

Landmarks Preservation Commission
April 16, 1991; Designation List 234
LP-1684

331 WEST 85th STREET HOUSE, 331 West 85th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1890-91; architect Ralph S. Townsend.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1247, Lot 20.

On July 12, 1988, The Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 331 West 85th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 22). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Three letters have been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Constructed in 1890-91 for the builder-speculator Perez M. Stewart at a time when the blocks in the Eighties west of Broadway were first developed, the 331 West 85th Street House is one house in a row of five nearly identical houses on the north side of West 85th Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive. Ralph S. Townsend, the noted architect, employed an eclectic architectural vocabulary -- Romanesque Revival elements as well as Queen Anne motifs -- to create an original facade design for No. 331 that can be seen as a late but highly successful example of the architecture of the Aesthetic Movement. Although the horizontal architectural elements and the picturesque towered silhouette relate it to the other four facades in the row, No. 331's facade of three stories with a basement, executed in contrasting brownstone and brick, is designed as a vertical unit. The expressive correspondence between the exaggerated and superimposed architectural components within this facade -- the coupled windows, their segmental, flat, and round-arched window heads, the smooth-faced and rough-cut voussoirs -- suggest structural support for the tower-like western bay. The carved foliate motifs provide details of special interest. Townsend's inventive facade treatment survives largely intact.

The Development of the Upper West Side

The evolution of the present appearance of West 85th Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive is a reflection of the Upper West Side's greater development. Largely undeveloped until the 1880s, the area was known as "Bloomingdale" prior to urbanization and was comprised of working farms in the eighteenth century and landed estates in the early nineteenth century. While included in the Commissioners' Map of 1811, which platted a grid of avenues and streets in Manhattan as far north as 155th Street, the area remained essentially rural and most of the streets were not laid out until after the Civil War. The creation of Central Park beginning in 1857

contributed to the growth of the areas around the Park's perimeter, but improved public transportation spurred the area's sustained development onward; in particular, the Ninth Avenue (Columbus Avenue) Elevated Railroad, completed in 1879 with stations at 72nd, 81st, 93rd, and 104th Streets, encouraged the area's growth. 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 (now a designated New York City Scenic Landmark) north of 72nd Street. Following the Financial Panic of 1873, development proceeded slowly but by 1885 the Upper West Side had become the scene of the city's most intense real estate speculation.

The tract now including the westernmost blocks of West 85th Street, once a fragment of the Oliver DeLancey farm which was conveyed to John H. Howland in 1825, was not partitioned into lots until 1850. Subsequently, a parcel of four lots, each 25 by 100 feet along West 85th Street's north side -- comprising lots 18 to 21 -- was sold three times, twice in 1886, and again in 1890. This parcel corresponds to the row at 329 through 337 West 85th Street. It should be noted that this site is located on a gentle rise from West End Avenue west to Riverside Drive.

The Rowhouse and the Speculative Builder

The earliest Upper West Side rowhouse speculators owned the property on which the houses were constructed; Edward S. Clark, President of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, who commissioned Henry J. Hardenbergh to design the row at 41 to 49 West 73rd Street in 1879-80, has been cited as an example of this trend.¹ The speculative builder followed close behind. Such a builder, often in concert with a property owner, would employ an architect with whom he often worked in partnership. It was the common practice among rowhouse developers to purchase groups of lots and reconfigure them, thus maximizing the number of houses within the row by building the houses narrower than the standard twenty-five foot lot. Perez M. Stewart, a speculative builder, purchased this four-lot parcel on the north side of West 85th Street in April, 1890, and subdivided it into five lots; each of the new lots became twenty feet wide. Stewart first appears in New York City directories (1881-84) as a clerk, then as a builder selling mantels (1888-89), and from 1890 for the next twenty years as a builder on the Upper West Side.

