

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 6, 1989, Designation List 216
LP-1697

GOTHAM HOTEL (now Peninsula Hotel), 696-700 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1902-1905; architects Hiss & Weekes.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 38.

On February 7, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Gotham Hotel (now Peninsula Hotel), and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses, including the representative of the owner, spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The imposing neo-Italian Renaissance Gotham Hotel (now the Peninsula Hotel) is one of the few structures on Fifth Avenue which recalls the golden age of luxury hotels and the prominent place they occupied in the formation of the city. Erected between 1902 and 1905 by the Fifty-Fifth Street Company, a real estate development firm, it was designed by the architectural firm of Hiss & Weekes and is among the oldest of the early "skyscraper" hotels. These hotels heralded the transformation of Fifth Avenue from an exclusive residential street -- Millionaires' Row -- to a fashionable commercial thoroughfare. Rising twenty stories, including a multi-storied rooftop addition, at the southwest corner of West 55th Street and Fifth Avenue, the boldly rendered Gotham is a stylistic counterpoint to its contemporary, the flamboyant Beaux-Arts St. Regis Hotel directly across Fifth Avenue and also skillfully complements McKim, Mead & White's University Club which adjoins the Gotham to the south.

History

The development of the luxury hotel in New York began when John Jacob Astor (1763-1848) commissioned Isaiah Rogers in 1836 to design an hotel to be erected on the site of his former house on fashionable lower Broadway opposite City Hall.¹ The Astor House was an immediate success and maintained its position as New York's finest hotel for over fifteen years until the city began its relentless northward growth. The fashionable center of the city moved "uptown" to Broadway between Canal and Houston Streets. Prompted in part by the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1853, a host of hotels were erected with the finest and most lavish rising along this section of Broadway. These hotels not only lived up to the standards set by the Astor House, but even exceeded them, vying to outdo each other in opulence. After the Civil War and the recovery of the economy from the general depression that followed, the city again moved north and a number

of grand hotels opened near Madison Square along Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

John Jacob Astor (1864-1912) and his cousin William Waldorf Astor again exerted their family's influence as arbiters of taste and fashion in both the worlds of high society and real estate by constructing the hotel Waldorf Astoria in 1892 and 1897 on the site of two neighboring family mansions on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 34th Streets (now the site of the Empire State Building).² In 1892, William Waldorf Astor also commissioned the New Netherland Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street. Fifth Avenue at that time was lined with this country's finest mansions designed by its most prominent architects to house its wealthiest families. The spires of churches which had been the tallest objects along the avenue were now eclipsed by these new "skyscraper" hotels. These hotels were the first to combine two separate building types: the skyscraper, previously restricted to the downtown area and to office use; and the hotel which had generally been low-scaled and essentially domestic in character. These hotels heralded the transformation of Fifth Avenue from an exclusive residential street--Millionaires' Row--to a fashionable commercial thoroughfare.

A decade after these hotels opened, the city once again underwent a substantial change. Major civic improvements, particularly in rapid transit, changed the character and pattern of movement of the city's residents. The first subways were being built, three East River bridges were either in the planning stages or under construction, as were the two great railroad stations, Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal.

By the beginning of the 20th century, distinct hotel districts developed. The areas immediately around the railway stations attracted hotels catering to transient businessmen. The theater district, which had moved to Times Square, encouraged the construction of hotels for tourists. Fifth Avenue, with its cachet of wealth and elegance, inspired the building of hotels for the well-to-do in New York -- who desired accommodation for the winter social season or for extended stays. A new kind of luxury hotel, providing a more exclusive and refined environment, was in demand and the Gotham, erected between 1902 and 1905, was one of the new hotels built to meet this demand.

Design of the Gotham

When the architects of the Gotham, Hiss & Weekes, chose the neo-Italian Renaissance as the style for the new hotel, they were not only aware of prototypes in Italy but were keenly aware of contemporary buildings in New York by McKim, Mead & White, which were altering the appearance of the city. McKim, Mead & White's lasting fame and influence is associated with the revival of Renaissance forms. Madison Square Garden (1887-91) and the Boston Public Library (1887-95) are among two of the most important monuments which reintroduced the Renaissance style to America and both were undertaken while Weekes was with the firm serving as draftsman and designer. In fact, during the thirteen years that Weekes was employed by McKim, Mead & White, from 1886 to 1899, most of the firm's important Renaissance-inspired buildings were produced.

