

GRAND HOTEL, 1232-1238 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1868; architect Henry Engelbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 832, Lot 66.

On March 13, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Grand Hotel and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 17). The hearing was continued to May 8, 1979 (Item No. 5). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 3 witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Grand Hotel, an urbane marble structure crowned with a handsome mansard roof, is a sophisticated example of the French Second Empire style. Built for Elias S. Higgins, an important manufacturer and vendor of carpets, it was designed by Henry Engelbert in 1868 at the beginning of a period in New York's history that transformed Broadway between Madison and Herald Squares into the heart of a glittering entertainment district.¹

Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War when Madison Square was an exclusive residential quarter, most hotels, restaurants, theaters and stores of any distinction were still below Houston Street. However, with the end of the War and the recovery of the economy from the general depression that followed it, the relentless northward growth of the city resumed and a number of fashionable hotels opened near Madison Square along Fifth Avenue and Broadway. The Albemarle, the St. James, the Victoria, the Gilsey House, and the Grand all located in the area and each attempted to exceed the other in opulence and luxury.

The great department stores moved "uptown" to Broadway and Sixth Avenue between 14th and 23rd Streets, creating an unparalleled shopping center known as "Ladies' Mile." Theaters also left downtown and began to congregate north of 23rd Street. At one time, the three blocks along Broadway between West 28th and 31st Streets boasted six theaters including: Daly's, Weber & Field's and Wallack's Thirtieth Street Theater, all featuring the finest musical-variety shows of the day.² So many music publishers had opened their offices on West 28th Street near Broadway that the cacophony of their pianos--likened to the clashing of tin pans--gave the sobriquet "Tin Pan Alley" to the street.

West of Sixth Avenue, the side streets, bordered with respectable brownstones, became notorious for the diversions they offered the "nabobs" frequenting the theaters and hotels. They housed the city's posh brothels and swank gambling clubs. Between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, West 27th Street once contained 27 of the district's "seraglios."³ So infamous had the area become as a source of municipal corruption, particularly in the West 30s, that Inspector Alexander "Clubber" Williams, on being appointed to the West 30th Street precinct, was able to say with impunity, "I've had nothing but chuck steak for a long time and now I'm going to get a little of the tenderloin."⁴ From then on the section was known as the Tenderloin--a section that offered the best and the worst that the city possessed, a section with Stephen Crane on West 23rd Street and "Clubber" Williams on West 30th, a section with newly wed Edith Wharton at 28 West 25th Street and the madam, Kate Woods, at 105 West 25th Street entertaining amid lush surroundings that only

the Mauve Decades could provide, a section glaring with rich and dramatic contrasts that only New York could produce.

The Grand Hotel, with its white marble facade, was a prominent feature of the area until the theater district shifted north to Times Square at the turn of the century and the section became part of the garment district. The Grand's former days of elegance were eclipsed and it became a second-rate residency hotel. But it and the Gilsey House still remain on Broadway to recall that colorful era of the city's past.

Elias S. Higgins, owner and builder of the Grand Hotel, was a prosperous carpet merchant and manufacturer of carpets during the last century.⁵ Two years after the end of the Civil War, Higgins was able to erect a costly marble-fronted warehouse on White Street, east of Broadway. The architect he selected for this project was Henry Engelbert whom he retained to design all his major projects between 1867 and 1869. The professional relationship between Higgins and Engelbert seems to have ended after the completion of the Grand Central Hotel (later the Broadway Central) which, when first opened on Broadway opposite Bond Street in 1870, was the largest hotel in the United States. Engelbert designed the Grand Central one year after he had completed the Grand Hotel for Higgins.

Engelbert first appears in the New York City Directories in 1852/53, listed as an architect working with another architect, John Edson, at 85 Nassau Street. Their association was brief, lasting only five years. The earliest known works by the two were ecclesiastical structures. One was the brownstone First Baptist Church built in 1856 on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 35th Street in the Early Romanesque Revival style.⁶ The interior arrangement of this church, which attracted attention and favorable comment at the time of its completion, bore a resemblance to the interior of the sculpture galleries in the Munich Glyptothek (1830) by Leo von Klenze.⁷ Another prominent church attributed to the firm is St. Mary's Abbey Church (1856) in Newark, also designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style. This church complex was said to be modelled on the Bonifaciusbasilica begun in 1835 in Munich. The fact that these two early works in which Engelbert was involved are strongly reminiscent of buildings in Munich, indicates that the firm was quite familiar with work executed in Southern Germany after 1830. It may also indicate that Engelbert was trained in Germany and had emigrated to this country sometime before 1852--probably after the Rebellion of 1848.

A number of Engelbert's important buildings were Roman Catholic churches and institutions. Among these were: the College of Mount Saint Vincent Administration Building (1857-59) in Riverdale, one of the finest Early Romanesque Revival buildings in the city; the reconstruction of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral after it was gutted by fire in 1866; the House of the Good Shepherd (1869), no longer standing; and Holy Cross Church (1868) and Academy (1869) on West 42nd and 43rd Streets.

Most of Engelbert's work, however, was not religious or institutional in character. He designed a variety of building types including stables, loft buildings, tenements, rowhouses and hotels. The extant examples of his work indicate that he was a talented architect of the period with the ability to create fine designs in a number of styles. In 1879, Engelbert closed his New York office and nothing is known of his life or career after that date.

