

CENTURY APARTMENTS, 25 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan.

Built 1931; architect Irwin S. Chanin.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1115, Lot 29.

On September 11, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Century Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Century Apartments, extending along the entire blockfront of Central Park West between West 62nd Street to West 63rd Street, anchors the southern end of one of New York City's finest residential boulevards. With twin towers rising 300 feet from the street, this building is one of a small group of related structures that help give Central Park West its distinctive silhouette. Designed in 1930 by Irwin S. Chanin of the Chanin Construction Company, the Century Apartments is among the most sophisticated residential Art Deco buildings in New York and is a major work by one of America's pioneering Art Deco designers.

Built in 1931, the Century was among the last buildings erected as part of the early 20th-century redevelopment of Central Park West. Central Park West, a continuation of Eighth Avenue, runs along the western edge of Central Park. Development along this prime avenue occurred very slowly, lagging substantially behind the general development of the Upper West Side. When Frederick Law Olmsted laid out Central Park he saw that the presence of the park would raise the value of land immediately adjacent to it. Olmsted expected these areas to develop as prime residential streets. Land speculation did indeed occur on Central Park West. However, the west side of the park never attracted the extremely wealthy people who could afford the inflated prices of land bordering on the park. Thus, while the side streets of the Upper West Side were built up with rows of speculative houses, Central Park West remained largely undeveloped. A survey of Central Park West published in February 1893 shows that of the three blocks between 60th and 96th Streets (the American Museum of Natural History, located between 77th and 81st Streets is counted as one block) nineteen were either totally vacant or contained old shanties and frame houses. Other blocks were partially vacant. South of 71st Street every blockfront was empty except for the southernmost frontages which contained the Durland Riding Academy and the Van Norman Institute.¹

The earliest residential improvement on Central Park West, and one of its great architectural monuments was the Dakota, a designated New York City Landmark, at 72nd Street. Built in 1880-84, this eight-story building established Central Park West's character as a street of multiple dwellings. In 1890, by which time the Dakota had been joined by two apartment hotels, the St. Remo on 75th Street and the Beresford on 81st Street, as well as several flat houses,² real estate broker F. R. Houghton noted that:

Central Park West seems to have only one future-- it is destined to become an avenue of grand apartment houses and hotels. Everything tends that way. It is too public a thoroughfare to become a private residential avenue ³

However, it wasn't until several years later that Central Park West experienced the construction boom that Houghton had predicted.

The first concentrated building boom on Central Park West occurred at the turn of the century when a significant number of elegant residential and institutional buildings were erected south of 96th Street. These include some of the finest apartment houses in New York, such as the Prasada (1904) at 65th Street, the Langham (1905) at 73rd Street, the Kenilworth (1908) at 75th Street, and the St. Urban (1904) at 89th Street, as well as such institutional structures as the Ethical Culture Society School and Meeting House (1902, 1909) at 63rd and 64th Streets, Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church (1903) at 65th Street, the Second Church of Christ, Scientist (1898) at 68th Street, the Congregation Shearith Israel Synagogue (1895) at 70th Street, the Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity (1898) at 76th Street, and the Progress Club (now the Walden School, 1902) at 88th Street. The presence of these fine apartment buildings and institutions on Central Park West reflects the coming of age of the Upper West Side. The Upper West Side had developed in the final decades of the 19th century as an enclave of upper middle-class life. Affluent middle-class families were attracted to the area by the quality of its housing, the presence of Riverside Park and Central Park, and by the accessibility of the neighborhood. As the Upper West Side became more and more desirable, developers began to build on the more expensive sites bordering the parks, and Central Park West began to be transformed into an elegant avenue of tall buildings that contrasted dramatically in scale to low rise residential Fifth Avenue. ⁴

In 1909 the new Central Park West apartment houses and institutions were joined by one of New York City's most sumptuous buildings, the New Theatre designed by Carrère & Hastings. This elegant limestone structure extended along the entire blockfront between 62nd Street and 63rd Street and was erected to house a subsidized theater company that would be artistically and physically separate from the commercial theaters centered around Times Square. This was not a successful artistic venture and the effort to establish a classical theater company at the New Theatre failed. In 1911 the theater was renamed the Century and it became a commercial house, albeit one located far from the commercial theater center. In 1920 the Shubert Organization gained control of the theater, and they managed it until its sale to the Chanin Construction Company in 1930.

