



View Southwest from Central Park, 1932 (Gottsho-Schleisner Archive, Museum of the City of New York).

The street begins at the Plaza and ends at Columbus Circle,...and the structures join together to create a streetwall that is one of New York's best: a veritable cliff of masonry, solidly cutting a line between the hardness of the city and the softness of Central Park.¹

¹ Paul Goldberger, The City Observed: New York (New York: Vintage Books 1979), p.179.

CENTRAL PARK SOUTH : THE EVOLUTION OF A HISTORIC DISTRICT

Draft report prepared by Michael O. Gotkin for the Historic Districts Council, May 1997.

A neighborhood of towering hotels and luxurious residences that is distinguished by one of New York City's most romantic skylines, Central Park South is now being proposed by the Historic District Council and others for designation as a historic district. The proposed district, anchored to the east by the landmarked Plaza Hotel and extending west to the former Gallery of Modern Art at Columbus Circle, includes familiar hotels, apartment buildings, and clubhouses along Central Park South as well as lesser known stables and garages on West 58th Street. Central Park South is the core of the proposed historic district, preserving diverse architectural styles within a constant streetwall that is accentuated by the fanciful roofs of the hotel towers. The dramatic effect of this masonry-and-glass wall remains today as it was depicted on picture postcards from the 1930s and as described in a guidebook at that time: "...a picturesque cliff, amidst towering trees to the north and other soaring skyscrapers to the south."¹

The proposed district has maintained a remarkably high degree of architectural integrity, having survived two building booms in the last 40 years; however, with developers bidding on midtown properties at a frantic pace, Central Park South might not be able to withstand the present heated real-estate market without landmark protection. Manhattan Community Board 5 was quick to recognize the threat to the area, and in February 1997 unanimously passed a resolution requesting that the Landmarks Preservation Commission designate Central Park South as a historic district. Joyce Matz, co-chair of the Board's Landmarks Committee, noted that the proposed district's distinguished buildings together form "an architecturally unified and elegant wall, appropriate to the historic and lush parkland opposite." The Community Board's resolution recognizes that the buildings are not only important as works of architecture, but also as backdrop to one of America's premier works of urban design, and perhaps the city's most visited tourist attraction, Central Park.

Gold Coast (1875-1907)

The history of the proposed Central Park South Historic District reveals a mix of periodic real-estate speculation and city regulatory controls, which determined both the form and function of the district. After the completion of Central Park in the 1870s, the construction of elaborate mansions on Millionaires' Row (Fifth Avenue) extended north to 59th Street. Chateau-like houses designed by such architects as George B. Post and Richard Morris Hunt defined the district just south of the park, replacing tenements, stables, and small commercial buildings. Post's sprawling house for Cornelius Vanderbilt II, constructed from 1878-82, was located on Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, and included the entire blockfront of 58th Street facing Grand Army Plaza. Modeled after a

¹ W. Parker Chase, New York: The Wonder City (New York: Wonder City Publishing Co. 1931), p.141.

French Renaissance castle, with steep mansard roofs, rounded corner turrets, and pointed dormers, the extravagant Vanderbilt mansion set the context and inspired the styling of taller buildings which later surrounded and eventually replaced it.²

Most notable of the early multi-story buildings in the area was the Spanish Flats, designed by Hubert & Pirsson in 1881 as the city's largest and most elegant apartment complex.³ Located on Central Park South, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, the series of linked apartment buildings was distinguished by Moorish-influenced turrets, elaborate chimneys, and ornamental dormers on its lively rooftops. At over 100 feet tall, and spanning the length of an entire city block, the Spanish Flats towered over neighboring buildings. Massive apartment buildings like the Flats enraged townhouse owners, who, seeking to protect their light and views, waged a successful lobbying campaign to limit building heights. With the passage of the Building Law of 1885, tall apartment buildings were forbidden. The restrictive law was contested by some who sought exceptions specifically for the construction of tall apartment buildings located opposite a park. Property owners were, however, able to construct hotels, which were not covered by the law. The southern perimeter of the park soon became a favored site for large hotel construction, and Central Park South was thereafter known as a hotel district, even after repeal of the law in 1901.

Because Central Park affords one of the rare opportunities in the city to view buildings, as well as groups of buildings, in their entirety, roof definition becomes especially important, providing architectural drama and also advertising luxurious qualities of the buildings. The magnificent roof of the Plaza Hotel, which opened in 1907, was influenced by the French Renaissance styling of the neighboring Vanderbilt mansion. The Hotel took advantage of its setting on Central Park South to provide a picturesque backdrop to the verdant park, establishing a sheer streetwall and concentrating romantic detail at the roof line. Architect Henry J. Hardenbergh elaborated on the special qualities of building opposite the park: "Distance and mass are added to the consideration of the surroundings. In a skyscraper having an exposed situation, the distribution of masses counts for more than decorated details. But the surroundings are also a vital factor. In designing the Plaza Hotel, for instance, the situation on Central Park largely determined the simplicity of the details."⁴

² The Vanderbilt mansion was demolished in 1927 and replaced by Bergdorf Goodman, which featured a green mansard roof, a theme at Grand Army Plaza that was earlier established by the Plaza Hotel (1907), and continued by the Savoy Plaza Hotel (1927), Sherry Netherland (1927), and Hotel Pierre (1928). Decorative friezes from the demolished Vanderbilt mansion were incorporated into the facade of the Sherry-Netherland, and the house's iron entry gates were later re-erected as the entrance to Central Park's Conservatory Garden at Fifth Avenue and 105th Street.

