

ASTRAL APARTMENTS, 184 Franklin Street, Greenpoint, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1885-86; architect Lamb & Rich.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2540, Lot 1.

On July 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Astral Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 21). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Astral Apartments is a massive, six-story apartment house faced with brick and terra cotta, occupying the entire blockfront on the east side of Franklin Street between India and Java Streets in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. In 1885-86, Charles Pratt, oil merchant and philanthropist, built the Astral Apartments for workers in the Greenpoint area. Designed by the New York architectural firm of Lamb & Rich, the building was considered highly innovative at the time of its construction, incorporating a number of features that were a radical departure from contemporary standards for workers' housing.

Greenpoint had been a largely rural, undeveloped section of the town of Bushwick until the 1850s when the shipbuilding industry began to leave Manhattan and settle on the Greenpoint shoreline of the East River. This industry brought national and international fame to the area by producing some of the most important ships of the 19th century including this nation's first ironclad warship, the Monitor. With the shipbuilding industry came a rapid increase in the population of the area giving Greenpoint, though small, a distinctly urban character. Other industries, such as glass-making, porcelain and china manufacturing, pencil and box factories, foundries, and oil refining followed shipbuilding, making Greenpoint the industrial center of New York after the Civil War.

The housing conditions in which the poor and working-class population of American cities lived had reached critical proportions by the mid-19th century. In New York, the situation had deteriorated to an appalling level. Not only were people packed together in concentrations unequalled in any American or European city, but the apartments they lived in had little light, less air and no indoor plumbing. The first law governing tenements in New York State was "An Act for the regulations of Tenement and Lodging Houses in the Cities of New York and Brooklyn," passed by the legislature on May 14, 1867. This law did improve conditions somewhat but it still did not completely address all the glaring shortcomings of the housing situation. No truly effective laws were added until the end of the century. What advancement there was in the field came from small, individual efforts such as Alfred T. White's Tower and Home Apartments in the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn and Charles Pratt's Astral Apartments.

Oil merchant and philanthropist Charles Pratt (1830-1891) was born in Watertown, Massachusetts. In 1851, he moved to New York City taking a job with the paint and oils firm of Schenck & Downing. Three years later, Pratt became a partner in the paint and oils firm of Reynolds, Devoe & Pratt. In 1867, he withdrew from this partnership

and established the firm of Charles Pratt & Co., crude oil refiners. At his Greenpoint refinery, Pratt not only provided "Pratt's Astral Oil," but also manufactured tools, cans, petroleum barrels, sulphuric acids, and other materials and chemicals used in petroleum refining. "Pratt's Astral Oil" gained a worldwide reputation as a less flammable lighting fuel and created a large-scale export trade for the company. On October 15, 1874, Pratt's interests were acquired by John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil. At the time, Pratt's refineries had a capacity of 1500 barrels of oil a day and were regarded as the most efficient and successful in the country. Pratt remained with the company and quickly became a major force at Standard Oil.²

At the time of his death, Pratt was Brooklyn's wealthiest citizen and perhaps its greatest philanthropist. In 1887, he founded the Pratt Institute and its Free Library as a place for students to gain practical skills so that they could become responsible citizens. He generously endowed the Adelphi Academy on Brooklyn, the University of Rochester, his son's alma mater, Amherst College, and the Emmanuel Baptist Church on Lafayette Avenue. He also bestowed grand houses as wedding gifts for his sons along Clinton Avenue near his own mansion at No. 232.³

The fact that Pratt not only built schools, universities, and churches but also built a model workers' housing project, can be understood as part of his personal philosophy of philanthropy and as part of the intellectual climate of the period which held that a healthy environment created a healthy individual both physically and spiritually who, in turn, contributed to the well-being of the larger society. There were also distinctly practical aspects to this attitude: a worker who lived in decent housing performed his job better; and as slums were seen as a breeding ground for crime and contagious diseases, their elimination was a social good. When Pratt hired the architectural firm of Lamb & Rich to design the Astral, the two architects took care to study other model apartment houses both here and in Europe with particular attention to the work done in London, both by philanthropists such as George Peabody, the American banker, Baroness Burdett-Coutts and Sir Sidney Waterlow, and by housing associations like the society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes.⁴ A number of the interior features incorporated into the Astral were derived from these English prototypes.

