

Landmarks Preservation Commission
August 14, 1990; Designation List 226
LP-1620

856 WEST END AVENUE HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1892-93; Schneider & Herter, Architects; Schneider & Company, Developers.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1873, Lot 62.

On November 18, 1986, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of 854 West End Avenue Town House 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. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The 856 West End Avenue House is one of an intact group of four residences designed by the architectural firm of Schneider & Herter and built by the firm of Schneider & Company as a speculative venture.¹ The rowhouse group is the sole surviving example of a type of site planning used on several corner plots along West End Avenue in the early 1890s where a group of houses facing the Avenue featured a prominent corner house and an additional house was built facing the side street behind the Avenue-facing houses. The group of residences was built in 1892-93 during the first period of intense residential development for the comfortable professional class along the northern portion of West End Avenue where the suburban qualities of landscaped streets, the views of the Hudson River, and the amenities of nearby Riverside Park created a desirable residential area. The quality and distinctiveness of the Queen Anne/Romanesque Revival style design of the 856 West End Avenue House reflects the desire for individuality in the appearance of houses within rowhouse groups and is representative of the eclectically-styled residential architecture of West End Avenue dating from the 1890s. No. 856 West End Avenue is distinguished by ornament characteristic of the mannerist aesthetic of the firm of Schneider & Herter, the juxtaposition of contrasting textures of rough, smooth-faced, and carved brownstone, and the emphasis on a lively roofline punctuated by gables and a chimney.

Development of the Upper West Side²

Despite its long history beginning soon after the colonial Dutch settlement, the Upper West Side, known as Bloomingdale prior to its urbanization, remained largely undeveloped until the 1880s. In the early eighteenth century, Bloomingdale Road (later renamed the Boulevard and finally Broadway in 1898) was opened through rural Bloomingdale and provided the northern route out of the city which was then concentrated in the southern tip of Manhattan. The Upper West Side was included in the Randel Survey of 1811 (known as the Commissioners' Map) which established a uniform grid of avenues and cross streets in Manhattan as far north as 155th Street, although years elapsed before streets on the Upper West Side were actually laid out, some as late as the 1870s and 1880s, and the land was subdivided into building lots. The city grew rapidly northward during the nineteenth century, but it was not until after Central Park (a designated New York City Scenic Landmark) was laid out in 1857 that development began around the perimeter of the Park, setting off the first wave of real estate speculation on the Upper West Side.

Improved public transportation to the area contributed to the growth and sustained development of the Upper West Side. By 1880 the horse car line on Eighth Avenue had been replaced by street rail service up to 125th Street and the Elevated Railway on Ninth Avenue (renamed Columbus Avenue in 1890) had been completed. However, the biggest boost to the development of the West End (the area west of Broadway) was the creation, between 1876 and 1900, of Riverside Drive and Park (a designated New York City Scenic Landmark) located north of 72nd Street along the Hudson River. The presence of the park and drive, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, was an important factor in making this area desirable for high-quality residential development.

Development of the West End began slowly, due, to a large degree, to the hesitation of would-be residents, but by 1885 it had emerged as the area in the city experiencing the most intense real estate speculation. The expectation that the blocks along Riverside Drive and West End Avenue would be lined with mansions kept the value of these lots, as well as adjacent land, consistently higher and developers were willing to wait to realize profits from the potentially valuable sites. The real estate developers, including the West End Association, founded in 1884 by the prominent developer, W.E.D. Stokes, ultimately stimulated the demand for houses in the West End. Real estate brochures and the local press drew attention to the area, emphasizing the scenic quality of the setting, the nearness of parks, and the availability of public transportation.

West End Avenue (formerly Eleventh Avenue) was opened in 1880 from 72nd Street to 106th street and was paved with asphalt by 1893. West End Association members set twenty-year restrictive covenants governing West End Avenue which closed the avenue to commercial traffic and initially limited development to single-family houses, thus enhancing the desirability of the residential area. By 1890 the character of the avenue had emerged as completely residential and was promoted as a suburban-like setting with such amenities as grass plots and trees along the sidewalks. The absence of

flats and apartment houses on the avenue provided the opportunity for various treatments of the corners with rowhouses and larger attached residences.

