

THE GERARD/later Hotel Langwell/later Hotel 1-2-3, 123 West 44th Street. Borough of Manhattan. Built 1893-94; architect George Keister.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan. Tax Map Block 997, Lot 19.

On August 11, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Gerard and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Gerard, an exceptionally fine brick, limestone, and terra-cotta apartment hotel, designed in 1893 by George Keister, marks a transition in both American architectural taste and in the developmental history of the west Midtown area. Stylistically, it displays an unusual combination of Romanesque and Northern Gothic and Renaissance details found on very few other buildings in America. When it was erected, this apartment hotel was one of the tallest buildings in a predominantly low-rise residential area and it heralded the enormous change that the neighborhood was to undergo a few years later as it became the heart of New York City's theater district.

The Gerard was commissioned by the developers Alexander Moore and William Rankin who employed George Keister to design the new structure. Keister is a little-known architect who was active in New York City from the late 1880s through the first decades of the twentieth century. Although few buildings by Keister have been identified, those that are known form an interesting group, and examination of his work reveals Keister as one of the more innovative and interesting architects of the period. Among Keister's major works are the eccentrically-massed Romanesque Revival style First Baptist Church (1891) on the northwest corner of Broadway and West 79th Street and a group of ten row-houses on East 136th Street in the Bronx, known as the Bertine Block (1891). These rowhouses bear a close stylistic resemblance to the Gerard. During the twentieth century Keister seems to have specialized in the design of theaters. These include the German-Renaissance style Astor Theatre (1906, demolished) on Broadway and West 45th Street, the neo-Classical style Selwyn at 229 West 42nd Street (1918), the Balasco Theatre (originally David Balasco's Stuyvesant Theatre, 1906-07), a Colonial Revival style building with elegant interior spaces, located next to the Gerard, and the Apollo (1912-13), one of Harlem's great cultural monuments.

The 1893 design of the Gerard coincided with the opening of the Worlds Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This world's fair firmly established Classical and Renaissance architectural sources as the preeminent design force in American architecture, hastening what had been a slow transition from the massive, earth-toned, picturesque forms of the Romanesque Revival to a lighter, more symmetrical type of architecture. The Gerard is a building that firmly marks this transition in architectural taste. A major portion of the softly modulated facade is designed in a late Romanesque Revival manner. The Gerard's tawny brown brick facing is punctuated with Gothic and Renaissance details; the Gothic and Renaissance forms chosen by Keister are not inspired by the Italian and French sources popular with his contemporaries, but are based on German precedents.

The picturesque juxtaposition of Romanesque forms with German Gothic and Renaissance details is typical of German architecture. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

the Renaissance dominated Italian architecture, but in Northern Europe, which did not have a strong classical tradition, the Renaissance never totally displaced medieval ideas and it is common to find a basically medieval building with Renaissance surface ornament. In Germany the Renaissance was less refined and more picturesque than in France and Italy. Keister's application of Renaissance details to a "medieval" structure shows a thorough understanding of the architecture of the Northern Renaissance. The most striking German motif on the Gerard is the pair of steep, sloping roof gables. This is a medieval German form particularly popular during the fifteenth century. Between these gables Keister has placed German Renaissance style dormers. These tall narrow features with their Ionic columns and rounded pediments, bristle with urns and they perfectly complement the gables.

The use of German forms was extremely rare in New York City outside of buildings designed specifically for the use of the German community such as the Ottendorfer Library and the German Dispensary (now the Stuyvesant Polyclinic) on Second Avenue near St. Mark's Place and Scheffel Hall (now Tuesday's Restaurant) at 190 Third Avenue. Besides Keister, the only architect in New York City to regularly use German-derived details was Henry Hardenbergh, such masterpieces as the Dakota Apartments at 1 West 72nd Street and the rowhouses at 13-67 West 73rd Street display German detailing.

Keister's choice of this rather unusual design vocabulary accords with his architectural philosophy. In an article published in the inaugural issue of Architectural Record in 1891 Keister noted his belief that good architecture need not be confined to a single style, writing that in a good design "different styles are not so distinctly separated that a composition may not have the characteristics of two or more styles."¹ Thus, Keister's combination of the forms of a late Romanesque Revival building with German Gothic and Renaissance details was appropriate for the creation of a distinguished design. Keister also believed that the "true Architect is no copyist, no stiff-thumbed duplicator of other's details and ideas."² The choice of these rarely used architectural motifs for the Gerard shows that Keister was not a "copyist," but an original and independent architect.