The Architect

Little is known about the early architectural career of Ralph Samuel Townsend (d. 1921). From 1882 -- when he was first listed as an architect -- until 1890, New York City directories give his business address variously as 10th Avenue and 100th or 101st Streets, or 200 West 101st Street. Throughout this period and for the decade preceding, a Ralph Townsend (no middle initial) is listed simultaneously at this same address. This Ralph Townsend's occupation was carpenter until 1886 when he was described as a builder; he retained this listing until 1891 when he was listed again as a carpenter. However, four years later he is listed as a builder. It is

likely that Ralph S. Townsend, the architect, was the son of Ralph Townsend, the carpenter/builder.² Ralph S. Townsend was a member of the Architectural League from 1899 until his death in 1921.³

Best known for his rowhouses and multiple dwellings in Greenwich Village, west midtown, and the Upper West Side (examples are located in the Greenwich Village, Riverside/West 80-81st Street, and Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic Districts), Townsend's first published commission was the apartment house he designed for the developer J.S. Pruden at 360-362 West 51st Street which appeared in the Builder and Woodworker, (Nov., 1881).⁴ A detailed discussion of the interior finishes, suggesting an abundance of carpentry -- the kind of work the Builder and Woodworker promulgated for its readership of carpenter/builders-- accompanied an illustration of the facade, rich with Neo-Grec references. It is likely that the elder Townsend was responsible for Ralph Samuel's architectural education and the two, one a carpenter/builder and the other a young architect, collaborated throughout the 1880s and into the early 1890s. The directories give no business address for the elder Ralph Townsend after 1906, by which time Ralph Samuel Townsend had formed a partnership with Charles A. Steinle and William C. Haskell. The firm of Townsend, Steinle & Haskell was especially known for its designs of large apartment buildings and was financially involved in many of its projects.

Design and Construction

No. 331 West 85th Street (Plate 1) was built as one of five first-class, single-family dwellings.⁵ This house exemplifies the architecture of the Aesthetic Movement, a progressive movement in England and the United States, which reached its zenith of popularity in the early 1880s. One of the components of this aesthetic, the "Queen Anne" style, is characterized by the rich and eclectic blend of a variety of elements common to vernacular Elizabethan and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture, as well as an occasional reference to the West's recently discovered arts of Japan. Although much of the architectural vocabulary of this narrow, towered facade -- the arches and round-headed windows, the rough-cut rusticated stonework, and second-story voussoir course -- recalls the Richardsonian Romanesque,⁶ these forms have been tempered for use with other, more delicate elements characteristic of the Queen Anne style: the thin columnar mullions of wood in the broad first-story window; the smooth-faced basement and first-story window voussoirs; the rinceaux in the tower's metal entablature frieze; and the spindly baluster and grid panels -- a Japanese motif -- in the tower's metal parapet. Another feature of the Queen Anne aesthetic that distinguishes this composition is the inventive vertical correspondence of a variety of architectural details, expressive components within an extraordinary three-story scheme of superimposed textural contrasts, which, in turn, suggest support for the pyramidally-capped tower-like western bay.

Architects of rowhouses on the Upper West Side designed rows as coherent units, but the individual houses varied in their details and were often arranged in a rhythmic pattern. Although the houses in this row are

united by corresponding materials (rusticated stone facing at the basement and first story and brick at the second and third stories), by horizontal elements such as sill and lintel courses, by a repetitive arrangement of the window openings, and by a staccato rhythm of the drip moldings and towers, a conscious effort was made to differentiate the ornamental details from house to house in this row. The dominant verticality of No. 331's facade contributes to its individual identity. The verticality of each facade is also Townsend's solution to the problem of aligning a row of near-identical facades built along a slight rise -- from east to west -- in the topography of the site. No. 331 and the house east of it are lower than the three in the row west of them. The variety of stylized Romanesque-inspired foliated motifs on springers, annulets, corbels, and keystones gives each facade a distinct identity and vitality. The very distinctive carving is most likely reproduced from contemporary published sources.

