

THE PLAZA HOTEL, 5th Avenue at 59th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1905, completed 1907; architect Henry Janeway Hardenbergh.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1274, Lot 25.

On May 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Plaza Hotel and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 18). Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission continued the hearing until November 10, 1966 when it was closed (Item No. 4). At that time the lawyer representing the owners opposed designation. All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

By day, the impressive white mass of the Plaza Hotel is visible above the trees in Central Park. By night, the lighted windows and the picturesque silhouette of the high roofs, reminiscent of a French Renaissance Chateau, add a note of beauty to the skyline. Located at Fifth Avenue on Central Park South, the building occupies one of the finest sites in the City and is the most elegant of our great New York hotels. Although the detail and decoration are in a style which the architect described as French Renaissance, the boldness of mass and good scale of this eighteen story white brick and marble structure make the Plaza the outstanding example of American hotel architecture of the first decade of the Twentieth Century.

To the east, the Hotel faces toward Fifth Avenue, but is separated from it by the Pulitzer Memorial Fountain which forms part of the Grand Army Plaza, extending from 58th Street to 60th Street, ending with Augustus Saint-Gaudens' great equestrian statute of General Sherman. The whole design of this area is like that of a European square and is one of the few squares of this quality existing in New York City. Although the surrounding buildings are not stylistically unified, at least some attempt was made to relate them through use of materials and the treatment of the facades. No other hotel in New York commands such an important and beautiful site. The Plaza Hotel, the second of this name at this same location, was constructed between the years 1905-1907 from the plans of Henry J. Hardenbergh, an architect of unusual ability, who was a pioneer in the field of luxury hotel and apartment house design. He is also noted for having designed the Dakota Apartments on Central Park West. The architect of the Hotel took full cognizance of the site, as he explained "to allow the building to be viewed in its entirety from many points of view and from considerable distances."

The imposing dignity of the two principal faces of the hotel is largely due to the carefully worked out unity and symmetry of the basic design. Since the north and east elevations are often viewed together, the corner tower provides a strong, coherent transition from one to the other. Repetition of architectural motifs such as balconies, balustrades, arches, loggias, pilasters and columns gives unity to the overall design. The picturesque gables of the Fifth Avenue front successfully counterbalance the ornate dormers of that facing Central Park. The relation of the upper loggias to the breaks in the front wall has been skillfully worked out. It is these subtleties of design, as well as many attractive details, which make the Hotel so satisfying architecturally, whether considered in its parts or as a whole.

Both of the main facades are tripartite in composition, being composed of a central portion with terminal sections at each corner. Vertically, they consist of a base, a shaft and a crown, each clearly marked off by horizontal band courses or balconies for emphasis. The base consists of three stories of marble two of which are rusticated. The shaft is formed by ten floors of white brick topped by a marble balcony which creates a band of deep shadow. The crown consists of the top five floors including the gables and steep slate roofs with their dormers. Two corners of the rusticated base on the east side are rounded, these flow logically upward into turrets which rise uninterruptedly for fourteen floors, through shaft and roof crown, terminated by small domical roofs.

The entrance portico of the Fifth Avenue front extends the width of the center portion and is composed of six columns in a modified version of the Tuscan order, topped by a balustraded balcony. Above this, paired pilasters of Corinthian derivation rise through the second and third floors, to support the continuous entablature and dividing the wall into five bays of windows. Tiers of windows arranged symmetrically rise, one above the other, to form the simple brick shaft of the building but, toward the top, decorative horizontal band courses are introduced, making a transition to the ornate roofs above. The gray-green mansard roof rises steeply and displays three tiers of picturesque dormer windows, varying in size and design, which create a sparkle of light and shade against the expanse of roof, which is topped by an elaborately patterned cresting of green copper.

Originally, there were only two entrances, the main one on West Fifty-ninth Street and a more exclusive one on 58th Street, used mostly by the permanent guests. The 58th Street facade, although in character with the two principal ones, is treated more simply and has an addition of later date to the west. On the Fifth Avenue side, a low, broad terrace once looked out over the square and opened from a restaurant, now the Fifth Avenue lobby. In 1921 the terrace was removed to make way for the present Fifth Avenue entrance. At that time three hundred more rooms were added to the Hotel on the Fifty-Eighth Street side.

The 59th Street front, facing Central Park, is designed as a basically symmetrical facade. The main entrance is through an entrance porch in the center portion. This same architectural motif is repeated in the top two floors, just below the roof, where five arched openings are separated by paired pilasters, reminiscent of the design used at the center of the Fifth Avenue front. A balcony with scrollwork extends the full width of the building on this side, and defines the five-story crown of the roof. In the central section of this roof, four tiers of dormers are set in a steep mansard roof. The corner sections have high pyramidal roofs with imposing dormers flanked by smaller ones on each side.

For sixty years the Plaza Hotel has played a part in the social life of New York, always maintaining its dignity yet reflecting the changes in the manners and customs of the Twentieth Century. When the Hotel opened its doors on October 1, 1907, a large orderly crowd stood opposite the main entrance on Central Park South to watch the arrival of the fashionable guests. On October 7, 1964 another crowd of howling teenagers gathered to welcome the Beatles. The Plaza has gracefully bridged this stretch of time and change. Eve Brown in her book, The Plaza, Its Life and Times, says: "From the cotillion to the bunny hug, to the Charleston, to the frug; from diademed dowager to dancing deb; from Lillian Russell to Eloise; from Elinor Glyn to Eleanor Roosevelt; from Groucho to Gromyko; from Billie Burke to Brigitte Bardot; from Caruso to Ringo; from High Society to Hollywood - through all phases of transition, The Plaza has managed always to be in tune with the times, its dignity unruffled, its good taste unimpaired." It is interesting to add that Frank Lloyd Wright, the apostle of a generation of architectural rebels, always chose this Hotel for his visits to New York.

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 Plaza 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 Plaza Hotel is one of the most distinguished examples of American architecture of the early Twentieth Century, that it was one of the truly great hotels of the world when built and remains so today, that it is skillfully designed to take advantage of the beautiful site which it occupies, that for sixty years it has been prominently associated with the social life of the City, that it is a fitting climax to the northern terminus of America's most important shopping street, that it forms one side of an exceptionally handsome city square, and that, by night and by day, it adds immeasurably to the beauty of the skyline of New York City.

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 Plaza Hotel, Fifth Avenue at 59th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1274, Lot 25, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.