

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
July 12, 1988; Designation List 206  
LP-1559

GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION, Manhattan.

Boundaries

The property bounded by a line extending southerly along the eastern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East, westerly along the southern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East to the midpoint of Gramercy Park East where it adjoins the boundary line of the Gramercy Park Historic District, northerly along the Gramercy Park East boundary line, easterly across Gramercy Park East to the northern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East, easterly along the northern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East to the point of beginning.

On November 12, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Gramercy Park Historic District Extension (Item No. 14). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twenty witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission received numerous letters in support of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The distinctive, Gothic style apartment building at 36 Gramercy Park East was built to the designs of the prominent architect James Riely Gordon in 1908-10. The building's fine Gothic detailing demonstrates one architect's response to the early twentieth-century quest for a proper way of expressing a tall building and is also a continuation of the tradition of Gothic architecture in the Gramercy Park Historic District. The terra-cotta cladding, popular because it allowed for the creation of elaborate detail at lower cost than stone, adapts particularly well to the intricate tracery, rope molding and other Gothic style details. Constructed for the Gramercy Park Club as a co-operative, the building followed earlier neighborhood precedents such as 34 Gramercy Park East, built in 1883 and one of the

city's first co-operative ventures. Number 36 rode the wave of early co-operative development which swept Manhattan during the first decade of the twentieth century. Because of its financial arrangements, the design of Number 36 was of a high caliber to attract investors to this refined residential neighborhood. Since its inception in the 1830s, Gramercy Park has been an elegant area, providing its residents with a unique sense of place within the bustling city. While the earliest buildings around the park were single family homes, apartment buildings and clubs were soon added. These taller buildings, such as number 34 and number 36 help define the boundaries of the park and contribute to the sense of it being a private enclave. All the buildings here tell "the story of urban residential development through examples which were among the best provided anywhere in the City for each period."<sup>1</sup> Thirty-six Gramercy Park East thus continues the architectural and historical traditions of the Gramercy Park Historic District.

### History of Gramercy Park<sup>2</sup>

Located on Manhattan's East Side in an area generally bounded by 18th to 21st Streets, and Park Avenue South to Third Avenue, Gramercy Park is a unique, quiet enclave set apart from the city's bustling business activity.

The land in this area was originally owned by Peter Stuyvesant and his heirs.<sup>3</sup> Part of his holdings were eventually purchased by James Duane, the first mayor of New York after the Revolution, and became known as Gramercy Farm. The name Gramercy is a corruption of the Dutch word "Crummashie" which was the name of a hill located near Governor Stuyvesant's farm. "Crummashie" in turn comes from the word "krom" meaning curved and "messie" meaning small knife and refers to the course of a small stream which ran in that vicinity.<sup>4</sup>

In 1831 lawyer and financier Samuel B. Ruggles bought Gramercy Farm and some adjoining property for development. Ruggles laid out the streets according to a grid plan, reserving Gramercy Park for the private use of residents of buildings facing it. Ruggles sold the lots surrounding the park with certain restrictions as to the size and type of dwelling which could be erected. This created an area with large, single-family residences, some built by owner-occupants, and some by speculators who sold or leased the buildings. From the first, Gramercy Park and the surrounding streets attracted fashionable society, while numerous artists and musicians found a home here as well.

Ruggles' covenants stipulated that no business activity could take place within the area, a condition which has been maintained to the present. Churches and institutions are allowed, however. The Evangeline Residence for Young Women,

Calvary Church, the Friends Meeting House (now the Brotherhood Synagogue), and several clubs, including the Players, the National Arts and the Columbia and Princeton Clubs have had their quarters here, either in private residences converted for their use or in buildings erected specifically for them. Numerous apartment buildings, many of them co-operatives, have been constructed around the park as the covenants did not exclude multi-family dwellings from this location.

### Development of the Co-Operative Apartment

Co-operatively owned apartment buildings existed in various European cities from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Among the earliest examples were those in Edinburgh; by mid-century others could be found in Vienna.<sup>5</sup> Co-operative apartments came much later to New York since it was not until late in the nineteenth century that apartment living became acceptable for people in the middle- and upper-income groups.