The influence of the years Weekes spent with the firm can readily be seen in the design of the Gotham. When plans for the hotel were first publicized, it was favorable noted that the Gotham was skillfully adjusted

to the design of McKim, Mead & White's University Club (now a designated New York City Landmark) immediately to the south:

We all know how woefully individualistic our builders have been, resulting in a mass of fragmentary, inharmonious, clashing architecture, no attempt being made to work in common for the sake of beauty and uniformity. This great projected hotel [the Gotham] of eighteen stories is designed to harmonize with the adjacent University Club, which is a fine piece of architecture. The architectural lines of the hotel will follow the lines of the University Club. The same centre line will make a continuous arcade of five openings in the club and five in the hotel. The stone balustrade will be carried out on the same lines of the present balustrade of the club. Thus the whole block will be tied together. The general scheme of architecture is also the same as that of the club, being Italian Renaissance as far as possible in an eighteen storied building.³

This harmonious relationship between the two buildings is further understood when it is remembered that Weekes was one of the men who produced the first drawings for the University Club.⁴

The influence of another of McKim, Mead & White's buildings which Weekes may have worked on, The Sherry hotel (1896-98), can also be seen in the design of the Gotham. Now demolished, this ten-story building stood on the southwest corner of 44th Street and Fifth Avenue and was the only large hotel McKim, Mead & White designed in the 1890s.⁵ Similarities exist in the choice of the neo-Italian Renaissance style, the cornice treatment, the strong horizontal lines, and the use of Gibbs surrounds on the end windows; the corner of each hotel is stepped.⁶

In the design of the Gotham, the architects acknowledged the influence of McKim, Mead & White with skill and also made an individual architectural statement demonstrating their own creative abilities as they adapted neo-Italian Renaissance forms and details to an eighteen-story skyscraper. This was further enhanced by rich sculptural detail. Hiss & Weekes' Gotham Hotel is an important part of the architectural history and development not only of Fifth Avenue but the City of New York.

Architects

Philip Hiss (1857-1940) was born in Baltimore and received his early education there. Later, he traveled to Europe and continued his studies in Paris. On his return to this country he settled in New York and established an architectural partnership with H. Hobart Weekes. Weekes, a native New Yorker, was educated at the Trinity Church School and later traveled through the United States, England, France, Italy and Greece studying architecture and sculpture. Soon after his return to New York in

1886, he joined the firm of McKim, Mead & White and remained with them until 1899 when he joined with Hiss.⁷

The firm of Hiss & Weekes continued in practice for thirty-four years producing a number of buildings in the city including: the Belnord Apartments (1908-09), a massive neo-Italian Renaissance apartment house on West 86th Street (a designated New York City Landmark); and the handsome Beaux-Arts townhouses at 6 and 8 East 65th Street (now in the Upper East Side Historic District). Outside the city, other buildings by the firm include the Church of Bethesda by the Sea in Palm Beach, Florida, the Elizabeth Arden Building in Chicago, and private homes on Long Island and in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Description

Faced in limestone, the Gotham Hotel rises twenty stories above the intersection of West 55th Street and Fifth Avenue. The Fifth Avenue facade is five bays wide and the West 55th Street elevation which contains the main entrance is six bays wide. Based on the configuration of the classical column, the hotel is designed with a base, shaft and capital. The base, originally consisting of two stories now subdivided into three stories, consists of monumental, rusticated piers supporting a full entablature with triglyphs. This entablature continues the line of the first-story cornice on the University Club. Between the piers, the first story is pierced by square-headed, flat-arched storefronts of recent date, above which is the round-arched second story. Originally, the first two stories were united in a single double-height arcade following the arcade of the adjoining University Club. There was also a balustraded enclosure along Fifth Avenue as there was at the University Club. Both were removed as a result of a 1908 city ordinance mandating the widening of Fifth Avenue on both sides by fifteen feet. The division of the Gotham's arcade into a square-headed first story and a round-arched second story probably took place shortly thereafter. The third-story windows, above ornamental festooned shields, are square-headed and deeply recessed with carved, beveled soffits. All the window openings above the arcade to the seventeenth story are square-headed, and all the windows are double-hung.

The main entrance to the hotel, on West 55th Street, is a dramatic architectural statement. The square-headed doorway is surrounded by an architrave molding richly carved in a stylized foliate design. A broken segmental pediment enhanced by swags crowns the doorway and carries two female sculptures depicting the mythological figures of Ceres and Diana. Between the two sculptures is a bull's-eye window. On either side of the doorway are monumental engaged columns on plinths. These stylized Doric columns are fluted and encircled by intricately carved bands and support a full entablature. This entrance bears a resemblance to the one to the University Club. On each side of the entrance are three bays. The two easternmost bays continue the arcade treatment of Fifth Avenue. The one nearest the entrance is a two-story round-arched window as are the three western bays.

