

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 19, 1974, Number 4
LP-0674

ANDREW CARNEGIE MANSION, 2 East 91st Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1899-1903; architects Babb, Cook & Willard.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1502, Lot 1.

On April 28, 1970 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Andrew Carnegie Mansion and the 9 East 90th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). 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 of the Carnegie Mansion. The Carnegie Corporation opposed the designation of 9 East 90th Street, and S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote to the Commission, "We are not persuaded that this house (9 East 90th Street) is deserving of landmark status."

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

When Andrew Carnegie commissioned the firm of Babb, Cook and Willard to design a new residence for him on upper Fifth Avenue, he envisioned it as being "the most modest, plainest and most roomy house in New York". The house and its surrounding gardens, completed early in 1903, comprise one of the grandest residential complexes in the City, regardless of his stated desire for modesty. Its architecture, reminiscent of an English Georgian country seat, is, however, more restrained than many of its New York contemporaries which were influenced by styles from France and Italy.

The area in which the house is located, which became known as Carnegie Hill soon after the erection of the mansion, was once part of the Village of Nieuw Haarlem, established by the Dutch in 1658. The Carnegie Hill area did not, however, develop as rapidly as did neighborhoods to the south and north of it. It, in fact, remained semi-rural in character until the early 1880s when speculative builders began erecting brownstone residences for those with "modest fortunes." This sudden growth resulted jointly from the general move uptown of middle-class residents and the completion, in 1881, of the portion of the Third Avenue "El" which provided the area with a rapid transit connection to midtown and lower Manhattan.

Relatively modest residences continued to be built throughout the neighborhood until the turn of the century, when Andrew Carnegie erected his new mansion at No. 2 East 91st Street, much to the amazement of wealthy property owners, residing below the Seventies on Fifth Avenue. Carnegie, who was more concerned with open spaces than fashionable neighborhoods, decided upon this location largely because it provided an area large enough for a garden. Soon after Carnegie's venturesome move, however, the well-to-do, business and professional people began building in the area, a trend which continued for the next thirty years. Andrew Carnegie was, in fact, directly responsible for the development of the neighborhood, having purchased, as an investment, considerable property near the proposed site of his mansion. One of Carnegie's new neighbors was George L. McAlpin, who in 1902-03 erected a house at No. 9 East 90th Street. Seventeen years later, Mrs. Carnegie purchased this residence for their daughter, Mrs. Roswell Miller.

Andrew Carnegie, who was born in Dumfermline, Scotland, in 1835, was sixty-seven years old when he moved into his new mansion in 1902, a few months prior to its official completion. He had by this time sold his holdings in the Carnegie Steel Company to the newly-formed U. S. Steel Corporation and was, consequently, one of the richest men in the world. He then retired to his new home from which he administered his extensive American philanthropic activities, the largest and most notable being the \$60,000,000 that he gave for public library buildings. He died in 1919, leaving the house to his widow, who in turn willed it to the Carnegie Corporation.

In 1972, the Corporation generously transferred the Carnegie Mansion, the Miller House and the grounds to the Smithsonian Institution. The buildings are now the home of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum.

The Carnegie Mansion was one of the most outstanding buildings designed by the well-known architectural firm of Babb, Cook & Willard, who worked in the commercial as well as domestic field. Among other buildings, they designed the New York Life Insurance Company in Minneapolis, and the DeVinne Press Building of 1885, on Lafayette Street, a designated New York City Landmark.

The sixty-four room Carnegie Mansion is four stories high, including the attic, and has three basement levels. The architects minimized the vast scale of the house with a symmetrical facade and with the use of restrained details. The free-standing house occupies a very large site, about 230 feet long by 200 feet wide, and was meant to be viewed from all four sides. The main entrance on 91st Street is approached by a shallow curved driveway. The large round-arched entrance with its handsome metal and glass doors is sheltered by an elaborate copper and glass canopy. The entrance facing the garden opens on a raised terrace, enclosed by a stone balustrade. The house rises above a high rusticated limestone base punctuated by arched windows with keystones and is surrounded by an areaway.