The English designs which most influenced the arrangement of the apartments in the Astral seem to be those of Henry Roberts who served as architect for the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Laboring Classes. One of their most prominent projects called Model Houses for Families was erected in 1849-50 in the Bloomsbury section of London. Each of the flats had a kitchen with scullery alcove from which a separate room with toilet opened. There was a substantial rear courtyard providing air and light to the rear of the apartments and it was also used as an area for drying clothes. One of Robert's other projects included bathrooms in the basement.⁵ These three features were all included in the Astral, where each scullery had a washtray and sink with hot and cold water, a range, a coal box, an ash chute to the cellar, and a window opening to the exterior for ventilation. A small room with a toilet and an exterior window opened off the scullery. The rear courtyard and the roof were allotted to the residents for drying clothes and the basement contained the bathrooms. The bathrooms had large tubs with hot and cold water, steam heat, marble floors and wainscoting, and polished ash woodwork.

Another feature influenced by English design was the treatment of the stairwells. Built of brick and stone, they divide the Astral into six subunits and were fitted with "buttoned" windows which were removed in the summer, creating a stairwell fully opened

to the exterior which greatly enhanced ventilation. Open stairs were first used in London for hygienic reasons because early tenement stairwells were notorious for their filth and foul odors. Exposure to the open air dissipated the smells, and materials used allowed for easy cleaning and maintenance, and they were fireproof.

Other elements of the Astral design are: dumbwaiters in the halls at each floor for hoisting heavy goods, coal and wood; a large lecture room with an impressive fireplace located in the basement and supplied with books and newspapers; and ground-floor stores in the corner units at Java and India Streets which were organized on a cooperative basis to reduce apartment rents. These ranged from \$10 to \$25 per month for two, three or four room flats.⁶ The management of the Astral would also arrange, if a group of families so desired, for one of the six subunits to be taken by them and "have it entirely in their own charge."⁷ This aspect of the Astral may indicate that provisions would be made for worker management or cooperative ownership of the apartments. These design features and amenities are a radical departure from standard 19th-century design for working-class flats and make the Astral Apartments a significant step in the development of the American housing movement.

Lamb & Rich, the firm that designed the building, was established in 1882 by Hugh Lamb (1848-1903) and Charles Alonso Rich (1855-1934).⁸ Lamb was born in Scotland and began his architectural practice in New York with Lorenzo Wheeler in 1878. The firm lasted but four years yet, during that time, they designed a number of buildings on the Upper East Side, Fifth Avenue, and two interesting French Flats on Perry Street in Greenwich Village. They also designed a development of Queen Anne styled rowhouses for people of moderate means on Henderson Place in the Yorkville section of Manhattan in 1880.⁹ Rich, born in Beverly, Massachusetts, studied at the Chandler Institute and Dartmouth College. After graduating from Dartmouth in 1875, Rich spent the next five years, including three years in Europe, continuing his architectural studies. The firm is particularly known for its collegiate buildings which include the principal buildings of Barnard College; twenty buildings on the campus of Dartmouth; the Pratt Institute Main Building; and various structures at Williams, Smith, Colgate and Amherst Colleges.¹⁰ They are also responsible for many handsome rowhouses in Park Slope and Mount Morris Park, all in the Romanesque Revival or Queen Anne styles or a combination of the two.

The Astral is designed in the Queen Anne style which became popular in Britain at the beginning of the 1870s and in the United States toward the end of that decade. Its leading advocate in England was Richard Norman Shaw (1831-1912) who occupied the centre of the architectural stage at that time. First used for country and suburban houses and later for urban residences, the Queen Anne is a brick architecture of asymmetrical massing using crafted details, molded brick, and clay tiles. Architectural details often referred to elements from earlier English periods and were combined with strong, picturesque roof silhouettes composed of gables, often derived from Flemish precedents, dormers, and prominent chimneys. The facade was enlivened and given an extra dimension by the use of oriels, polygonal bays and deep recesses. In the design of the New York rowhouse of the period, it was usual to combine the Queen Anne with another contemporary American style, the Romanesque Revival, and, as with the British prototype, often to employ stepped gables which contrasted with the more common flat roof. As in Britain where architectural motifs of the Queen Anne referred back to earlier indigenous styles, so too in New York where the stepped gabled referred back to the city's Dutch heritage. Moreover, in New York, the style was often rendered in a combination of materials: brick, terra cotta, stone, slate, pressed metal, wrought iron, and stained glass.