In the mid-1880s the most attractive areas for development along West End Avenue were located near the El stations and along the higher elevations of the hilly avenue. Construction of mid-size rowhouses, rather than the more grand type of mansions originally projected for West End Avenue, began in 1885 near 104th Street which was convenient to a Ninth Avenue El station and by 1895 the high plateau between West 99th and 104th Streets had been built up with three- and four-story rowhouses. The architectural tone of these private residences was set by the presence of costly mansions such as the W.F. Foster residence at 102th Street and Riverside Drive and the Bacon residence at 104th Street and Riverside Drive.

The Schneider & Company's Houses³

The site at the northeast corner of West 102nd Street and West End Avenue appears to have been first sold for development purposes in 1881 and at that time an open-ended restrictive covenant was initiated which prevented the construction of a variety of commercial and industrial buildings. The property changed hands several times before Hannah O'Brien filed plans in 1890 to build five three-story limestone-fronted houses designed by Andrew Spence; within a year O'Brien lost control of the property and this project was abandoned.

Two New York architects, Ernest W. Schneider and Henry Herter, along with two partners -- John Fish, a previous client, and Eugene Schultz -- acquired the property and soon after filed plans for the construction of a group of four residences. The centerpiece of the group of three-story houses with raised basements is the corner house which has a cylindrical tower with an additional story and an entrance near the center of its long West 102nd Street facade. Beside this house facing West End Avenue are two narrow houses, nearly identical in design, the southernmost one being No. 854 West End Avenue. Situated across the rear of the three West End Avenue houses and facing West 102nd Street and enclosing the yard area, the fourth house has a freestanding side facade.⁴ The houses, built between May, 1892, and April, 1893, were appropriately finished on the interior with decorative mantels, hardwood trim, and horseshoe openings ornamented with fretwork dividing the music rooms from the parlors, as well as up-to-date plumbing and utility areas. The placement of the stairhall in the center of each house permitted large full-width front rooms on the upper floors.

The house at 856 West End Avenue, the first of the group of residences to be sold, was purchased by Lavinia Katz in 1893. In 1895 the remaining houses were divided among the investors. The house at 854 West End Avenue was sold in 1895 and the house on 102nd Street house was sold in 1896. The corner house was sold in 1897; after title reverted to the developers in 1898, they were able to resell it that same year. A similar situation developed with 854 West End Avenue when title was regained by the investors in 1899; the house was resold again the following year.

The Schneider & Company development venture is the sole surviving example of a site development pattern that emerged on West End Avenue in which large corner parcels were purchased for the construction of rowhouse groups. By decreasing the depth of the avenue-facing houses, an additional house could be built on the plot facing the side street; the plan worked to the advantage of the developer who sought a maximum return on the expensive West End Avenue lots. Slightly larger and more prestigious corner houses, with highly visible design features such as corner towers, were characteristic of this site development plan. This scheme was particularly favored in the early 1890s when the area between 99th and 104th streets was developed. Rowhouse groups facing West End Avenue, with a side street-facing house (or houses) across the rear of these lots, were built at the southeast corners of West End Avenue and 99th, 100th, 102nd, and 103rd Streets; all of the groups except the Schneider & Company group have been demolished. The rowhouse group at the southeast corner of 103rd Street and West End Avenue, designed by M.V.B. Ferdon in 1891, included five houses facing West End Avenue and one facing 103rd Street; only the house facing West 103rd Street remains standing. Another group of houses designed by M.V.B. Ferdon and built by Increase Grenell in 1892 at the northwest corner of West End Avenue and 104th Street (demolished) included a corner house very similar to the Schneider & Company house, featuring the entrance near the center of the 104th Street facade.⁵