The housing situation in New York City at the the end of the nineteenth century was undergoing rapid and drastic changes. Residential areas were being taken over by businesses, with housing becoming increasingly expensive and single-family home construction being forced into more distant, northern locations. Thus apartments were, by necessity, becoming a more acceptable living solution for those who wanted to remain in the heart of the city. This rising cost of land for individual homes in the city, the shortage of capable domestic help, and the advent of spacious, well-designed apartments, brought a wealthier clientele to apartment life.<sup>6</sup> By 1893, it was noted that, "Apartment life is popular and to a certain extent fashionable. Even society countenances it, and a brownstone front is no longer indispensable to at least moderate social standing."<sup>7</sup>

Co-operatively-owned apartments became one way of making this new type of living arrangement more attractive to wealthy clients. The idea of being able to choose one's neighbors and thus achieve a certain degree of exclusivity was appealing.<sup>8</sup> In addition, co-operative ownership inspired better architecture than had generally been seen in New York apartments, since the owners would be living in the buildings and not just investing in them in hopes of a large profit. Co-operative owners turned to well-qualified architects and required that they create larger spaces with more luxurious details.<sup>9</sup>

### Early New York Co-Operative Ventures

The first co-operative apartment house in New York, The Rembrandt, was built in 1880 on West 57th Street. The next one, located at 80 Madison Avenue, was built in 1881.<sup>10</sup> The

Knickerbocker(1882), on Fifth Avenue at 28th Street, and the Gramercy Park Apartments(1883) at 34 Gramercy Park followed shortly after. The Gramercy Park, developed and promoted by Mr. Charles A. Gerlach, was quite successful, returning a large profit for its original investors.<sup>11</sup>

Many of these early co-operative apartments were developed by Hubert, Pirssen & Company, architects and builders, and carried the appellation Hubert Home Clubs. Home clubs differed from other co-operative apartments in that there was one central kitchen and dining room which offered food service for all the residents, and the general management was more like that of a club.<sup>12</sup> The Rembrandt was a Hubert Home Club, as were two buildings constructed in 1883, 121 Madison Avenue, and the Chelsea Apartments (now the Chelsea Hotel, a designated New York City Landmark) at 222 West 23rd Street.

The next co-operative venture, the Navarre Apartments, located between 58th and 59th Streets, on Seventh Avenue, was a financial disaster. Unlike the usual co-operative arrangement, the owners did not have sole control of the building, thus creating a difficult and ultimately unworkable arrangement.<sup>13</sup> Despite this organizational difference, the failure of the Navarre Apartments effectively put a stop to the further development of co-operative apartments until after the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1901 a group of artists formed a corporation to erect a co-operative apartment building which would provide large working studio space as well as living quarters. The result of their efforts was the 67th Street Studio Building, which was the precedent for several other artist co-operatives built in the following few years. The success of the artist co-operatives reintroduced this type of financing to the New York apartment scene.

Before long, the co-operative idea became accepted for middle-class housing as well as for more exclusive developments.<sup>14</sup> Developers were attracted to the idea because they could realize a quick return on their investment. The subscriptions of the members of the co-operative organization became the capital used to finance the project. In 1907 co-operative apartments were declared "a prominent feature of the realty situation" in New York.<sup>15</sup> Two years later The New York Times reported that fifteen to twenty co-operative apartments had been erected in New York during the preceding few years.<sup>16</sup> Thirty-six Gramercy Park East rode this wave of early co-operative development in New York City.

## History of the Site

The land adjoining the east side of Gramercy Park remained vacant until it was purchased in 1852 by Oscar Stebbins, who filled the blockfront with speculative residential buildings. The buildings in this row were combined in 1853, to become Sanderson's Family Hotel.<sup>17</sup> Thirty years later some of these buildings were taken down to make way for the Gramercy Park, at 34 Gramercy Park East, one of New York's first co-operative apartment buildings. Those remaining buildings, occupying lots 21-24, passed through the hands of numerous owners before being purchased by John Olson in 1908, for the site of the new apartment building.<sup>18</sup> Olson, as head of the Gramercy Park Construction Company, was the contractor for the building. Upon completion of the apartment house in 1910, title to the land was turned over to the Gramercy Park Club, a corporation formed to run the building.

