

21 EAST 70TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1918-19; architect William J. Rogers.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1385, Lot 16.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 21 East 70th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 23). Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The hearing was continued until March 26, 1974 (Item No. 5). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the March hearing, one witness spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation, including the representative of the owner.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The simple but elegant house at 21 East 70th Street was built in 1918-19 and was designed by William J. Rogers in a sophisticated manner based on modified classical traditions.

The properties on this block were held by the Estate of James Lenox until 1907, when they were transferred to the New York Public Library--Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. The Lenox Library building which stood on this block was completed in 1875; in 1911 the collections were removed from the location on Fifth Avenue and 70th Street to the new New York Public Library building on Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, and the Lenox building was subsequently replaced by the Henry Clay Frick mansion. The Library began selling the properties on the north side of East 70th Street in 1909. Fifth Avenue and its side streets, above 59th Street, had already been well developed in the 1880s and 1890s, so for this land to have remained open until 1909 was quite unusual. The wealthy New Yorkers who bought these lots usually commissioned houses for themselves, thus continuing the well-established residential trend in the development of the area.

Although the other houses on the north side of the street were built shortly after the Library sold the properties, No. 21 was built only after the lot had changed hands several times. Gustav Pagenstecher bought the property in 1918, and the house was completed the following year.

The design of this five-story building was handled in a very restrained manner by the architect, resulting in an elegant 20th-century residence. The smooth ashlar limestone facade is pierced by two very deeply recessed openings at each floor which give the design its crisp and distinctive character. The tall, round-arched enframements of the handsome parlor floor windows are delicately emphasized by being slightly recessed from the wall surface, a treatment which is repeated in the rectangular window enframements of the upper stories.

All the windows have multi-paned casements. Those of the parlor floor are set below transoms designed in the manner of fanlights and open onto shallow curved balconies enhanced by wrought-iron railings. Applied decoration has been kept to a minimum; what there is has a classical flavor. The classical keystones above the parlor floor windows, the dentils above and below the fascia of the roof cornice, and the classically-inspired molding just below the stone balustrade defining the slight setback of the fifth story are all treated with care and delicacy.

The sophisticated elegance of the house with its restrained and simple facade and minimal detail is indicative of a new modernism which began to make its appearance on the East Coast in post World War I American architecture. The architect of 21 East 70th Street freely adapted classical forms to create a striking building in much the same way as the "reform" architects of the early 19th century in England and Europe had simplified and stylized classical elements inherited from the 18th century. No. 21 East 70th Street was designed in a distinctive style by the architect, and, in addition, he was able to create a design which was appropriate and fitting to its earlier neighbor, 19 East 70th Street, and in harmony with the three other fine town houses further to the west.

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 21 East 70th 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 21 East 70th Street House is notable for its elegance and calculated restraint, that the deeply recessed openings at each floor of the facade give it a special character, that the house was designed in a sophisticated manner based on modified classical traditions and indicative of a new modernism, and that it contributes to the distinction of the fine row of town houses on the north side of this street.

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 21 East 70th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1385, Lot 16, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.