Prior to the Civil War, the current style for commercial architecture was Italianate, a style based on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance. John B. Snook had introduced the style to this country in 1845 with the A.T. Stewart department store on Broadway and Reade Street. The form of the new Italianate mode or palazzo style was cubic, flat-roofed and nearly flat-surfaced. From the 1850s until the outbreak of the war, it was the standard style for commercial buildings.

During the War years and immediately following, when there was little active construction in New York, Britain was experiencing an upsurge in building. Some of the new residential structures, commercial buildings and hotels there reflected the architectural style of the Paris of Louis Napoleon--the Second Empire style. Napoleon III had embarked upon a major campaign to redesign Paris. One of his major projects and one of the most widely known outside of France was the New Louvre (1852-57) by Visconti and Lefuel. The building, with its ornate pavilions and striking mansard roofs, became, "the symbol, par excellence, of cosmopolitan modernity."⁸ When the building market in New York began to burgeon between 1867 and 1873, the architects here adopted the new French-inspired style popular in Britain and adapted it to the American environment.

The prominent characteristics of the Second Empire style are pavilions which add plasticity and verticality to the facade, and mansards which enhance the pavilions and create bold silhouettes. These characteristics contrast sharply with the nearly flat surface and flat roof of the Italianate palazzo. In New York, because extensive lot coverage and building to street-property line were traditional in commercial architecture, fully developed pavilions were usually found only on institutional buildings surrounded by open land or on a few free-standing mansions. Often, the style as expressed in a business structure was the standard palazzo topped with a mansard, with little or no vertical articulation of the facade to indicate pavilions. It was left to the silhouette of the mansard with its towered sections to create that image. The Grand Hotel is not a melange of palazzo below and palais above, but an example of the Second Empire style not based on the high style of the New Louvre but rather on the style of the new hotel particuliers lining the sidestreets of the redesigned Paris.

The new Parisian houses were three between five and seven stories high with simple mansard roofs and, often, commercial ground floors. The intermediate floors were distinguished by a different window treatment at each level and band courses at still level. The story immediately below the mansard was usually enhanced by an iron balcony. Details such as pilasters and quoins were used to enframe corner and end windows. The Grand Hotel has a number of these elements.

The Broadway or main facade of the hotel originally had a cast-iron ground floor of delicate columns and broad plate-glass shop windows that continued around the corner to West 31st Street for one bay. The present appearance of the ground floor is due, in large measure, to a complete alteration of the storefronts in 1957.⁹ The building has square-headed windows at the second and third floors, segmental-arched windows at the fourth and fifth floors, and full round-arched windows at the sixth floor, creating an arcade effect below the mansard. With exception of the end and central bays, the window enframingent is homogeneous at each story yet differs from floor to floor. Strong molded band courses at the sill level enhance the horizontal effect created by the unified fenestration at each story. The slightly projecting end and central bays create shallow pavilions which add verticality to the facade. The pavilions are emphasized by quoins for

the full height of the building and by rich window enframements. The vertical note of the pavilions is continued above the roof cornice by the towered mansard.

The sophisticated restraint of the facade of the hotel contrasts with the elaborate two-story towered mansard above the heavy bracketed roof cornice. The profile of the tall straight-sided corner towers and central convex tower which rise above the roof line of the mansard recall the crowning roofs of the New Louvre pavilions. The towers are boldly embellished with dormers that, unfortunately, have been stripped of their ornament.

Englebert took full advantage of the hotel's prominent corner site by cutting the corner of the building at an angle and creating a one-bay chamfer. The West 31st Street facade is more restrained than the Broadway facade. The windows are handled like those in the recessed sections of the main facade, and there are also three shallow pavilions, at the end bays and a broad five-window wide central pavilion. When the hotel first opened, the ground floor on West 31st Street did not contain shop windows but was rusticated with arched windows.

The Grand Hotel and its neighbor, the Gilsey House, two blocks south on Broadway, are important reminders of a colorful period of the city's past and valuable parts of our architectural heritage. Their continued use and preservation greatly enhance our urban environment.

Report prepared by James T. Dillon
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FOOTNOTES

1. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department; Docket Books N.B. 619-68.
2. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973), pp. 122-172.
3. Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 296.
4. New York Times, May 20, 1979, IV, p. 20.
5. Trow's Business Directory, 1870.
6. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 24, 1856, p. 373.
7. Henry - Russell Hitchcock, Architecture: Nineteenth Twentieth Centuries (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 50-51.
8. Ibid. p. 194.
9. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department; Docket Books Alt. 223-57 and Alt. 224-57.

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 Grand Hotel 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 Grand Hotel was designed by Henry Engelbert, a notable New York City architect, that it is an excellent example of the Second Empire style, that the hotel was built for Elias S. Higgins, a prominent 19th-century carpet manufacturer and hotel developer, that the design of the hotel incorporates elements found in the new townhouses of Napoleon III's redesigned Paris, that the elegant marble facade is enhanced by restrained ornamentation, that the building is crowned by a handsome mansard roof, which recalls the roof of the New Louvre, and that the Grand Hotel is a valuable part of the city's architectural and historic heritage.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Grand Hotel, 1232-1238 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 832, Lot 66, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. May 24, 1856, p. 373.

Henderson, Mary C. The City and the Theatre. Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973.

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Trow's Business Directory, 1870.



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Built: 1868

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Architect:
Henry Engelbert