## 36 Gramercy Park East

Although 36 Gramercy Park East followed in the developing tradition of New York co-operative apartments, its financial arrangements were slightly different from the norm. At this time in New York, co-operatives were generally arranged so that the initial subscribers purchased 40-45% of the total apartments. The rest of the apartments were retained as rental units with the payments used for building maintenance.<sup>19</sup> At 36 Gramercy Park East, all of the apartments were purchased outright, leaving no outside source of income. "The advantages apparent in this form of co-operative ownership are that it requires an investment smaller by one-half and fixes, as nearly as may be, the annual expense to each individual. The operation of the club house puts each owner in direct touch with the property, its receipts and expenses, and he is required to pay only his proportionate part of the taxes and other annual expenses and no more, precisely as he would do if the owner of a single-family private dwelling."<sup>20</sup>

The architect for the new structure, James Riely Gordon, designed a twelve-story, U-shaped apartment house clad in glazed terra cotta and decorated with Gothic forms. The deep, central well creates the effect of two slim towers, emphasizing the building's verticality, while the building's complex Gothic detailing lends rich historical associations and continues the tradition of Gothic architecture in Gramercy Park. Terra cotta, then achieving its zenith for architectural use, was easily adapted to this building's elaborate decorative scheme. By 1910, a trade magazine noted, "An unusually large proportion of architectural terra cotta has been used in the buildings erected this year."<sup>21</sup>

Architectural terra cotta began to gain popularity in this country in the 1870s. In the rebuilding of Chicago after the Great Fire, terra cotta was used extensively for its fireproof qualities and for its decorative effect when blended with brick. In other, less populous cities terra cotta was appreciated for its light weight, ease of transport, and the ability to create ornamentation when there was a lack of skilled craftsmen. Later in the decade the material finally came to be used in some eastern cities. H.H. Richardson in Boston, and Stone & Carpenter in Providence, among others, started to employ it. In 1877 George B. Post, an early New York proponent, designed a residence on 36th Street, near Madison Avenue for James B. Smith. This building was described as, "the first strictly architectural terra cotta building in the City of New York."<sup>22</sup> The following year Post used terra cotta on the Long Island Historical Society Building (now Brooklyn Historical Society), further advancing its visibility and acceptance. Other architects gradually came to accept this material and its use became more widespread, as locally applied ornament (34 Gramercy Park East is an example), as fireproofing material, and finally, as a material to clad entire facades. An early example of the latter was the Bayard-Condict Building on Bleecker Street (a designated New York City landmark), built in 1897-99 and designed by Louis Sullivan of Chicago.

Terra-cotta cladding made buildings fireproof. Glazed terra-cotta buildings brightened the neighborhood as well as their own interiors because of their light reflecting ability. And by using terra cotta, architects gained great freedom of expression in the amount and diversity of ornament. By 1909, when 36 Gramercy Park East was being built, Liberty Tower (a designated New York City Landmark) designed by Henry Ives Cobb, was also reaching skyward in downtown Manhattan. Covered on three sides with white, glazed terra cotta and finished with Gothic-style details, this building was similar in concept to the design of 36 Gramercy Park East. The Gothic style was only one of numerous historical trends popular during this early part of the century, and it seemed to many to express particularly well the verticality of the skyscrapers which were rising ever higher. Terra cotta was particularly well suited to the intricate tracery and other complex patterns found in this style. This architectural trend culminated in the soaring expression of the Woolworth Building (a designated New York City landmark) designed by Cass Gilbert in 1911-13.

All this building activity kept numerous terra-cotta manufacturing companies in business. Many had their factories in New Jersey, with the ability to ship finished materials to Manhattan by boat. Several of the more popular and well-known companies included Standard Terra-Cotta Company, one of the largest in the east, New Jersey Terra-Cotta Company, Perth Amboy

Terra-Cotta Company (which produced the materials used on the Bayard-Condit Building), and the firm that produced tiles for 36 Gramercy Park East as well as Liberty Tower and the Woolworth Building, the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company.

