

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, Central Park West between West 77th Street and West 81st Street, Borough of Manhattan. South central wing begun 1874, completed 1877; architects Vaux & Mould. West 77th Street building begun 1889, completed 1900; West wing on Columbus Avenue begun 1906, completed 1908; architects Cady, Berg & See. East wing on Central Park West begun 1922, completed 1924; architects Trowbridge & Livingston. Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall begun 1931, completed 1935; plans by John Russell Pope. North wing of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall begun 1931, completed 1933; Hayden Planetarium completed 1935; architects Trowbridge & Livingston.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1130, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described buildings are situated.

On June 14, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the American Museum of Natural History and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 14). 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. In a letter to the Commission, the Director of the Museum approved the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The American Museum of Natural History, in addition to being one of the world's finest institutions devoted to natural science exhibits, is also one of our largest municipal cultural structures. It covers one of the most spacious sites in New York City, formerly known as Manhattan Square. The Museum is not a single building but consists of eighteen interconnected units. This impressive complex represents the work of almost a score of our most eminent architects. Nearly a century of development and expansion is reflected in its growth and in the several architectural styles manifested in its facades. As a gateway to the study of natural history, this fabulous institution has few peers in the world.

In 1869, a group of distinguished men of affairs, including Theodore Roosevelt, the elder J. P. Morgan and Joseph H. Choate, incorporated the American Museum of Natural History and in less than two years opened it to the public in the old Arsenal Building in Central Park. Three years later President Ulysses S. Grant laid the cornerstone for a new building on its present site, and in 1877 the Museum celebrated its second opening, in the first unit of its new home.

This early building by architects Vaux & Mould is a five story red brick and stone structure, in the Victorian Gothic Style, now hidden behind the center of the Museum's long pavilion facing West 77th Street. The architects for the central unit on 77th Street, which was completed in 1891, were Cady, Berg & See who preferred the Romanesque Revival to the Victorian Gothic Style of their predecessors. They also designed the similar east and west wings which were added to this central unit during the years 1894-1900. This completed the Museum's principal 77th Street elevation extending from Columbus Avenue to Central Park West. It is the most impressive example of Romanesque Revival architecture in New York City.

The 77th Street Facade

This imposing facade is a uniform composition in both style and material, comprising five stories of smooth and rock-faced Vermont pink granite with steep sloping red slate roofs. The main motif of the central unit consists of two graceful stairways rising from the street to an open platform at first floor level, on either side of a giant segmental arch, formerly the carriage entrance. A handsome seven-bay arcaded porch, surmounted by a continuous balustrade, extends along the platform level and terminates in forward-projecting engaged towers located at each end of the central unit. These impressive towers are recalled at the extremities of the facade where they take on a more nearly circular form. With a conical slate roof at the west tower and a pyramidal shaped one at the east tower, they rise substantially above the remainder of the structure. An ornate cornice encircles these towers and carved eagles, perched on wreaths, adorn them at the base of the steep roofs. In 1906 the 77th Street section was extended north along Columbus Avenue, adjoining it and in the same style of architecture.

When the Museum required further enlargement, the task was given to the firm of Trowbridge and Livingston, which started a wing to the north on Central Park West in 1922, using a gray granite and adapting the classic style. They carried through the principal heights of the 77th Street section in the Central Park West structure. Actually the decision to change to a classic design enabled the architect John Russell Pope, a devoted classicist, to achieve his design, won in competition, for the central unit facing Central Park, the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial. Pope's winning design, an expression of the Roman triumphal arch motif, was carried out by Trowbridge & Livingston in a warm shade of limestone. The cornerstone was laid in 1931 by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then Governor of New York State.

This monumental entrance section dominates the Central Park West facade and projects forward from the main line of the building. A broad flight of stairs leads up to the triumphal arch. Deeply recessed within the arch is the impressive entrance doorway with enframed bronze doors, ornate frieze and a large expanse of window grille above them. On each side of the arch two free-standing Ionic columns, each with its own broken entablature and sharply defined cornice, are surmounted by sculptured figures silhouetted against a high attic wall inscribed with a dedication to the President. The surface of the pedestals, supporting the columns, and a low wall carried forward on either side of them are decorated with superbly carved bas reliefs of animals. In front of the arch, on a wide platform, a high pedestal bears an imposing equestrian statue of President Roosevelt by James E. Fraser.

In later years other additions have been built, including the functional Hayden Planetarium with dome and Copernican Hall, designed by Trowbridge & Livingston and finished in 1935. Although a master plan was originally conceived, the buildings have been built over a long period of years, and each represents the architecture of the period when it was built. As seen from Central Park, the buildings are set back at a comfortable distance where they may readily be seen in their entirety, a none too common occurrence in New York City, where so many of our most beautiful monuments are located in such crowded quarters that it is difficult to enjoy either the building or its setting.

Nearly three million visitors from all parts of the world flow through the Museum's corridors annually. Inside, protected by four acres of glass, more than 2,300 habitat groups, mounted specimens, showcases, dioramas, and scientific exhibits fill fifty-eight great halls and alcoves open to the public. The Museum is also a research laboratory, a school for advanced study, a publishing house for scientific manuscripts, and a sponsoring agency for field exploration expeditions. The institution contains one of the world's finest natural history libraries consisting of 175,000 volumes.

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 American Museum of Natural History 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 American Museum of Natural History is an interesting complex of buildings, incorporating outstanding examples of Romanesque Revival and Roman Classic architecture of the late Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, blended into a unified composition of great distinction and individuality befitting this Museum and that it ranks as one of the great institutions in the world, a tremendous asset to the cultural life of the City and to the country.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West between West 77th Street and West 81st Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1130, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described buildings are situated.