During World War I construction on Central Park West slowed, but between 1920 and 1931 the area was transformed as the vacant sites were filled and many of the early apartment hotels and flats were replaced by new apartment houses. This final phase of Central Park West's development culminated in 1929-31 with the construction of the four twin-towered buildings that gave Central Park West its characteristic skyline. The distinctive form of the Century at 62nd and 63rd Streets, the Majestic (1930) at 71st-72nd Streets, the San Remo (1929) at 74th-75th Streets, and the Eldorado (1929) at 90th-91st Streets has come to symbolize the high quality of residential design of New York's Upper West Side. ⁵

Two of these great twin-towered buildings, the Majestic and Century, are Art Deco style structures designed and constructed by Irwin S. Chanin, one of New York City's leading builders and a pioneer in the design of Art Deco buildings

in America. Irwin Salmon Chanin was born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Soon after his birth the family returned to its native Ukraine, remaining there until 1907 when they moved back to Bensonhurst. Chanin graduated from Cooper Union in 1915 having studied engineering and architecture. His earliest employment was as an engineer working on subway construction in New York and Philadelphia. In 1919, after a brief stint in the army, Chanin began his building activities by constructing two houses in Bensonhurst. The success of this modest venture led to the construction of other one- and two-family houses in Bensonhurst as well as the formation of the Chanin Construction Company. In 1924 Chanin entered the real estate field in Manhattan with the erection of the Fur Center Building. Also in that year Chanin began the construction of the first of a series of Broadway theaters. These theaters--all designed by architect Herbert Krapp--the 46th Street, Biltmore, Mansfield (now Brooks Atkinson), Royale, Majestic, and Masque (now Golden) have excellent sightlines and acoustics and only a single balcony; they remain among the finest Broadway houses. Chanin also built three large movie houses--the Loew's Coney Island (1925), Reilly & Hall, architects; the Roxy (1927), Walter Ahlschlager, architect; and the Beacon (1927-28), Walter Ahlschlager, architect. In 1925 Chanin spent four weeks in Paris visiting the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes. This decorative arts exhibition had a profound influence on American architecture as American architects began to adapt the ornamental forms they had seen in Paris to their buildings. The first architects in the United States to use what have come to be known as Art Deco forms on major architectural works were Chanin and Ely Jacques Kahn, both of whom had visited the Paris exhibition.⁶ Art Deco motifs first appear in Chanin's work at the Lincoln Hotel (now the Milford Plaza Hotel) built in 1927 as part of a complex of buildings that included the Royale, Majestic, and Masque Theatres. The Lincoln was a traditionally styled structure designed by Schwartz & Gross. For the lobby and dining room, however, Chanin designed Art Deco wall panels and furnishings. The Lincoln Hotel interiors were followed by the Chanin Building of 1927-29 located at the southwest corner of East 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue. At the time the Chanin Building was designed, Chanin was not a registered architect. Chanin hired Sloan & Robertson, a rather conservative architectural firm responsible for the nearby Graybar Building, to examine the plans prepared by the Chanin Construction Company. Sloan & Robertson were only responsible for the exterior form of the building. Chanin personally supervised the decoration of the building. The building is filled with French-inspired Art Deco motifs, many executed under Chanin's direction by French-trained sculptor Rene Chambellan.