The major facade of the Astral is along Franklin Street with two secondary facades along India and Java Streets. The rear of the building is not fully visible from the street but is divided into a number of pavilions. This is an important feature of the building's plan because it allows for each rear apartment to have windows that open onto the large rear courtyard rather than onto an air shaft. The dominant element of the main facade is a projecting central entrance section that rises the full height of the building. Its battered base of rough-faced stone is pierced by a half-circle arch with wide stone voussoirs and is surmounted by a brick bandcourse with a terra-cotta plaque inscribed "The Astral." Above this base rises a deep, four-story high, round-arched recess which indicates one of the stairwells and is one of the most dramatic architectural elements of the facade. The entire central section is crowned by a stepped gable. Three sided projecting window bays over the corner stores rise from the second to the sixth floor and were originally crowned by gables. Such roof gables, particularly the Flemish-inspired central gable, and the deep round-arched recess refer to Richard Norman Shaw's luxury apartment house, the Albert Hall Mansions, which was being competed in London at the same time the Astral was being completed in Greenpoint. The arched recess is a motif in a number of Shavian structures. At the fourth window bay to either side of the central section are other entrances marked by half-circle arches with brick dog-tooth archivolt springing from rough-faced stone imposts. Above the entrances, the four stairwell windows are not aligned with the other windows of the facade. The first and fourth level windows have brick round arches with stone imposts carved with ornate Byzantine-inspired floral designs. The second and third levels have unusual segmental arches with dog-toothed entrados, brick corbel shoulders, and brick splayed lintels that carry the sills of the windows above. Each window has a recessed paneled brick parapet. The apartment windows are square-headed at the second floor with a continuous brownstone lintel band; segmental at the third and fourth floors with splayed brick lintels; square-headed at the fifth; and round-arched with brick voussoirs and raised extrados at the sixth except at the corner three-sided bays where the windows are square-headed and carry deep sandstone and terra-cotta lintels.

The facade is further enhanced by brick and stone bands at the second floor and brick and terra-cotta cornice at the fifth. The sixth floor is given distinction by the use of pulled and recessed headers and stretchers in imitation of the tiles used by Shaw and others on some of their Queen Anne English country houses. A corbeled cornice crowns the building and is topped by an iron railing with brick and terra-cotta newels. The corner stores are designed with cast-iron storefronts and alternating bands of rough-faced stone and brick at the piers.

The two side facades share many of the design elements of the main, Franklin Street facade, including the treatment of the windows and the facade surfaces. The India Street elevation is the longer of the two and is asymmetrically massed. The central projecting entrance bay with stepped gable on Franklin Street is repeated here with a simplified treatment of the base. The three-sided bays at either end of the Franklin Street elevation are also repeated and, at the ground-floor level of the eastern bay is a half circle entrance to a stairwell. At the roof above the stairwell, a major part of the crowning gable remains. Between the projecting entrance section and the eastern bay are two other round-arched openings now partially filled-in. The Java Street side is more simply treated with only one projecting three-sided bay carried on an ornately carved stone corbel above the storefront. There is only one stairwell on this side and it is designed in the same manner as the secondary stairwells on Franklin Street, but it is still graced by its crowning gable.

The Astral Apartments is one of the most important 19th-century apartment houses in New York City and is one of the earliest model housing projects designed and built for the working class. The many exceptional features of the building, the interior arrangement of the apartments, the integration of communal and private spaces, the amenities provided, and the handsomely rendered Queen Anne styling of the facade all distinguish the Astral from its contemporaries, and make it a major example of its type.

FOOTNOTES

1. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Greenpoint Historic District Designation Report, (LP-1248), report prepared by James T. Dillon, (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1982), 1-8.
2. Dumas Malone, ed., "Charles Pratt," Dictionary of American Biography, VII, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 168-170.
3. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Clinton Hill Historic District Designation Report, (LP-2017), report prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart, (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981), 48.
4. Brooklyn Daily Eagle, December 5, 1885.
5. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Early Victorian Architecture in Britain, Vol. I, (New York: DaCapo Press, 1972), 468-470.
6. Brooklyn Daily Eagle, December 5, 1885.
7. "The Astral Apartments," promotional pamphlet, (Brooklyn, 1885), 6.
8. Dennis S. Francis, Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900, (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), 48.
9. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Henderson Place Historic District Designation Report, (LP-0454), (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1969), 2.
10. Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970), 506.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Astral Apartments 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 Astral Apartments is one of the most important 19th-century apartment houses in New York City; that it is one of the earliest model housing projects designed for the working class; that many of its features were a radical departure from then contemporary

standards for workers' housing and represent a significant step in the development of the American housing movement; that it was built by Charles Pratt, one of Brooklyn's wealthiest citizens and perhaps its greatest philanthropist; that it was designed by the notable architectural firm of Lamb & Rich; and that it is a handsome and skillfull rendering of the Queen Anne Style.

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 Astral Apartments, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 2540, Lot 1, Borough of Brooklyn as its Landmark Site.

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