Description

This three-story house with a high basement is twenty feet wide, fifty-five feet deep, and forty-seven feet to the top of the tower (Plate 2). The rusticated basement and first story are faced with rough-cut Connecticut brownstone ashlar; the second and third stories are red brick with brownstone trim (all now painted). The entablature and tower parapet are metal. The original main entrance (now the eastern first-story window) and the tower (not specifically articulated until the third story) dictated the organization of the facade into two bays. Defined by the rough-hewn stonework of the basement and first story, the narrow bay on the east and the wider bay on the west can also be read in the consistent width and architectural treatment of the fenestration in the upper stories.

The present entrance at the basement level of the narrow bay was once contained below the original box stoop (Plate 1, removed in 1957-60). It is now protected by a quarter-spherical canvas canopy. The two basement windows with their segmental heads are articulated together at the base of the wider bay by the smooth-faced ashlar of their surrounds, keyed into the rustication; their smooth-faced voussoirs extend up to the first-story sill course (Plate 2). The basement window springers bear individualized carvings of stylized Romanesque foliated motifs. The entrance door (not original) is a single pane of etched glass. The basement windows have one-over-one wood sash; the wrought-iron window grilles are not original.

The narrow eastern bay on the first story now contains a double window (with one-over-one wood sash) in the arched opening where the original main entrance was once located; the original fanlight remains (Plate 3). Within the wider bay there is a broad, segmentally-headed window (Plate 2). Two columnar mullions of wood support three one-over-one wood sash windows, a wider one flanked by narrow ones.⁷ A dentil molding heads each window. The transoms above are filled with leaded glass in an imbricated pattern. The glass has a yellowish tint; the lozenge in the central transom is light blue. The smooth-faced window surrounds and attenuated voussoirs of both windows are keyed into the rustication. The three springers carry three more variations of the stylized Romanesque foliated ornament. Both of these

arches are locked with tall keystones which reach the second-story sill course. Both are carved: the keystone on the east (the original entrance) carries a seven-pointed leaf emerging from a "figure eight" form (plate 3); the keystone on the west bears a more detailed variation -- a spiral and foliated design (Plate 2). The extreme stringers also carry variations of the "figure eight"; the surface of the center springer has been parged to create a landscape in relief, the sun rising from behind two mountains. The shaft that defines the western edge of No. 331's facade, the longest in row, is the "hinge" Townsend contrived to unite the disparate levels of this house and the one to the west (Plate 2). Unlike all of the others, this shaft rises from a corbel that is carved, not with a face, but in a foliated motif, and placed adjacent to the westernmost springer.

The second story has three window openings; the two in the wider bay are paired by a gadrooned (basin-like) sill which incorporates the running sill course. Another of the row's horizontal elements, the rusticated lintel course, incorporates voussoirs over the windows. At the third story, the shaft defining the tower's eastern edge rises from the running sill course. The windows in the wider, tower-like bay are arched; they are paired by a drip molding. The window in the narrow bay has a protruding (basin-like) sill incorporating the running sill course; the sill's carved surface carries a convex rondel surrounded by foliation. The transom is subdivided into two parts by a stone mullion. The same drip molding, continued from above the paired windows in the wider bay, here defines the right angles of the window head. The metal cornice above it is modillioned. The second- and third-story windows have one-over-one wood sash.

The tower's stone corner shafts, ringed by annulets, both plain and foliated, where they are crossed by the horizontal courses, rise up the facade, penetrating the entablature and the parapet, and once terminated in thick, foliate finials. The foliated annulets of No. 331's western shaft are elongated to incorporate both its own sill courses and those of its western neighbor, No. 333. Above the cornice, the shafts are metal. A high-relief pressed-metal rinceau decorates the entablature's frieze. The parapet, also pressed-metal, is articulated by alternating panels of spindle balusters and thick grids. The tower's pyramidal roof, distinguished by a blind eyebrow opening, is topped with a metal finial. The tower roof and the false mansard above the narrow bay are covered with slate.