In 1930 Chanin became a registered architect and he was responsible for the design of the two Central Park West apartment buildings, but both projects had their genesis in plans for other building types. In April 1929, the Chanin Construction Company purchased the old Hotel Majestic on Central Park West between 71st Street and 72nd Street, intending to replace the old structure with a 45-story hotel.⁷ As designed, this was a dramatically-massed Art Deco structure, but the building situation in New York following the stock market crash precluded the construction of such an ambitious and risky project. In June 1930 it was announced that a 29-story twin-towered apartment house would rise on the site. According to Chanin, the design of this building was somewhat experimental--he wished to see if Art Deco forms would be accepted for a residential building.

Chanin's official involvement with the Century site began on May 28, 1929, when it was announced that the Chanin Construction Company would purchase the entire city block bounded by Broadway, Central Park West, West 62nd Street, and West 63rd Street. The site included the Century Theatre on Central Park West, Daly's Theatre on 63rd Street, and an apartment house and two garages on Broadway. Chanin announced that he would build a 65-story skyscraper on the site, that would, according to the New York Times, "be revolutionary in design and use."⁸ The Century Theatre was the property of the Shubert Organization, and in order to acquire the Central Park West site, Chanin was forced to sell them his interest in the Royale, Masque, and Majestic Theatres. The Shubert Organization had purchased a half interest in these theaters in 1928 and, according to Chanin, had had an interest in acquiring full control.

In August 1929 Chanin announced specific plans for the newly acquired Century Theatre site. He proposed to build an office and hotel that would be "an innovation in international relations."⁹ The building, to be known as the Palais de France, was to house the French consulate and tourist board, and the offices of French commercial firms. Chanin was to design the new building which would be in a "modern French [style] adapted to the exigencies of American skyscraper construction."¹⁰ In other words, this was to be an Art Deco style building using forms similar to those already in evidence at the Chanin Building. The building was to have three stories of permanent exhibition space for the display of French manufactured goods and for an international display of automobiles, airplanes, and yachts. There would also be shops on the ground floor. The next 27 stories were to be a hotel, while the top 30 stories were to be the French offices. The conception of a Palais de France for New York reflects Chanin's interest in France and French culture. He wished to provide a building where French and American art and commerce could be united. While Chanin was impressed with European, and particularly French, modern design, he felt that America had successfully adapted these forms to create its own design idiom:

While Europe is the motherland in the development of the so-called modernistic tendencies in design, it is my own opinion that America is rationalizing these ideas and is making them fit into the scheme of things more successfully than Europe. I did not see abroad any modernistic interiors or furniture that approaches either in beauty or usefulness that which is becoming fairly common in New York.¹¹

The Palais de France was to unite a modern American structure with the finest modern French products.

Chanin and banker S.W. Straus traveled to France to arrange the sale of the Century site to the French. Negotiations seemed to be progressing, but no money was forthcoming from French banks, and in October 1930, Chanin announced that the Palais de France scheme had been dropped and that he would build a twin-towered apartment house similar in concept to the Majestic, then under construction. This building was to contain small apartments of from two to seven rooms "to meet the demand for this type of housing accommodation along Central Park West."¹² According to Irwin Chanin the Century's apartments are smaller than those of earlier buildings because of the difficulty in renting large apartments during the Depression. The earlier Majestic had large apartments, some of which were difficult to rent and so the Century was planned with

smaller, but still carefully laid out units.¹³ The Century, designed a year after the Majestic, is considered by Chanin to be a finer work. He particularly noted that the crown of Century is a more complex creation and that the building has finer bay windows and balconies, and special glass.¹⁴

The Century was the last of the four great Central Park West twin-towered apartment buildings. It is these buildings which prompted the New York Times to write that the west side "skyline bids fair to be ere long as beautifully fantastic as it is where the river mingles in the bay."¹⁵ The tower forms of the Century, Majestic, San Remo, and Eldorado came about as a result of the multiple dwelling law passed by the New York State Legislature in 1929. This law mandated an increase in yard and court area, but allowed residential buildings to rise higher than before, legalizing setbacks and towers in this building type for the first time. The bill limited the height of street walls to 1½ time the width of the street, but, on plots of over 25,000 square feet, allowed towers that could rise up to three times the width of the street.