James Riely Gordon (1863-1937)<sup>23</sup>

Raised and educated in Texas, Gordon received his early architectural training in the office of Texas architect W. C. Dobson. He worked for several years in the office of the U. S. Supervising Architect, overseeing the construction of a number of governmental buildings. Later he opened an independent practice in San Antonio, and beginning in 1904, joined the firm of Tracy & Swartwout in New York. During this time the firm achieved some prominence in the design field, producing plans for banks, offices, hotels and public buildings in many cities, such as the Denver Post Office and Courthouse. In New York, buildings to their credit included a hotel at 780 Madison Avenue (within the Upper East Side Historic District), a home club-apartment building at 11-15 East 45th Street (1906, demolished), and 36 Gramercy Park East. By 1912 Gordon opened his own office in New York from which issued designs for buildings of many types, including hospitals, prisons, churches and hotels. His interest and expertise in public buildings continued throughout his career. During his many years of architectural practice, Gordon designed seventy-two courthouse buildings, including the state capitals of Arizona and Mississippi (with the firm of Link & Haire). Gordon was responsible for the design of the Texas State Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 for which he received the Congressional Medal. He served thirteen terms as president of the New York Society of Architects.

Description

Thirty-six Gramercy Park East rises through twelve stories and a penthouse, and creates, along with its neighbor at 34 Gramercy Park East, a building wall which helps define the eastern boundary of the park. A U-shaped building, the facade of 36 Gramercy Park East is clad in white, glazed terra cotta above a granite basement, while those elevations visible above adjoining buildings are faced with unadorned brick. The brick bearing walls are spanned by steel channels and Guy B. Waite hollow paneled concrete arches. Each wing of the "U" is two bays wide and two bays deep and is emphasized by deep, spiral rope moldings which define each corner of the building. The entrance is centrally located in the well of the "U", which is also two bays wide. The visual emphasis of the building is vertical as the projecting oriel windows continue from the fourth through the

through the tenth stories. The verticality is broken by elaborately decorated cornices above the second, third and tenth stories.

The basement of the building is finished with dressed ashlar granite with square-headed windows faced with metal grates. A shallow water table divides this section of the building from the stories above, while the areaway fence consists of a horizontal bronze railing between low stone posts. Light fixtures originally capped each of these posts but have been removed. At present two life-sized knights in silver-painted armour, each carrying a lamp, stand atop the two inside posts.

The entrance is centrally located in the recessed section of the "U". A large, non-historic canvas canopy extends to the lot line, from the doorway which is set within a projecting, square, pinnacled porch. A large, ornate pointed arch reaches above the roof of the porch over the opening. Narrow, arched windows open on either side of the entrance.

The front and side facades of the "U" are identical, as is the recessed center section, above the second story. Stories one and two are grouped together under a foliate cornice above the second story. Within this section, the windows are linked vertically within each of the two bays. A deep, ogee molding tops each bay while the tripartite windows are joined by a spandrel covered with ornate tracery. One-over-one windows are deeply recessed within this framework.

The third story is set off by a broad cornice with interlocking trefoil molding. Each bay on this story is composed of two windows with basket-handle arches, each under its own deep ogee molding and joined by a thin colonnette.

Projecting oriels begin at the fourth story and run continuously to the tenth story where each terminates as a balcony in front of recessed windows. These windows are framed by basket-handle arches and are capped by broad ogee moldings as well. The oriels take the shape of half hexagons in section, with a single, one-over-one window on each of the three sides. The spandrels between each story are decorated with putti and heraldic shields. On alternate stories the shields are rounded on the bottom and capped by crowns, or pointed on the bottom and plain.

A broad cornice lies between the tenth and eleventh stories, punctuated by a projecting gargoyle atop each of the three piers. Applied vertical elements in the shape of corbelled colonnettes extend down for one story from each of the gargoyles. Above this cornice, the fenestration pattern is similar to that of the oriels below, but with a lesser projection. The windows in the two bays of the eleventh and twelfth stories are grouped



stories. Between the two bays, are three, two-story niches, each topped by a gargoyle. The building's largest cornice caps the twelfth story with a wide band of molding in a tracery design and deep projections. Above this cornice, at each corner of the two wings rises a stylized knight with a shield. Originally there were a series of these knights, linked by a balustrade but most were removed when recessed penthouses were added to the building in 1917.<sup>24</sup> These penthouses are not visible from the street.

### Recent History

Thirty-six Gramercy Park East was owned by the Gramercy Park Club from 1910 until 1946. The corporation had by then gone bankrupt and the building was sold to an individual and the apartments became rental units, a situation which continues to the present.<sup>25</sup>

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### NOTES

1. LPC, Gramercy Park Historic District Report, (New York: 1966), 2.
2. Information about the history of the Gramercy Park area was abstracted from LPC, Gramercy Park Historic District Designation Report, and other materials in the Landmarks Preservation Commission research files.
3. "A Distinctive Residence Neighborhood," Real Estate Record & Guide, (Nov. 25, 1911), 781-82; LPC, Gramercy Park Historic District Designation Report; Stephen S. Garmey, "No. 36 Gramercy Park East," (typescript in the LPC research files,

n.d.).