Subsequent History

Perez Stewart sold No. 331 five days after it was completed.⁸ On October 5, 1954, this house (and all of the others) was sold to Havens Enterprises, Inc., which commissioned Wechsler & Schimenti, Architects, to remove the stoop, and remove the existing main entrance door, replacing it with a pair of sash windows.⁹ A new, wood "colonial" style door and frame replaced the original basement entrance and the facade was painted a cream color. No. 331 became a multiple dwelling after the alteration.

A subsequent renovation occurred when this house (with the others in the row) became a cooperative apartment complex in 1988. The architect Manuel Angel Santiago redesigned the areaway, installing brick planters and

bluestone paving. A fire-resistant canopy on an aluminum frame was placed above the new aluminum door and new light fixtures were placed within the canopy. The facade has been repainted: the ashlar trim and ornamental details are cream; the rusticated stone surfaces are a rosy brownstone color. The brick surface and the metal elements are the rosy brownstone color. Except for the missing stoop, this facade is relatively intact. Only the shaft finials have suffered loss: the eastern shaft finial has been replaced with an unarticulated metal cylinder; the western finial is missing.

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NOTES

1. Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Rowhouses of New York's West Side," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 34, no. 1 (Mar., 1975), 20.
2. Ralph Samuel Townsend's place of residence changed often. A review of his residential addresses finds him residing in a sequence of his recently completed commissions. For example, in 1892 he designed a multiple dwelling for Wilcox & Ames at 330 West 88th Street, completed the following year. He is recorded as residing there, 1894-96.
3. In 1899 Townsend was captioned as an associate member of the American Art Society -- Moses King, Notable New Yorkers 1896-99 (Boston, 1899), 397. No records for an American Art Society exist. Townsend was not a member of the Society of American Artists. The reference in Notable New Yorkers appears to be inaccurate.
4. "Apartment House," Builder and Woodworker 17, no. 11 (Nov., 1881), 190, pl. 84. This periodical was subtitled "A Journal of the Industrial Art." Townsend worked for Pruden subsequently: French flats west of Central Park West on West 66th Street, 1892-93. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets. NB 370-1892.
5. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1247, Lot 20. NB 1170-1890.
6. The architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886), trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, popularized the revival of the architecture of tenth and eleventh century France in this country.

7. The original carved detail of these mullions -- the turnings, fluting, the capitals, as well as the deeply beveled panels above -- remain intact.
8. Patrick J. O'Keefe bought No. 335 in 1910, no. 331 in 1920, and Nos. 329 and 337 (eight days later) in 1930. No. 333 was conveyed to P.J. O'Keefe's estate in 1938 by Richard H. O'Keefe, reuniting the row under one ownership.
9. The drawing of the projected elevation renovation indicates that steel casements were called for, NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1247, Lot 20. Alt. 873-1954. But the paired one-over-one sash are shown in a snap shot taken in 1985 before the subsequent renovation. The steel casements may never have been installed.

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 331 West 85th Street 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 331 West 85th Street House, constructed in 1890-91 for the builder-speculator Perez M. Stewart at a time when the blocks in the Eighties west of Broadway were first developed, was one house in a row of five nearly identical houses; that the noted architect Ralph S. Townsend employed an eclectic architectural vocabulary in the design of the brick and brownstone facade that includes generalized Romanesque Revival style elements and Queen Anne style motifs which create a striking and highly successful example of the architecture of the Aesthetic Movement; that the expressive correspondence between the superimposed architectural components within this facade such as the varied types of window openings and the tower-like western bay, as well as the variety of carved stylized foliated motifs, contribute to No. 331's individual identity; and that Townsend's inventive facade treatment remains largely intact.

