

HENRY VILLARD HOUSES (in part), 451-455 Madison Avenue and 29 1/2 East 50th Street, Borough of Manhattan. 451-455 Madison Avenue begun 1882, completed 1884; 29 1/2 East 50th Street completed 1909; architects McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1286, Lot 21 in part, consisting of the land on which the described buildings are situated and that part of the Courtyard owned by the owner of 451-455 Madison Avenue and 29 1/2 East 50th Street.

On May 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Henry Villard Houses and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 21). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Nowhere in New York City does there exist another unified group of brownstone residences of such magnitude as this cluster standing on Madison Avenue. This great complex of Italian Renaissance town-houses is skilfully welded into one U-shaped unit, surrounding a courtyard originally planned as a turn-around for carriages. Designed in the manner of a Sixteenth Century palace, these buildings represent the epitome of brownstone architecture of their day. Stately and dignified in appearance, they express in their formality a fine architectural design. This "House of Mansions" represented an early break with the picturesque tradition of the Romantic Styles. It inaugurated the new formalism of the Renaissance, introduced here for the first time by the architects, McKim, Mead & White.

The street fronts are all unified by the bold (rusticated) stonework of the basement and first floor, with smooth wall surfaces (ashlar masonry) for the floors above. A stone band course signals each floor at window sill level, while a projecting cornice effectively crowns the entire composition. The third floor windows, handsomely enframed, are reminiscent of those of the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, while some of the second floor windows display striking individual balconies carried on console brackets. The north and south doors facing the courtyard are complemented, in their elegance, by the welcoming arched loggia on the east side. The central portion, Nos. 453-455 Madison Avenue, contains five graceful arches on the ground floor and paired windows of the three upper floors. The entrance to the courtyard is between two square uprights surmounted by balls between which a graceful arch of scrolled wrought iron is bridged to carry the central lantern.

On Forty Ninth Street at the east end of the house, an eight story addition was made in 1909, when Whitelaw Reid occupied the south wing of the complex.

Henry Villard (1835-1900), who built this group of Houses and occupied one of them, was a journalist, railway promoter and financier. He was born in Rhenish Bavaria and emigrated to America in 1853. As a correspondent, he covered the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the Pike's Peak gold discovery and the Civil War. In 1881, with his love for journalism and as a man of wealth, he acquired a controlling interest in the New York Evening Post. During the years 1879 to 1883 Villard was probably the outstanding railway promoter in the United States. He held many important posts and was president of the Northern Pacific and chairman of the board until 1893, when his railway career came to an end. He married Helen Francis Garrison, the only daughter of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist. Oswald Garrison Villard, their son, was publisher and editor of Nation Magazine.

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 Henry Villard Houses have 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 Henry Villard Houses are a magnificent example of Italian Renaissance architecture, that this harmoniously combined complex of houses is unique in New York City, that the buildings are stately and dignified in appearance and that in their style and character they represent a fine expression of architectural design and overall planning unequalled in the City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 that part of the Henry Villard Houses which is located at 451-455 Madison Avenue and 29 1/2 East 50th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1286, Lot 21 which contains the land on which the described buildings are situated, and that part of the Courtyard owned by the owner of 451-455 Madison Avenue and 29 1/2 East 50th Street.