Picturesque Architecture on West End Avenue⁶

During the intense period of rowhouse development on the Upper West Side, from 1885 to 1900, residential design was dominated by a reaction to the conformity and homogeneity of older Italianate style brownstone rowhouses found elsewhere in the city. The first wave of development along West End Avenue in the period between 1885 and 1895 produced a number of individually-designed houses and speculatively-built, yet distinctive, rowhouse groups which, along with houses in the West End as a whole, represent the culmination of single-family house construction in Manhattan. Many of the most prominent architects working in New York City designed these residences, often for speculative developers who invested in the area. The residences designed for West End Avenue were characteristic of the picturesque eclecticism of late-nineteenth-century architecture, drawing from a wide variety of stylistic sources and expressing the desire of architects and clients for originality, variety, and novelty in residential architecture. There was a movement away from smooth brownstone as a facing material and a new emphasis on the sculptural and textural qualities of surfaces, as well as on the mixture of colors and materials.

Unusual, picturesque house design on West End Avenue had been initiated by the construction of two groups of houses with a "Dutch" flavor in 1885-86, designed by Frederick B. White and McKim, Mead & White. Clarence True and other architects continued to design residences for West End Avenue in unusual and picturesque revival styles which were executed with a high-degree of artistic experimentation. Strong rhythmic patterns, asymmetrical massing, and a lively streetscape were created by the profusion of

bowfronts, bay and oriel windows, gables, turrets, chimneys, dormers, cornices, stoops, and ornamentation associated with the popular Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles as well as more exotic revival styles. These later rowhouses on West End Avenue, and throughout the Upper West Side, unlike their Italianate brownstone predecessors from earlier in the nineteenth century, were purposely designed to be distinguished from one another, while together forming visually coherent ensembles. Along West End Avenue in particular, there emerged a characteristic treatment in the design of rowhouse groups. A larger corner house served to terminate a row of houses or became the focal point in a rowhouse group that turned a corner; the design of these corner houses frequently included an entrance in the longer, street-facing facade, a curved corner bay and tower, and a lively roofline.

The houses designed by Schneider & Herter are representative of this picturesque design movement, and although based on the common hybrid of the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles they are enlivened by unusual carved ornament. The treatment of each of the four houses individually within the easily recognizable group provided the architects with the opportunity to create variations on a theme. The high degree of modulation in the plane of the facades through the use of recessed entrances and balconies (which afforded views of the river and park) adds depth and grandeur to the rowhouse designs. Schneider & Herter explored the range of surface effects achievable from smooth-faced and rough-cut brownstone, and incorporated both geometric and figural carving of the material. The repetition of several ornamental elements unites the houses, including paired stringcourses, gridded panels of rough-faced stone, chamfered window surrounds in the smooth-faced facades, sheet-metal panels at the roofline, and elements of the carved stone program. The two smaller West End Avenue houses are identical except for the shape and detailing of the window openings where the rock-faced semi-elliptical-arched window surrounds of the 856 West End Avenue House contrast with the trabeated pilaster scheme with chamfered window heads of the 854 West End Avenue House.

The design of picturesque rowhouses in New York was influenced by trends in the design of architectural ornament in the later nineteenth century, a time when ornament was treated by many architects as an opportunity for creative experimentation. European theorists such as Owen Jones, James K. Collings, and Christopher Dresser encouraged an abstract interpretation of vegetation executed with an emphasis on geometricized form and their publications influenced designers in the United States. At the same time, technological change also influenced the design of ornament. The availability of steam-powered tools encouraged the use of bold, machine-cut ornament while the growing use of terra cotta prompted the design of intricate ornament that could be easily reproduced.

