It does, however, appear in the original plans. The original elevator tower which is centrally located on the wall and projects one bay from the body of the building, is strikingly defined by linear, geometric ornament executed in black brick and extending almost the full length of the tower. This wall ornament is one of the chief distinguishing architectural features of the building and provides an instantly recognizable identification for the building to those approaching from the south. The horizontal black bands of the main facade extend around the corner to form part of the 61st Street wall. "U.S. Bonded, Free, Sofia Brothers, Inc. Fireproof Storage Warehouse" appears in painted block letters along these extended bands. Through the use of such brick bands to articulate the floor levels as well as metal sash, the designers were following the precepts for "appropriate expression for garage design" articulated by the Architectural Record.⁴ A series of one and two-story entrances, decorated with brick, terra-cotta, and cast stone in a similar fashion to the main facade, project from the base of the side elevation forming low office wings.

The Sofia Brothers Warehouse, now one of the very few commercial buildings surviving in its neighborhood, is a notable example of the Art Deco style. In the Lincoln Center area, which has been extensively developed in recent years, it is a reminder of an earlier era, enhancing the area with its architectural quality and distinctive character.

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FOOTNOTES

1. See "Garages", Architectural Record, 65 (February 1929), 178-191, for a discussion of the problems of garage design.
2. Gervin Robinson, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 24.
3. See plans: Jardine, Hill & Murdock, Roofline treatment, South side elevation, sheet 8, commission 111-82, June 16, 1930. In possession of owner.
4. "Garages," 178.

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 Sofia Brothers Warehouse 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 Sofia Brothers Warehouse is a notable example of the Art Deco style in New York City: that it is one of the finest and most innovative examples of a uniquely 20th century type of architecture, the urban parking garage; that it is the only known Art Deco design by Jardine, Hill & Murdock, the successor firm to the prominent 19th-century architectural firm of D & J Jardine; that the building contains a wealth of terra-cotta Art Deco detailing; and is elegantly massed and that the building continues to enhance the area with its architectural quality and distinctive character.

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 Sofia Brothers Warehouse, 35-43 West 61st Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1114, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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