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 331 West 85th Street House, 331 West 85th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1247, Lot 20, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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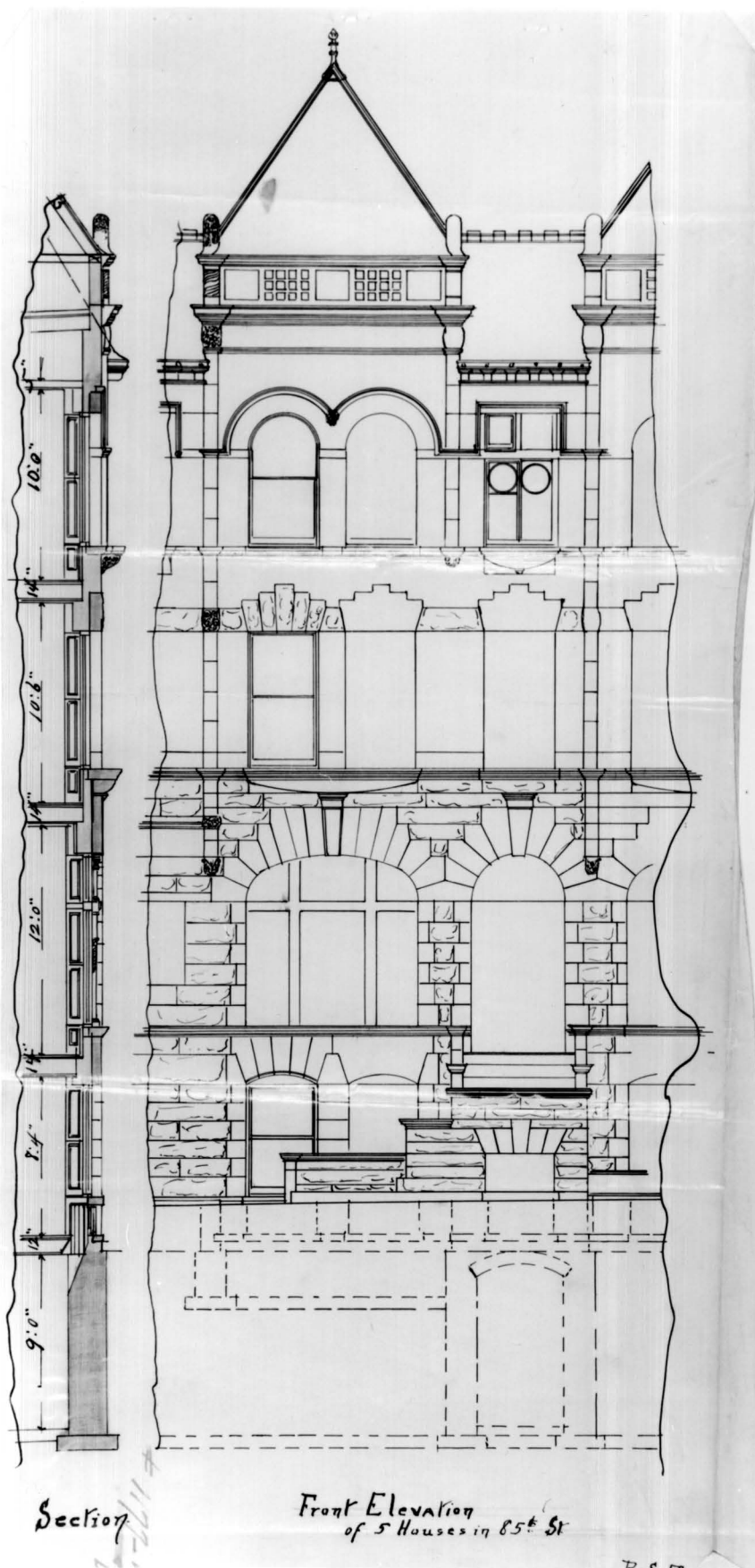