The popularity of several revival styles, and the inventive blending of these styles, encouraged the architect/designer to adopt an individualized aesthetic in the design of architectural ornament. This trend can be seen in the abstracted naturalistic ornament developed by such recognized American innovators as Frank Furness and Louis H. Sullivan, as well as in the pioneering work of architects like Henry Hobson Richardson, who

architects working in New York City also developed identifiable personal styles, such as Clarence True with his interpretation of the "Elizabethan Renaissance Revival" style.

Schneider & Herter developed a somewhat idiosyncratic and mannerist aesthetic characterized by a lack of reverence for the established usage of ornament, an unexpected combining of architectural styles, and asymmetry in the composition of facades and their detailing; these characteristics appear in the firm's early designs for tenements, rowhouses and synagogues. In the ornamental programs of several buildings, including the 854 West End Avenue House, Schneider & Herter combined incised, machine-cut ornament--recalling the earlier Neo-Grec style of incised ornament -- with both abstracted naturalistic designs and romantic figurative carving which included a female mask above and entrance door and lion newel posts at the stoop (no longer intact), identical to those at the 254 West 102nd Street House. An uncommon approach to the composition and placement of ornament appears in the use of unmatched abstracted designs for the capitals of the pilasters that frame the former entrance and in the projecting balcony above that suggests an entrance portico. The placement of the capitals at the height of the window transoms required the insertion of paneled blocks above the capitals and creates compound vertical forms that depart from the traditional relationship of pilaster and horizontal member above. In contrast, the pilaster capitals at the second story, executed in another series of abstracted foliate designs, support the weighty horizontal member below the setback of the fourth story.

Schneider & Herter⁷

Ernest W. Schneider and Henry Herter began an architectural partnership in New York City around 1887; within a very short time they had a thriving business designing tenements, flats, and industrial buildings, primarily on the Lower East Side. Schneider & Herter worked repeatedly for a group of German-Jewish clients with ethnic backgrounds similar to theirs, the most prominent of whom were the real estate developers Jonas Weil and Bernard Mayer for whom the architects designed a number of multiple dwellings. This association led to the firm's commission for the Park East Synagogue, 163 East 67th Street (1889-90, a designated New York City Landmark), which Weil financed and led as president of the congregation. Schneider & Herter also designed Congregation Kol Israel Arshi at 20-22 Forsyth Street (1892, now owned by the Hellenic Orthodox Community).

The firm of Schneider & Herter had acted as architect-developers prior to its venture on the Upper West Side, designing and building a pair of French flats at 731-735 East 5th Street in 1890-91 and a French flat at 233-35 Delancey Street in 1891-92; the firm began a warehouse project at 141 West Broadway in 1893. Schneider & Herter later erected a five-story apartment building at 79-81 Perry Street in 1895 (in addition to designing several other buildings now within the Greenwich Village Historic District) and a pair of flats buildings at 309 and 317 West 93rd Street in 1901-02 (within the Riverside-West End Historic District).

first projects on the Upper West Side. Many of the firm's more than 100 multiple dwellings in Manhattan no longer stand, but those remaining exhibit the firm's individualistic approach to the use of ornament and facade compositions often featuring round-arched windows characteristic of the Romanesque Revival style.

Description

No. 856 West End Avenue is the central house in the West End Avenue frontage of the group of houses built by Schneider & Company. The seventeen-foot wide rowhouse has three stories above a raised basement and features a brownstone facade two bays wide. In the southern bay of the parlor story the recessed entrance, at which the original door remains, is surmounted by a recessed balcony with a shallow curved balustrade at the second story supported by a lion head. Paired one-over-one double-hung wood windows in semi-elliptical-arched openings light the main rooms of these stories; the parlor-story windows have carved wood mullions and stained-glass transoms. The third story is recessed slightly, allowing room for a balcony in the northern bay which is accessed through a door in a window group with carved wood mullions in a semi-elliptical opening. Pilasters at the parlor and second stories have carved capitals executed in a variety of abstracted foliate designs. Rough-faced brownstone used in the spandrels of the parlor and third stories and narrow rough-faced courses on the gable and chimney adds to the picturesque quality of the roofline, further enhanced by a peaked gable and a tall chimney above the northern bay and a small blind dormer extending from the patterned sheet-metal sheathed mansard roof. Originally, a pinnacle extended from the buttress-like form next to the gable. The box stoop which led to the parlor story entrance has been removed and the raised basement has been refaced with concrete stucco.⁸

