

7 WEST 54TH STREET HOUSE (Philip Lehman Residence), Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1899-1900; architect John H. Duncan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 29.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 7 West 54th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing was continued to January 8, 1980 (Item No. 3). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 20 witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters and petitions have been received supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This elegant residence was built in 1899-1900 for Philip Lehman, a prominent New York banker. Designed in the French Beaux-Arts style by architect John H. Duncan, it is a distinguished example of the fashionable town houses that once characterized the West Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and is one of an ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street.

Midtown Manhattan remained open farmland until the first half of the 19th century when shanty towns, rubbish dumps, stockyards, and factories began to appear above West 40th Street. The landscaping of Central Park, commenced in 1857, helped spur the development of midtown, and during the building boom that followed the Civil War, the West Forties and Fifties became lined with brick and stone residences. These new houses ranged from lavish Fifth Avenue mansions commissioned by such individual clients as the Vanderbilts to middle-class dwellings erected on a speculative basis.

The house at 7 West 54th Street occupies part of the original site of St. Luke's Hospital (1858), which fronted on West 55th Street at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue. The hospital dominated the east end of the block until new quarters were erected on Amsterdam Avenue at 113th Street in 1896. That same year, construction began on the University Club, designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White and located on the northwest corner of West 54th Street and Fifth Avenue. During the next few years, several fashionable residences were constructed on the north side of West 54th Street. Together with the University Club, a designated New York City Landmark, they typify the fine turn-of-the-century residences and private clubs that transformed the Fifties near Fifth Avenue and Fifth Avenue itself into an exclusive neighborhood--part of the continuing northward residential trend in Manhattan. Many of the buildings were designed by New York's leading architects for the city's most affluent and prominent citizens, such as Philip Lehman.

Philip Lehman (1861-1947), the cousin of New York Governor Herbert H. Lehman, was the son of Emanuel Lehman, a founder of Lehman Brothers. This successful firm began in the 1850s as a cotton brokerage and developed after the Civil War into one of the world's leading investment banking houses. Philip Lehman became a partner in the firm in 1887. He served as first

chairman of the board of directors from 1929 to 1941 and was also a director of the F.W. Woolworth Company from 1912 to 1947. Philip Lehman is perhaps best known, however, for his fabulous private art collection, enlarged after his death by his son Robert.

Philip Lehman commissioned his splendid Beaux-Arts style town-house from the architect John H. Duncan in 1899. Duncan (1855-1929) was well known as the designer of two of New York's most imposing monuments, the General Grant National Memorial (1891-97) in Manhattan and the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch (1892) on Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, both designated New York City Landmarks. In both cases his designs were chosen in competition with many others and his success must have helped Duncan establish a clientele of notable New Yorkers for his residential and commercial work. The architect designed many fine residences in New York, often using the neo-French Classical style; examples of his work may be seen at 8-10 West 76th Street in the Central Park West-76th Street Historic district and at 11 East 70th Street, a designated New York City Landmark. In designing the Lehman residence, Duncan was able to show his adeptness in the Beaux-Arts style.

The handsome exterior of the Lehman residence is faced with rusticated limestone that provides a background for a profusion of luxuriant relief carving. The four-and-one-half story, two-bay residence is symmetrically massed and distinguished by an elaborately designed two-story mansard roof. A central front entrance is located at ground floor level, approached by a low stoop. The arched entry frames double glass doors and is flanked by a pair of windows crisply recessed into the facade and ornamented with decorative iron grilles. Ornate console brackets with carved garlands and fruit appear above the windows and entrance, supporting a bowed balcony at second story level. The balcony fronts two pairs of French windows that are crowned by richly carved, extremely ornate cartouches. Double-hung windows with eared architraves and fronted by decorative iron balcony grilles light the third story. The third story is crowned by an impressive cornice designed with heavy console brackets and foliate ornament that marks the beginning of the steep, slate mansard roof. Two dormer windows with egg-and-dart moldings and heavy crowning cartouches, pierce the roof at fourth-story level, while the attic above is lit by three oval lucarnes, also surmounted by copper foliate cartouches. Even the limestone roof coping bears carved foliated detailing, and it terminates in console brackets. The original design is remarkably intact, the only alterations being the replacement of the second and third story window sashes. The pleasing proportions, scale, and skillful application of rich ornament to the rusticated stone facade is testimony to the talents of John Duncan as a designer of fine residential architecture.

In the years following World War I, the mansions of Fifth Avenue and the fine residences on the adjacent Fifties side streets began to give way to commercial and apartment house development. Most of the town houses which survived were altered for commercial use on the ground floors. A portion of 54th Street west of Fifth Avenue was a rare exception to this trend. The Lehman residence stayed in the possession of the Lehman family until the 1970s. After his father's death in 1947, Robert Lehman occupied the residence, supervising the redecoration of the interiors in the early 1960s, and expanding the family art collection which was composed of the works of such masters as El Greco, Rembrandt, and Goya. After Robert

Lehman's death in 1969, the collection was transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where it is installed in a specially designed pavilion which includes recreations of the interiors of the 7 West 54th Street House. The house itself was acquired by the 7 West 54th Street Realty Corp. in 1974. With its exuberant Beaux-Arts design it is a distinguished reminder of the fine residences that lined the blocks west of Fifth Avenue during the turn of the century.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 7 West 54th Street House (Philip Lehman Residence) 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 7 West 54th Street House (Philip Lehman Residence) is a handsome French Beaux-Arts town house; that it is a distinguished example of the residential architecture that once characterized the Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; that the pleasing proportions, scale, and skillful application of rich ornament to the rusticated stone faced is testimony to the talents of John H. Duncan as a designer of fine residential architecture; that the house forms part of a handsome ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street; that it was built for Philip Lehman, a prominent New York banker and art collector; and that with its distinguished architectural features, it is a reminder of the exclusive neighborhood of the Fifties and Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century.

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 7 West 54th Street House (Philip Lehman Residence), Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 29, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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