Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 16, 1973, Number 3
LP-0481

THE CONSERVATORY (includes the Palm House and wings), New York Botanical Garden (bounded by Bronx River, Bronx River Parkway and the Bronx and Pelham Parkway), Bronx Park, The Bronx. Begun 1899, completed 1902; architect William R. Cobb for Lord & Burnham.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 3272, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Conservatory and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Dr. Howard S. Irwin, president of the New York Botanical Garden. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The construction of the Conservatory in the New York Botanical Garden was begun in 1899, eight years after that institution was incorporated by the New York State Legislature. The Botanical Garden, a non-profit institution, is located in the northern section of Bronx Park on land that was once a part of the Lorillard estate. After having visited the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in 1888, Dr. Nathaniel L. Britton, one of the most eminent botanists of his day, was inspired to establish a similar institution here.

Dr. Britton was influenced not only by the conception of Kew, but also by its famous horticultural house, built between 1845 and 1847 from designs by Decimus Burton. This relationship is seen in an 1896 clipping from an unknown New York source which shows a rendering of the proposed greenhouse, nearly duplicating Burton's design, and the New York Journal of June 16, 1901 states: "...New York will have the largest [greenhouse] equipment of the kind in the world, with the exception of the famous Kew Gardens."

Parallel developments were taking place in the realm of exposition buildings, epitomized by the design by Sir Joseph Paxton for the Crystal Palace which was built for the 1851 Great Exhibition held in London. Our Crystal Palace, housing the New York Exhibition of 1853, had a dome at the crossing which might well have served as a precedent for later palm houses.

A theoretical relationship between the two greenhouses definitely exists despite the half century separating their construction, which allowed for variations in structural methods and design elements. While British horticultural houses erected during the mid-nineteenth century were restricted to iron and wood construction, steel framing was largely utilized in the one built for the New York Botanical Garden.

The architectural design for the New York Botanical Garden Conservatory is believed to have been carried out by William R. Cobb, designer and architect for Lord & Burnham, the most noted greenhouse firm at that time and to this day. This company (now a division of Burnham Corporation) was founded in 1856 by Frederick A. Lord. In 1872, William Addison Burnham, Mr. Lord's son-in-law, entered the firm as a partner. By then, the company had moved from Syracuse to Irvington, New York, in order to be near the many Hudson River estates which supplied them with so much of their business. Perhaps the most prominent of these private greenhouses was the one built in 1881 at Lyndhurst, the estate of Jay Gould in Tarrytown, New York. The firm's early work also included commissions for public greenhouses, such as the one commissioned in 1877 for Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

The New York Botanical Garden Conservatory comprises a central rotunda or Palm House and ten connecting greenhouses, which together form a C-shaped plan. The central Palm House, which is approximately 100 feet in diameter, is flanked by two lateral wings, each about 116 feet long, and two cruciform-shaped corner houses. Projecting from these corner buildings are side wings, each 75 feet long, set at right angles to the central portion. The C-form is completed by

two square pavilions at the ends of the side wings, and two 103-foot wings parallel to the central portion of the building. This elaborate plan was actually built in two stages: the central portion and one of the side wings, January 1899 to June 1900, and the remaining greenhouses, 1901 to early in 1902.

The central Palm House and adjacent greenhouses were set on stone foundations, to which were bolted vertical steel posts. These in turn were connected to bowed steel ribs, forming a curved roof. The bowed steel ribs are tied together horizontally by steel purlins. Intermediate wood ribs support the overlapping panes of glass. Many of these wooden members, which were originally cypress, were replaced during an extensive reconstruction carried out by Lord & Burnham between 1937 and 1939. It is believed that the original ornamental window enframements on the greenhouse wings and the acanthus leaf roof crestings were removed at that time.

The circular Palm House has engaged cast-iron columns set outside of the trussed members which support the main dome. These trussed members, which originate at ground level, are curved inside the dome and are gathered together at the top to a steel ring, which, in turn, supports a clerestory and the upper dome which is carried on ribs.

The Palm House retains its original windows and elaborate transoms which create the effect of round-arched fan lights. Other decorative elements remaining on this section include slender cast-iron columns, crowned with Composite capitals. Above these columns runs a pressed-metal frieze with garlands and swags and a dentiled cornice. These elements, considered to be "modernized" Italian Renaissance in 1900, are also reflected on the cupola atop the dome of the rotunda, with its six vertical sides, separated by Doric pilasters and topped by elaborate arches. Although the entrance to the Palm House has been replaced by a modern addition, several early entrances to the wing houses remain.

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 Conservatory in the New York Botanical Garden 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 Conservatory in the New York Botanical Garden is the largest and most elegant horticultural house in New York City, that it was designed by the foremost American greenhouse firm, that the circular Palm House has an unusual and boldly expressed structural system, that it displays handsome architectural ornament characteristics of the turn of the century, that it is well-related to its natural park surroundings, and that it continues to serve its original function.

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 The Conservatory (includes the Palm House and wings), New York Botanical Garden, Bronx Park, Borough of The Bronx and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 3272, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.