The fourth through the sixth stories, designed as a transition from the base to the shaft of the building, are rusticated. The fourth-story windows are flanked by diminutive pilasters that carry the sill brackets of

the heavily enframed fifth-story windows. There is a band course at sill level of the fifth story where the windows are alternately crowned by segmental and triangular pediments with a variation on West 55th Street where the alternation takes place after every two windows. The sixth-story windows are simply enframed except at the end bays where the windows have Gibbs surrounds as do all the end bay windows through the sixteenth story.

A cornice above the sixth story marks a shift from the full rustication of the base and transitional fourth through sixth stories, to rustication at the end bays only, enframing the smooth-faced ashlar of the central section of the facade. This sixth story cornice repeats the design of the second story cornice on the University Club. There are stone balustraded balconies at the end bays. On Fifth Avenue, the end bays have double windows while those on West 55th Street have two separate windows. The windows of the central, smooth-face section are simply enframed. At the tenth story, a balcony on heavy scroll brackets unites the three central windows and echoes the horizontal of the University Club's roof entablature. Originally this balcony was graced with an iron railing. There is a similar balcony on West 55th Street.

A garlanded cornice above the fifteenth story, indicating the beginning of the capital, carries scroll brackets and wreathed corbels at the sixteenth story which support the two-story high arcade of the seventeenth and eighteenth stories. This arcade, embellished by garlanded shields and wreathed bull's-eyes flanked by flaming torches, echoes the arcade of the base and visually ties the building together. It also carries the weight of the enormous copper roof entablature.

The western elevation, along the lot line, is simply treated. It is pierced by square-headed windows and the bands and rustication above the fifteenth story are continued from the main facade. There is also a recessed light court at the southern end of this elevation. The southern elevation, parallel to West 54th Street, is marked by a central recessed court spanned by braces at the fifteenth and seventeenth stories. The full copper roof entablature of the main facade is carried along this elevation. Both of these secondary elevations are painted a neutral limestone color. There is a multi-level rooftop addition designed in 1980 by Stephen B. Jacobs & Associates in a modern idiom with a screen wall, slanting roofs and glass atria reflecting the multi-purpose use of this new structure.⁸

Subsequent History

The Gotham remained in use as a hotel under various owners until 1981, when it was closed for a major renovation under a new owner. The hotel reopened in 1987 as Maxim's de Paris. The Peninsula Group acquired the hotel in the fall of 1988, subsequently renaming it the Peninsula and adding it to a world-wide group of luxury hotels by that name.

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NOTES

1. This John Jacob Astor was the first to bear this name in America. See: "Astor, John Jacob," Dictionary of American Biography. vol. 1, ed. Allen Johnson (New York, 1927), 397.
2. This John Jacob Astor, the fourth by this name, died in the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. See: "Astor, John Jacob," DAB, vol. 1, ed. Allen Johnson (New York, 1927), 400.
3. Architectural Record, 12 (Nov., 1902), 622-24.
4. Leland M. Roth, McKim, Mead & White, Architects (New York, 1983), 401, footnote 98.
5. Ibid. 223.
6. Leland M. Roth, A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1897-1915 (New York, 1977), Plate 98.
7. Philip Hiss obituary, New York Times, Dec. 16, 1940. H. Hobart Weekes obituary, New York Times, Dec. 18, 1950.
8. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1270, Lot 38. Alt 557-1980.