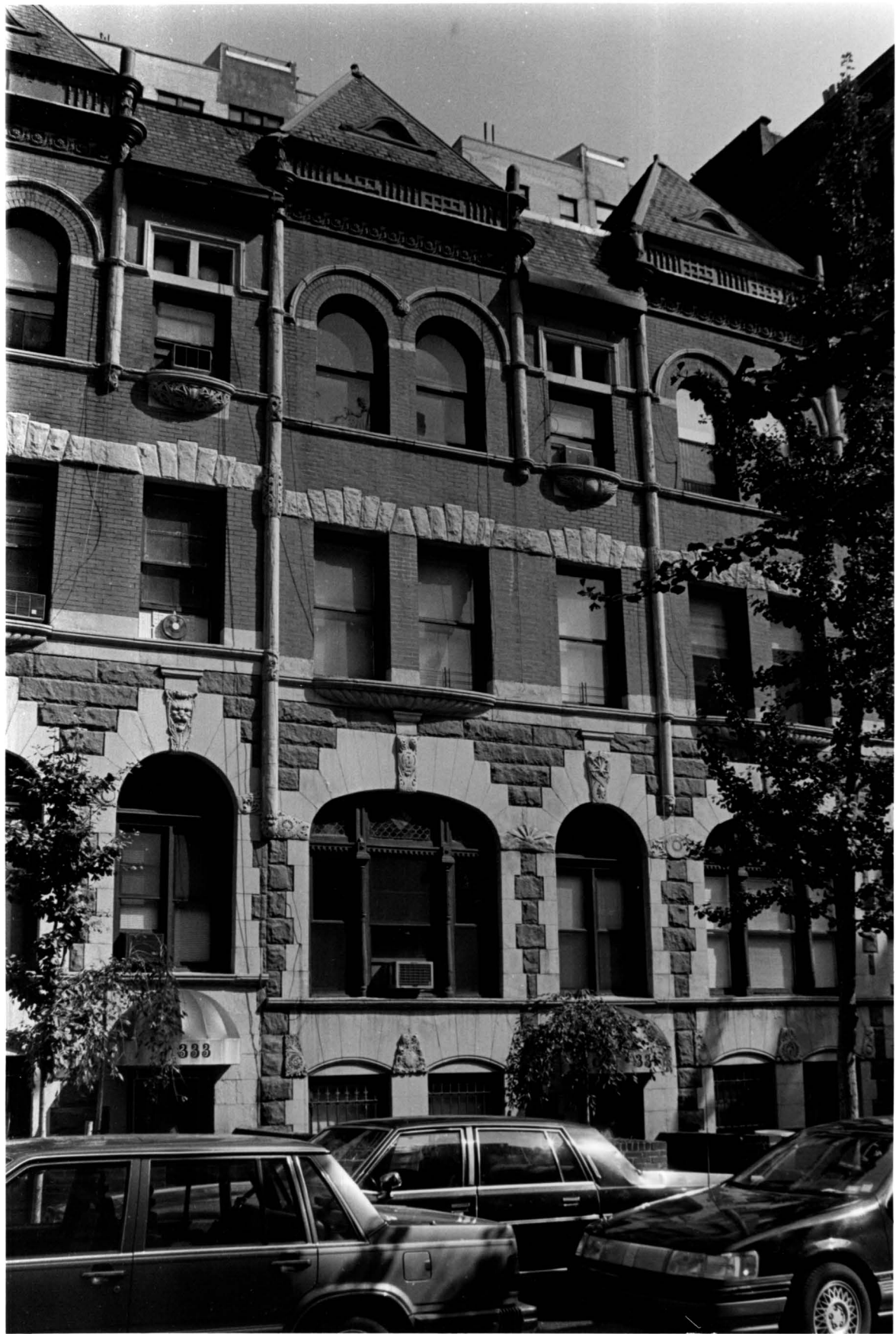


Plate 1. Ralph S. Townsend. Front elevation (for five houses, 329-337 West 85th Street). New York City. Buildings Department, Manhattan.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 2. 331 West 85th Street.



Plate 3. 331 West 85th Street. Detail, first story.

(Carl Forster)