The Century is a sophisticated essay in "modern American" or Art Deco design. The facade exhibits a complex balance of horizontal and vertical elements that creates a dynamic design tension. The nineteen-story superstructure forms a street wall that hugs the lot line on all three main elevations and lines up with the older pre-1929 buildings on Central Park West, while the towers rise up to proclaim the advent of a new zoning scheme and a modern style of architecture. The bands of tan and light brown brick, the long corner windows, and the cantilevered balconies lend a strong horizontal force to the design, but these are balanced by the vertical thrust of the projecting bowed window bays with their vertical brick ornament, by the rust-colored brick spandrel panels, and by the recessed window bays of the towers. The geometric masses that crown the towers also display this complex balance of horizontal and vertical forms. On a smaller scale, the pattern of window mullions echoes the balance of horizontal and vertical elements found elsewhere. This is particularly true at the corner solaria with their strong horizontal mullions and rhythm of narrow and wider vertical mullions. These solaria are an important feature of the Century's design, and they, along with the other windows of the building, were equipped with a special imported English glass that allowed ultra-violet rays into the apartments. Much of the Century's interest lies in the manipulation of such structural features as the brickwork, windows, bays, and balconies. Ornament, placed sparingly on the exterior, is used to highlight major focal points of the building such as the entrances, setbacks, and crowns. It is the crowns, visible from Central Park and as far east as Fifth Avenue, that are, appropriately, given the most dramatic ornamental form. The buttressed crowns with their corner fins and arched rear projections are one of New York City's major architectural adornments.

When it opened, the Century contained 417 suites and 1,688 rooms. Among its special features were sunken drawing rooms with fireplaces, creak-proof floors of walnut and selected hardwoods, free standing showers, duplex suites, and lobbies adjacent to the three entrances that displayed the finest in contemporary American design. In addition, there was a private landscaped garden located within the U-shaped plan of the building. The garden walls are faced with the same brick used for the street facades, reflecting Chanin's effort to have the eighty-foot wide garden take on the form of a street, so that when residents looked out of their garden windows they did not have the feeling of living in a

dark court. The quality of the Century's design and its location near Midtown offices and the theater district have attracted many prominent tenants including members of the Chanin family, Ethel Merman, Lee Shubert, Nanette Fabray, Jack Dempsey, Joey Heatherton, Mark Connolly, Theodore Sorenson, Carol Lawrence, Robert Goulet, Bill Cullin, and Leo Lindy (of cheesecake fame).

Description

The Century Apartments faces onto Central Park West between 62nd and 63rd Streets and extends back 250 feet on both side streets. The massing of this 30-story building is divided into a massive nineteen-story base that runs along the lot line on all three elevations and a pair of tall towers set at the Central Park West corners. The structure rests on a low rose-colored granite watertable, above which is a one- and two-story ochre-colored stone base. In the center of the Central Park West facade, the one-story stone base is pierced by the main entrance. The lobby is entered through a pair of glass doors protected by stylized geometric Art Deco style grilles of "white metal." The doors are set within a modest white metal enframement. The entrance ensemble is surrounded by the same rose-colored granite used on the watertable. This surround is framed by quoin-like forms ending in raised vertical moldings. To either side of the entrance are window groups and doors leading to professional apartments. There are stores at either corner. The storefronts are not original, but they are set within the original openings. The commercial space at the 62nd Street corner was originally planned to house a bank, but due to the Depression the two-story space remained vacant. After World War II the space was divided and an apartment was created on the second floor.