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NOTES

1. The group includes the houses at 854 and 858 West End Avenue and 254 West 102nd Street.
2. This section was based on information in the LPC, 520 West End Avenue Residence Designation Report, Riverside - West End Historic District Designation Report, "West Side Number," Real Estate Record & Guide 51 (Feb. 11, 1893), supplement, 6-41, and Real Estate Record & Guide 51 (March 25, 1893), 444.
3. This section is based on information in the "West Side Number," 32-33; NYC, Department of Buildings, Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1873, Lots 61, 62, 160, 162, New Building Permit No. 785-1892.
4. The house at No. 854 West End Avenue is 17' wide and the adjacent house at No. 856 is 16' wide; both have two-story rear extensions. The corner house at 858 West End Avenue is 17'11" wide and 72' deep; the house at 254 West 102nd Street is 28' wide and 50' deep and is separated from the other three houses by a passageway into the rear yard.
5. These rowhouse groups are readily identified on historic maps such as the 1898 Bromley Atlas of New York City. The rowhouse group at the southeast corner of West End Avenue and West 104th Street also featured a larger corner house, but as did other corner groupings, used a different plan to fill the corner plot.
6. This section is based on information in LPC, 520 West End Avenue Residence Designation Report.
7. This section is based on information in LPC, Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report, Riverside-West End Historic District Designation Report, and Park East Synagogue Designation Report, Francis, and information in New York City, Department of Buildings, Plans, Permits, and Dockets.
8. It appears that the stoop was removed when the residence was converted to a multiple dwelling with eight apartments in 1936 although this alteration was not specifically mentioned in Buildings Department records. Original wood sash remains in situ although covered by storm sash at the parlor story. A grille has been added to the north basement window.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