4. D. H. Valentine, Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York for 1856, (New York, 1856), 465; and Garmey report, 2; New York City Guide, American Guide Series, (New York, 1970), 191; "Origin of 'Gramercy Park.'," NYT, Mar. 22, 1909, p.6.
5. Allan L. Benson, "The Spread of the 'Own-Your-Own-Apartment' Idea'," NYT, July 25, 1909, p.9.
6. Elisha Harris Janes, "The Development of Duplex Apartments,- I. The Early Type," The Brickbuilder, 21 (June, 1912), 159.
7. Moses King, King's Handbook of New York City (Boston, 1892), 217.
8. Elisha Harris Janes, " The Development of Duplex Apartments.-III. Residential Type," The Brickbuilder, 21 (Aug., 1912), 203.
9. "Apartment Houses," The American Architect, 100 (Nov. 29, 1911), 229-30.
10. "Principles of Co-Operative Building," Real Estate Record & Guide (Sept. 24, 1910), 483.
11. "Co-Operative Houses," Real Estate Record & Guide (Sept. 28, 1907), 474.
12. C. W. Buckham, "The Present and Future Development of the Apartment House," The American Architect, 100 (Nov. 29, 1911), 224.
13. Benson, 9.
14. "Co-operative Building Seeking Wider Field," NYT, Feb. 10, 1907, p.16.
15. RER&G, (Sept. 28, 1907).
16. Payson M. Merrill, "Recent Developments of Cooperative Apartments," NYT, Apr. 25, 1909, p.2.
17. RER&G, (Nov. 25, 1911).
18. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Mortgages, Liber 142, p. 243.
19. RER&G, (Sept. 24, 1910).

20. "Newest Form of Residential Construction," RER&G, (Oct. 23, 1909), 720.
21. "Personal News and Trade Gossip," RER&G, (Oct. 29, 1910), 701.
22. "A Review of Architectural Terra-Cotta," A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York, (1898; rpt. New York, 1967), 516.
23. This information on the life of James Riely Gordon was compiled from obituaries in American Architect, 150 (March, 1937) 143, and NYT, Mar 17, 1937, p.26; and listings in Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects, ed. Adolf K. Placzek, vol.2 (New York, 1982), 232; and Henry F. Withey and Elsie R. Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased) (Los Angeles, 1970), 241-42.
24. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 876, Lot 21. Alt 1114-17.
25. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Mortgages, Liber 4464, p. 420 and Liber 4819, p. 244.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Gramercy Park Historic District Extension, along with the Gramercy Park Historic District, has a special character and special historical interest and value which represent one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the building at 36 Gramercy Park East is an important and integral part of the Gramercy Park Historic District; that, built in 1908-10 to the designs of the prominent architect James Riely Gordon, its distinguished facade is rich with Gothic-style ornamentation, continuing a tradition of Gothic architecture in Gramercy Park; that the design is finely executed in glazed terra cotta, a material which was popular during the first decade of the twentieth century, for its adaptability to elaborate detailing at low cost; that terra cotta lent itself particularly well to the intricate Gothic details of this building; that 36 Gramercy Park East, intended to be a co-operative for the Gramercy Park Club, was built during a wave of co-operative construction during the early twentieth century, which developed from, in part, the successful development of the building next door at 34 Gramercy Park East; and that this building follows in the tradition of fine architecture for which the Gramercy Park Historic District is noted.