The Gerard was one of the first high-rise buildings to be erected on the West Side, north of 42nd Street. The west Midtown area had developed in the post-Civil War period as a residential area and the streets were lined with three- and four-story brownstone-fronted rowhouses designed primarily in the Italianate and Second Empire styles. This area remained a choice residential neighborhood until the late nineteenth century when commercial development began to move into the streets north of 42nd Street forcing the affluent residents of the area to move to the newly-developing neighborhoods north of 59th Street. West 44th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues was typical of the residential development of the area west of Fifth Avenue. The block consisted of solid rows of residential buildings interrupted on the north side by the Shaari Tephila Synagogue, erected in 1865. Remnants of these rowhouses survive at Nos. 143, 145, 147, and 153 West 44th Street.

The Gerard was built on the site of the Shaari Tephila Synagogue. This apartment hotel was in the vanguard of a development that was to completely change the character of the area in the next twenty-five years as it became a center for theaters and hotels. New York City's theater district had been slowly moving northward throughout the nineteenth century. By 1890 Broadway from Union Square to Long Acre Square (now Times Square) had become the center of the theater district. At the south end of the district, near Union Square, the theaters housed vaudeville and other forms of light entertainment, while the newer theaters to the north housed legitimate drama.³ The theaters just south of 42nd Street were erected in the 1880s and early 1890s and reflected the steady northward movement of the legitimate theater. The first theater to open in the area was the

Metropolitan Concert Hall on Broadway and West 41st Street which made its debut in 1880 with musical comedy and variety performances. This venture was unsuccessful and in 1888 the Concert Hall was replaced by the more traditional Broadway Theater. The Metropolitan Concert Hall was followed in 1882 by the Casino Theatre on Broadway and 39th Street, in 1883 by the great Metropolitan Opera House between 39th and 40th Streets, and by the Empire Theater on Broadway and 41st Street, the American Theatre at 260 West 42nd Street, and the Abbey Theatre on Broadway and 38th Street, all erected in 1893. It was clear by 1890 that the theater district was continuing to move northward and that theaters would soon be erected on Broadway north of 42nd Street. The Gerard was a harbinger of this development. One year after the Gerard's completion in 1894, Oscar Hammerstein opened the Olympia Theatre on Broadway between 44th and 45th Streets. Within a few years the Gerard was joined on West 44th Street by four other hotels, two theaters, and the Lamb's Club.

The construction of hotels has always been integrally linked to the development of the theater district. Hotels and theaters had a symbiotic relationship. The hotels housed those who were visiting New York to participate in its varied theatrical offerings, and also supplied a large audience of other visitors who were able to fill the theaters on a nightly basis. Some of these hotels were enterprising that catered to transients, but others were apartment hotels.

The apartment hotel was extremely popular in New York during the late nineteenth century. These hotels catered to visitors who were in residence for long periods of time. They were divided into suites and boasted elegant dining facilities. The guests at apartment hotels tended to be New York City residents who did not wish to be saddled with the responsibility of running a large private home, or affluent visitors who came to New York, usually on an annual basis, for long stays. In its discussion of hotel life in New York the British publication Pall Mall Magazine noted that cultivated Americans were spending less and less time in city residences which were becoming superfluous "when a perfectly appointed apartment, or suite of rooms in an hotel deluxe, may be engaged at any time, for a short or long period. Furthermore, the man who has 'made his pile' in Chicago, St. Louis, Denver or San Francisco, and consequently has plenty of money to spend, will surely visit with his family the financial and artistic centre of the country at least once a year, even if he cannot arrange to live there."⁴

Although not a "hotel deluxe," the Gerard catered to respectable people who wished to stay in New York for an extended period, but did not have a residence in the city. When it was completed, the Gerard had 132 suites of from two to five rooms with bath and 25 one-room bachelor's apartments. The Hotel was named for William G. Gerard, its manager, and it housed an extremely elegant 100-foot long dining room "done in the Italian Renaissance with striking features of marble and mosaics."⁵ This dining room was "the especial pride of the Gerard / with /...its plain American home cooking, liberal in quantity and wholesome in quality. French menus and foreign ideas do not prevail here."⁶ The irony of this is that the dining room now houses the restaurant known as Cafe Une-Deux-Troiz."

The Gerard's occupancy by respectable residents was short-lived and by the second decade of the twentieth century the building seems to have declined into what the New York Times euphemistically described as "a disorderly house."⁷ By about 1920 the hotel, had been renamed the Hotel Langwell; it later became the Hotel 1-2-3. Today, with the exception of the ground floor commercial space, the building is vacant.