In its massing and ornamentation the Century Apartments displays a sophisticated balance between horizontal and vertical elements. Vertically, the main mass of the symmetrical apartment house can be divided into five pavilions, each separated by shallow bow windows. The three central sections are faced with a tan brick that was chosen because of its resemblance to the color of limestone. The facade is enlivened with wide bands of light brown brick set between all of the windows with the exception of those beside the vertical bowed bays at either end. The central pavilion, above the entrance, is articulated by two windows on each of the floors between two and fifteen (exterior floor numbers may not always correspond with the interior numbering system). As with all of the windows of the building the sash consists of metal casements. Each window is divided into several movable and stationary panes by thin metal mullions. The balance between the vertical and horizontal mullions echoes the overall balance of the building. In the central section each window consists of two movable casements. Long rectangular panes flank the casements while four stationary panes are set above and four jalousie windows are set below. There are concrete sill bands below each window.

Flanking the central section and separated from it by pairs of bowed window bays are pavilions that consist of pairs of small single casement windows and a double casement. The bowed bays rise vertically from the second floor. Bands of tan and light brown brick are located between the bays of each pair. The bowed window of each apartment is set below the level of the other windows indicating the presence of sunken drawing (living)rooms. Each of the bow windows is divided into five parts with three narrow casements flanked by stationary panes. There are fixed transoms above and jalousies below. The bays are enlivened by the use of rust-colored brick spandrels ornamented with vertical bands of

projecting bricks laid at an angle. The rows of angled bricks continue the vertical lines of the window mullions. Each window in the bay has a concrete sill and a brick lintel.

The corner sections of the building are faced entirely in tan brick and are articulated by large glass solaria. The end pavilions are separated from the central portion of the building by single bowed bays identical in form to those already described. These bays rise to the seventeenth floor, two stories higher than the central bays. Each solarium consists of eight windows on Central Park West and three on the side street. With the exception of the end panes on Central Park West all of these are movable casements. These large window groups have strongly articulated horizontal metal mullions and a rhythm narrow and wider mullions.

The sixteenth through nineteenth floors form a transitional zone between the main mass of the building and the towers above. Each of these floors contains cantilevered concrete balconies guarded by metal railings ornamented with Art Deco style chevron patterns.

The twin towers soar upwards to the ornamental crowns that identify the building from afar. The towers are faced with tan brick with light brown bands at the corners. The windows, with their metal mullions, are of the type discussed above. On Central Park West, beginning above the twentieth floor, the four central windows of each tower are ornamented by bold geometric brick patterns. At the thirtieth floor each tower sets back to form the unique top that gives the Century its distinctive, recognizable silhouette. Like the massing and ornamentation of the facades and the arrangement of the windows these crowns exhibit a complex interaction of horizontal and vertical elements. Each consists of a main geometric mass (housing a water tower) that is supported by buttresses. The vertical thrust of the buttresses is countered by concrete fins that straddle each corner of the towers. At the northwest corner of the north tower and the corresponding southwest corner of the south tower arched projections with incised channels rise almost to the roofline (that to the south has been poorly rebuilt). These add to the dynamic silhouette of each tower.

The side street elevations of the Century step down in accordance with zoning rules. There are four major levels on each side street elevation, each of which is topped by projecting concrete balconies. The tan brick facades are interrupted in three locations by pairs of ornamental rust-colored brick window spandrels. On the ground floor are a succession of doors leading to professional offices and secondary residential entrances similar in design to that of the front elevation. At the rear, on each street, are geometric Art Deco gates leading to the service entrances. Geometric water tower pavilions, similar in form to the tower crowns, are located above the roofline of each side street facade.

The main mass of the Century is laid out on a U-shaped plan with a central garden that is visible from the public park and drive of the Lincoln Plaza Apartments off Broadway. The inner elevations of the Century are faced with the same tan brick used elsewhere and are articulated with a similar fenestration pattern. The use of the same face brick on the private inner court that was used for the public facades was unusual and evinces a desire on Mr. Chanin's part to design and build a building of the highest residential quality. The

court created by the U-shaped plan was laid out as a garden for the enjoyment of the tenants. This garden, with its four brick pylons, survives.