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 Gotham Hotel (now Peninsula 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 Gotham Hotel is one of New York's early luxury hotels and recalls the prominent place they occupied in the formation of the city; that, the Gotham, along with others, heralded the transformation of Fifth Avenue from an exclusive, low-rise, residential street to a fashionable commercial thoroughfare of tall buildings; that, the hotel is a boldly rendered example of the neo-Italian Renaissance style by the architectural firm of Hiss & Weekes; that it skillfully complements the adjoining University Club forming a superior piece of urban design; and that, the Gotham Hotel is an important part of the architectural history and development of the City of New York.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Gotham Hotel, 696-700 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 38, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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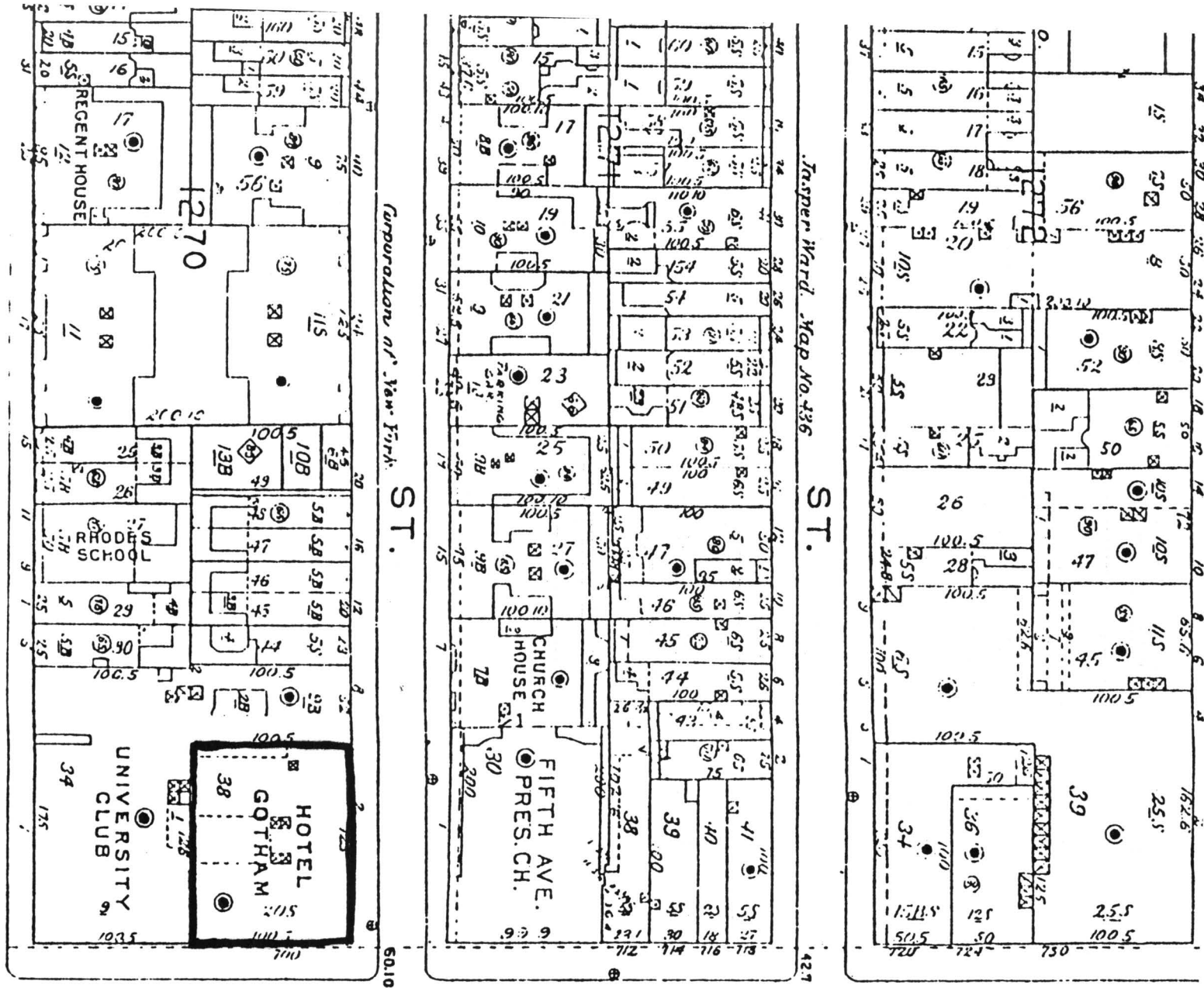
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FIFTH

120

60

3

120

SCALE OF FEET

PART OF SECTIONS 4 & 5

84

Gotham Hotel, 696-700 Fifth Avenue,
Manhattan, Landmark Site

Source: Manhattan Land Book, 1988.





Photo Credit:
Carl Forster

Gotham Hotel
696-700 Fifth Avenue
1902-1905

Architects:
Hiss & Weekes



Photo Credit:
Carl Forster

Gotham Hotel
696-700 Fifth Avenue
Entrance Detail

Architects:
Hiss & Weekes



Photo Credit:
Carl Forster

Gotham Hotel
696-700 Fifth Avenue
1st and 2nd story windows

Architects:
Hiss & Weekes



Photo Credit:
Carl Forster

Gotham Hotel
696-700 Fifth Avenue
4th-6th Story windows

Architects:
Hiss & Weekes