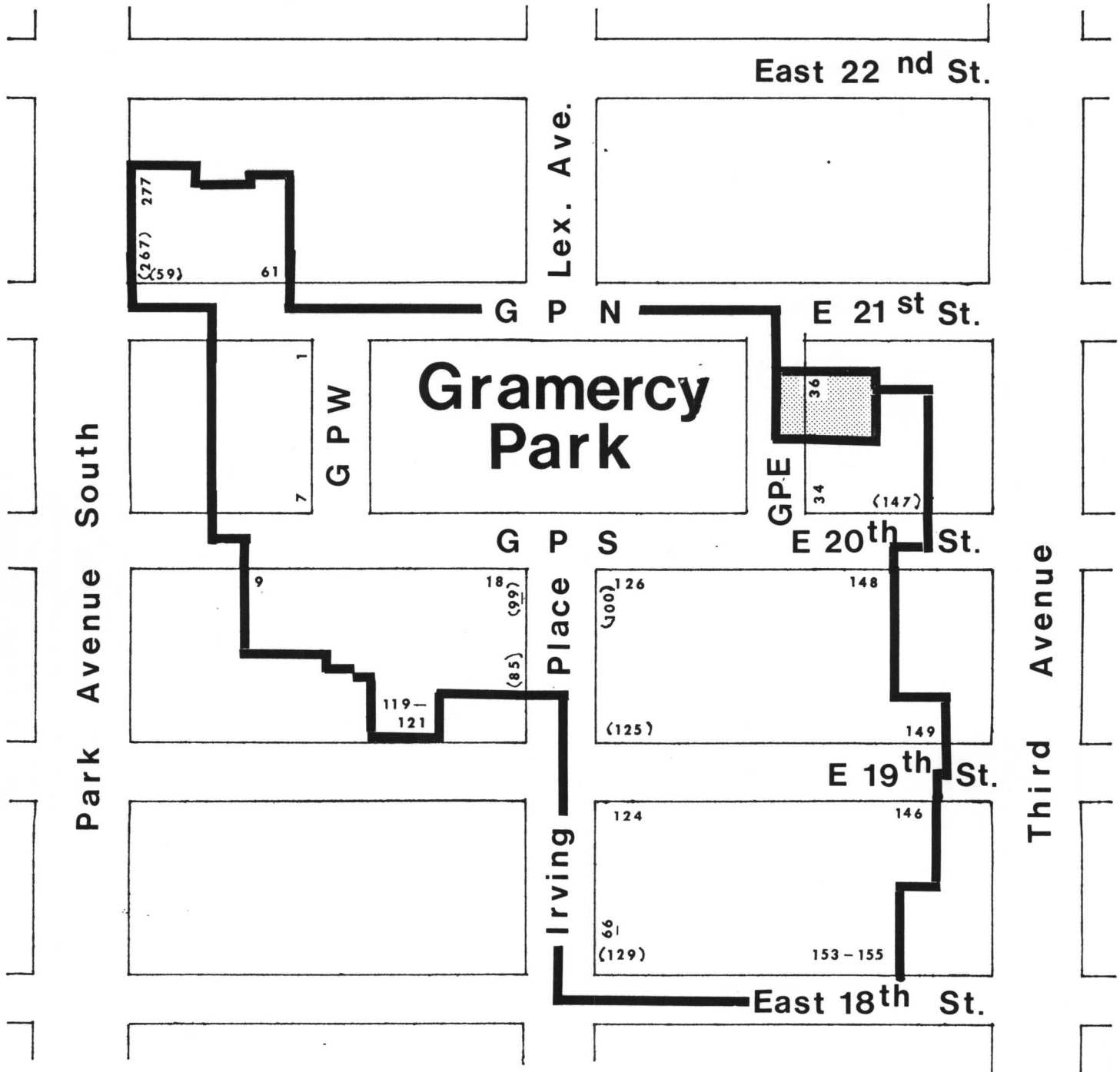
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, The Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Extension of the Gramercy Park Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, the property bounded by a line extending southerly along the eastern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East, westerly along the southern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East, to the midpoint of Gramercy Park East where it adjoins the boundary line of the Gramercy Park Historic District, northerly along the Gramercy Park East boundary line, easterly across Gramercy Park East to the northern property line of 36 Gramercy Park East to the point of beginning.