There have been only two serious alterations to the Century since its completion. These are the alteration to the arched fin of the south tower, previously noted, and the removal of the original windows and brickwork from the twentieth and twenty-first floors of the Central Park West elevation of the south tower. Other alterations have occurred to the windows of the north tower penthouse and to several other apartment windows.

The Century Apartments stands today as a testament to the vision of architect and builder Irwin S. Chanin. In its characteristic twin-towered form, it remains one of the landmarks of Central Park West and is one of the major Art Deco style apartment buildings in America.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart

FOOTNOTES

1. Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, 51 (February 11, 1893), Supplement, p.20.
2. The St. Remo and Beresford were both replaced in the late 1920s by the present buildings of the same names. These two residential hotels were joined by 1893 by the Majestic between 71st and 72nd Streets. Of the flat houses erected by 1890 only one, at 227 Central Park West (1888), survives.
3. Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, 46 (December 20, 1890), Supplement, p.29.
4. The first apartment building on Fifth Avenue north of 59th Street was 997 Fifth Avenue at 81st Street of 1910-12.
5. Also of note on the Central Park West skyline is the Beresford (1929) at 82nd street with its three square towers.
6. For a more detailed study of the Art Deco, see Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (NY: Oxford University Press, 1975). Raymond Hood's American Radiator Building (1924) with its modernistic Gothic forms is also considered to be related to the Art Deco style.
7. New York Times, April 26, 1929, p.1.
8. New York Times, May 29, 1929, p.1.
9. New York Times, August 13, 1929, p.1.
10. Ibid.
11. New York Times, September 22, 1929, Section 13, p.1.
12. New York Times, October 24, 1930, p.43
13. Interview with Irwin S. Chanin, July 8, 1985.
14. Interview with Irwin S. Chanin, June 26, 1985.
15. New York Times, October 26, 1930, Section 10, p.12.

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 Century Apartments 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 Century Apartments, built in 1931, is one of the major Art Deco style apartment

buildings in America; that it stands today as a testament to the vision of its architect and builder Irwin S. Chanin and is one of his finest works; that with its twin-towered form, enabled by the 1929 multiple dwelling law, it is one of a small group of related structures that help give Central Park West its distinctive silhouette; ; that the Century is a sophisticated essay in Art Deco design, exhibiting a complex balance of horizontal and vertical elements that creates a dynamic design tension; that this is expressed in the manipulation of such structural features as brickwork, windows, bays, and balconies; that the towers with their crowns are one of New York City's major architectural adornments; and that the Century Apartments continue to symbolize the high quality of residential design on New York's Upper West Side.

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 Century Apartments, 25 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1115, Lot 29, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agrest, Diana, ed. A Romance With The City: Irwin S. Chanin. NY: Cooper Union Press, 1982.

Chanin, Irwin S. Interview, June 26, 1985, and July 8, 1985.

"Century Pictorial," 1(n.d.), promotional newsletter.

New York Times. April 26, 1929, p.1; May 29, 1929 p.1; July 3, 1929,p.19; August 13, 1929, p.1; September 22, 1929, Section 8, p.1; October 13, 1929, p.35; June 8, 1930, Section 12, p.1; June 29, 1930, Section 11, p.1; October 24, 1930, p.43; October 24, 1930, p.43; October 26, 1930, Section 10, p.12; November 9, 1930, Section 13, p.1; November 30, 1930, Section 12, p.1; January 3, 1932, Section 11, p.1.

Real Estate Record and Builders Guide. 46(December 20, 1890, Supplement); 51 (February 11, 1893, Supplement).

Robinson, Cervin and Rosemarie Haag Bletter. Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1975.



Century Apartments
25 Central Park West
Manhattan

Built: 1931
Architect: Irwin S. Chanin

Photo: Landmarks Preservation
Commission



Century Apartments
West 62nd Street facade

Photo: Philip Yam
Landmarks Preservation
Commission



Century Apartments
window detail

Photo: Philip Yam
Landmarks Preservation
Commission



Century Apartments
entrance detail

Photo: Philip Yam
Landmarks Preservation
Commission