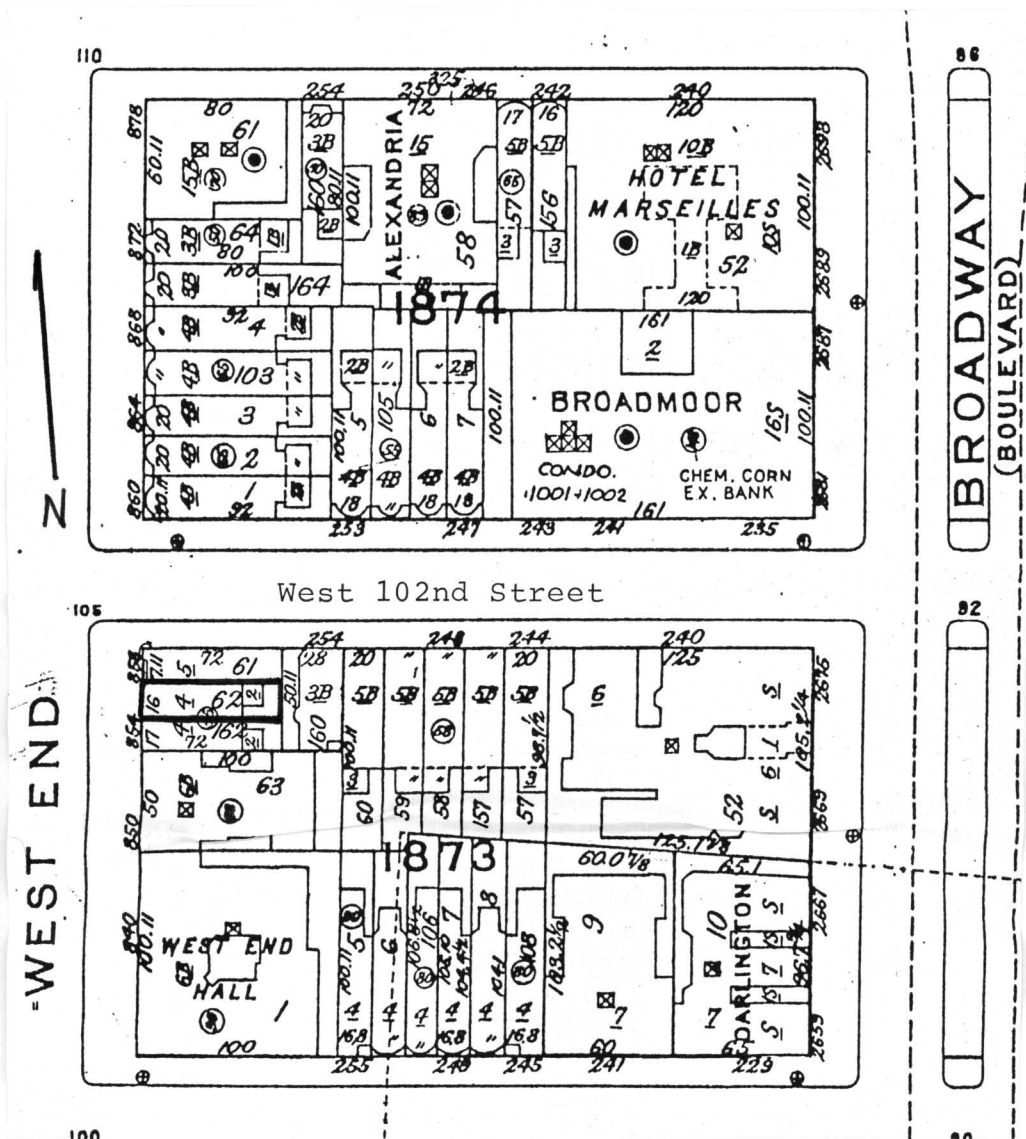
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 856 West End Avenue House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 856 West End Avenue House, as part of a rowhouse group designed by the firm of Schneider & Herter, was built in 1892-93 by the firm of Schneider & Company as a speculative venture; that the Schneider & Company project is the sole surviving intact example of a frequently used development scheme for the northern end of West End Avenue in the early 1890s where corner sites were planned with a prominent corner house and a side-street facing house across the rear of the plot; that the design of this Queen Anne/Romanesque Revival style residence is representative of the contemporary picturesque trend in rowhouse design characterized by an emphasis on the use of a variety of surface textures, a high degree of modulation in the facade of the house, and a lively roofline punctuated by gables and a tall chimney; that the design of No. 856 West End Avenue is distinguished by ornament which reflects the mannerist aesthetic of the firm of Schneider & Herter; that this ornament takes the form of unusual, asymmetrically-designed pilasters framing the entrance and the carved mask supporting the balcony above; and that the quality and individuality of the residence reflects the nature of the first wave of residential development along West End Avenue for the comfortable professional class where picturesque houses and the amenities of the nearby Riverside Park created an attractive and desirable residential area, as well as the trend toward individuality in rowhouse design in the 1890s throughout the city.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), 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 a Landmark the 856 West End Avenue House, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1873, Lot 62, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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856 West End Avenue House Landmark Site, Manhattan.
 Block 1873, lot 62.

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89 Edition.



856 West End Avenue House, Manhattan.
1892-93; Schneider & Herter, architects. Photo Credit: Carl Forster



856 West End Avenue House, Manhattan. Detail, ground story.
1892-93; Schneider & Herter, architects. Photo Credit: Carl Forster



856 West End Avenue House, Manhattan. Detail, parlor story.
1892-93; Schneider & Herter, architects. Photo Credit: Carl Forster



856 West End Avenue House, Manhattan. Detail, upper stories.
1892-93; Schneider & Herter, architects. Photo Credit: Carl Forster