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# GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT MANHATTAN



Designated Sept. 20, 1966   
 Extension Designated July 12, 1988

Numbers indicate addresses within boundary of district  
**LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION**



GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10  
Architect:  
J. Riely Gordon

Photo: 1988  
Photo by:  
Forster, LPC





GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10  
Architect:  
J. Riely Gordon

Facade Detail

Photo: 1988  
Photo by:  
Forster, LPC



GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10

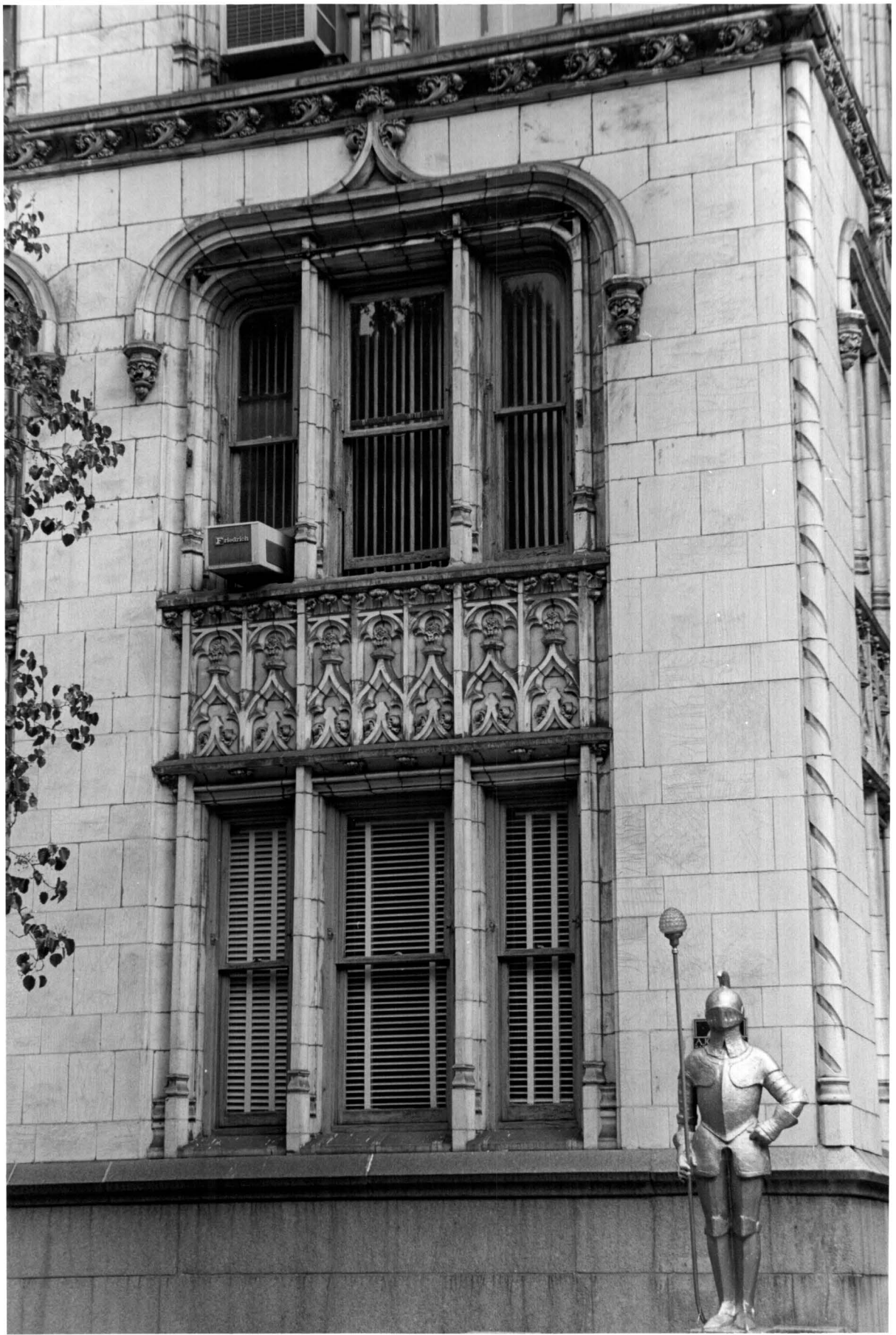
Architect:

Entrance Detail

Photo: 1988

Photo by:  
Forster, LPC

J. Piely Gordon



GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10  
Architect:  
J. Riely Gordon

Detail, 1st and 2nd Story Windows

Photo: 1988  
Photo by:  
Forster, LPC



GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10  
Architect:  
J. Riely Gordon

Oriel Detail

Photo: 1988  
Photo by: Forster, LPC



GRAMERCY PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION  
36 Gramercy Park East  
Manhattan

Built: 1908-10  
Architect:  
J. Riely Gordon

Detail, Upper Stories

Photo: 1988  
Photo by:  
Forster, LP