The two stories above the high base are faced with red brick and are flanked by heavy limestone quoins at the corners. The long facade on 91st Street and that facing 90th Street are almost identical. Each side has eleven windows, nine of which are grouped in threes and flanked by quoins and single one-window bays at the ends. All windows are enclosed by heavy, carved limestone enframements. Those at the second floor level are more prominently accented by heavy keystones and are surmounted by projecting cornices and pediments. On both sides, the three center windows and the end bay windows, at the second floor, are emphasized by projecting balconies. The Fifth Avenue and east ends are five bays wide, and the windows are similar to those on the long facades. On the Fifth Avenue facade a balcony is placed at the second floor level beneath the three central windows. A three-sided projecting oriel accents the second floor on the east end. Crowning the entire building is a continuous modillioned roof cornice beneath a balustrade. Carved stone urns are set on the balustrade at the corners and above the quoins flanking the central bays. The roof rising behind the balustrade is given added interest by segmental-arched, copper-faced dormers. Tall brick chimneys with limestone ornament rise above the roof.

A one-story wing, originally the art gallery, is located at the east end of the house with a brick facade above a rusticated base. It is surmounted by a handsome cornice with anthemion cresting. The former conservatory, located behind it and visible from 90th Street, is also on the east end. It is a freestanding light metal and glass structure set on a rusticated base with connecting passages to the east wing and main house. Also seen from 90th Street is the trellis-topped pergola at the east end of the terrace.

Carnegie's residence was particularly notable for its engineering innovations, among the most advanced for their day. An ingenious heating and ventilating system brought in air from the outside, filtered it, heated or cooled it, and adjusted the humidity to the proper level. Two large Babcock & Wilcox steam boilers were installed for direct heating. Two smaller boilers heated the conservatory, and another one heated water for domestic purposes. Carnegie also had a separate filtering system installed to purify drinking water.

The house is set near 91st Street while much of the remaining property is occupied by a large garden and yard. The main rooms of the house were situated to provide a view of the garden which then contained chestnut and crabapple trees, lilac and azalea bushes, and rhododendron, ivy and wisteria plants. The site is enclosed by an exceptionally handsome high wrought-iron fence set between heavy urn-crowned stone posts.

The McAlpin-Miller House at 9 East 90th Street, built in 1902-03 by architect George Keister, occupies a site at the southeast corner of the Carnegie property. The five-story red brick house with a rear wing has a swell front at the second and third stories and a portico entrance at the ground floor.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission recognizes that the Landmark on the property in question (and the Landmark Site) is wholly used for museum and directly related charitable purposes by the Smithsonian Institution and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and that the needs of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum for such uses may change in the years ahead, entailing alterations in the existing structures or the creation of other structures on the Landmark Site. By this designation of the Landmark above described and the Landmark Site on which it is located, it is not intended to freeze the structures there in their present state or to prevent future appropriate alterations needed to meet changed requirements of use for museum and directly related charitable purposes. The Commission believes it has the obligation and, indeed, it has the desire to cooperate with owners of Landmarks who may wish to make changes in their properties. In this connection the Commission wishes to state at this time that it recognizes that the Cooper-Hewitt Museum may wish to make exterior alterations to its existing buildings. The Commission looks forward to working with the representatives of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum when the Museum desires to make exterior alterations on its existing buildings.

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 Andrew Carnegie Mansion 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 Andrew Carnegie Mansion was owned by one of this country's best known industrialists and greatest philanthropists, that the Carnegie move to the area encouraged the building of fine residences in the area, that the mansion is a handsome neo-Georgian style residence surrounded by a large garden, and that the site is enclosed by an exceptionally handsome wrought-iron and stone fence.

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 Andrew Carnegie Mansion, 2 East 91st Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1502, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.