The thirteen-story Gerard has a two-story limestone base that supports eleven stories faced with tawny brown Roman brick. The rusticated base once featured a one-story columned portico that ran across most of the front facade. This was removed in 1917 at which time the stores were probably added. The second floor, with its fourteen single rectangular window openings, remains intact. The upper stories of the building have a strong vertical emphasis that culminates in the steep gables and tall dormers. The third through the sixth floors form a single unit. The two central bays of this six-bay wide unit are composed in two sections. The third and fourth floors are faced with white terra-cotta and ornamented with Ionic pilasters. The shafts of the central pilasters are embellished with anthemion. A continuous stone balcony runs below the second floor and two round balconies project above the fourth floor. The fifth and sixth floors of this central section are comprised of three-sided, angular, brick bays separated by single Corinthian pilasters with decorated shafts. Flanking the central bays are shallow, rounded, brick bays, extending up four stories. At each floor in each bay are three rectangular windows with splayed brick lintels. Simple terra-cotta cornices crown each bay.

The seventh floor is the focal point of the midsection of the building and serves as a transition between the more restrained lower stories and the more complex upper stories and ornate roofline. In the center of this floor are two broad round arches that spring from the central pilasters described above. Three round-arched windows and two blind roundels are set within each arch. The arch spandrels are ornately decorated with terra-cotta foliage and a large central anthemion. To either side of the wide arches are four round-arched windows with simple terra-cotta enframements. Above these windows rise two-story bowed oriels that rest on elaborate terra-cotta corbels. These flank the flat eighth and ninth stories of the central section which are simply articulated by tall Ionic pilasters. Above these pilasters is a transitional tenth floor with short Ionic pilasters that support a cornice from which rise the spectacular central dormers. The dormers project from a mansard roof and each contains a two-story arched window flanked by Ionic columns and crowned by a deep cornice that is surmounted by a raised arched pediment. The dormers are flanked by low pedestals supported by pilasters. Nine urn pinnacles project from the dormers and pedestals. Flanking these dormers are the steeply-pitched three-story gables which are articulated by contrasting terra-cotta bands of varying widths. The skyline of the building was originally further enhanced by tall end chimneys, but these have been removed. The gabled and mansard roofs were originally further enhanced by tall end chimneys, but these have been removed. The gabled and mansard roofs were originally clad with Spanish tile that has also been removed. The side walls, which are visible from the street, are faced with common brick and have no notable ornamental decoration.

As in 1893, the Gerard dominates West 44th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. The handsome facade with carefully executed brickwork and curving bays and the striking gables and dormers make the Gerard among the most prominent buildings of the theater district. These architectural features characterize a rare stylistic example in American architectural history. In addition, the Gerard stands as a monument to the early development of the Times Square area as an entertainment center.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart
Sr. Landmarks Preservation Specialist

Report typed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. "Fads in Architecture," Architectural Record 1 (July-September, 1891), 49.
2. Ibid , 52.
3. See Mary Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, N.Y.: James T. White, 1973).
4. Walter T. Stephenson, "Hotels and Hotel Life in New York," Pall Mall Magazine, 31 (1903), 251.
5. New York Times, advertisement, September 8, 1895, p. 23.
6. New York Times, September 8, 1895, p. 23.
7. New York Times, March 6, 1915 p.18

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 Gerard 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 Gerard is an exceptionally fine example of an apartment hotel, a very popular building type in the late 19th century; that it was designed by architect George Keister in an unusual style that combines late Romanesque Revival and German Gothic and Renaissance forms to create a handsome and sophisticated work; that this design reflects Keister's architectural philosophy; that it was in the vanguard of the development of the Times Square area as the center of New York City's entertainment district and its construction is integrally related to that of the theater district; and that it is one of the more architecturally distinguished and visually prominent buildings in the west Midtown section of the city.

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 Gerard, 123 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 997, Lot 19, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fletcher, Banister. A History of Architecture. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).
- Keister, George. "Fads in Architecture." Architectural Record, 1 (July-September 1931), 49-61.
- King, Moses. King's Views of New York. New York: Moses King, 1896, p. 25.
- New York City. Department of Buildings. Plans, permits and docket.
- New York Times. September 8, 1895, p. 23; March 6, 1915, p.18
- Stephenson, Walter T. "Hotels and Hotel Life in New York." Pall Mall Magazine, 31 (1903) 250-260.

THE LANGWELL HOTEL, NEW YORK,

123-129 West 44th Street,
"Just Off Broadway" at Times Square,
L. Marshall Thompson, Pres. and Gen. Mgr.



"In the Heart of the Metropolis"

The Gerard/later Langwell Hotel
Old Post Card View
123 West 44th Street

Architect: George Keister

Date: 1893



The Gerard
123 West 44th Street

Architect: George Keister

Date: 1893