³ M. Christine Boyer, Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style 1850-1900 (New York: Rizzoli 1985), 159-60.

⁴ John Tauranac, Elegant New York: The Buildings and the Builders 1885-1915 (New York: Abbeville Press 1985), p.152.

Hotel Row (1927-1941)

The Plaza Hotel set the tone for the next wave of construction at Grand Army Plaza and along Central Park South, as the Vanderbilt mansion and Spanish Flats were replaced with elegant high-rise buildings. Many of the new towers featured green mansard roofs, a tradition established by the Plaza Hotel. In 1930, *The New York Times* noted that “a new skyline has been built up...” which included the Pierre, Sherry Netherland, Savoy Plaza, Bergdorf Goodman, St. Moritz, Barbizon Plaza, Hampshire House, Essex House, and the New York Athletic Club.⁵ These buildings, which still define the architectural scale and character of the district, were all constructed within a few years of each other, from 1927-31. Though each building was designed by a different architectural firm, and each featured its own fanciful roof ornament, they are related to each other by color, material, and scale. Praising the “extraordinary unity” of the green-roofed buildings at Grand Army Plaza, *The WPA Guide to New York City* of 1939 goes on to describe the architectural harmony of Central Park South: “Central Park South, in character, is an extension of the plaza. Its skyscraper hotels, seen from the park, have a magnificent quality as a group.”⁶

The new hotels on Central Park South were notable for their dramatic massing and whimsical rooftops, designed to be visible above the treetops of Central Park. The St. Moritz, designed by Emory Roth, displayed a dramatic facade composed of a series of asymmetrically arranged setbacks above the 21-story streetwall, culminating in a tile-roofed tower inspired by the architecture of Renaissance Florence.⁷ The tower is visible from far south on Sixth Avenue, and marks the end of the boulevard at Central Park. The Barbizon Plaza, located across Sixth Avenue from the St. Moritz, featured what was once the most striking rooftop in the area, as America’s first skyscraper with a glass pinnacle. Designed by Lawrence Emmons, the top four stories were constructed entirely of glass brick set in a steel skeleton. The glass was faceted on the outside to reflect the rays of the sun, and produced a dazzling display by day. At night, the glass roof was illuminated from within to provide a variety lighting effects, including duplicating the phosphorescent glow of moonlight.⁸ This fantastic spectacle was sadly covered and “Art Deco-ized” by a gilded turret, courtesy of the Donald Trump organization, which bought the hotel and converted it to condominiums in the 1980s.

The Essex House was composed of a cliff-like series of ornamented masonry setbacks. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 1930, critic Lewis Mumford was uninterested in the ornamental detail, but impressed with the dramatic massing and subtle color gradation of

⁵ “Central Park South’s Rising Skyline,” *The New York Times* (October 12, 1930), section 11, p.1.

⁶ *The WPA Guide to New York City* (New York: Pantheon Books 1982), p.230.

⁷ Steven Rutenbaum, *Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emory Roth* (New York: Balsam Press 1986), p.153.

⁸ “A New Beacon,” *The Architect* (June, 1930), p.243.

exterior brickwork designed by architect Frank Grad.⁹ The neighboring Hampshire House, designed by Caughey & Evans, had an equally impressive silhouette of cascading setbacks faced in gleaming white brick. The building was distinguished by an unusual combination of Spanish Baroque ornament and Moderne aluminum details, culminating in a steep copper roof. The Hampshire House was abandoned in mid-construction when its financing collapsed in 1931. Deserted for more than six years, the incomplete building became a curiosity on Central Park South, and a fitting, though temporary, monument to the frenzied financial and real-estate speculation that resulted in the stock market crash of 1929.

Although the Great Depression effectively ended the hotel building boom in the area, the composition of striking towers remained as the most impressive expression of modern city living. As critic Robert A.M.Stern has noted, the group of hotel towers "...especially as seen from Central Park, immediately became one of the most optimistic visual images of city life, an elegiac composition that balanced New York's two kinds of man-managed nature, Olmsted's sylvan landscape and the pinnacled mountain range of mid-Manhattan. Not only was this image burned into the public's psyche by photographs, etchings, and drawings...but it was also widely disseminated by postcard views and Hollywood films, which presented the city as a romantic dreamlike place."¹⁰

Notable exceptions to the dearth of construction during the Depression were two apartment buildings designed by Mayer & Whittlesey in 1941. The firm was masterful at integrating large modern apartment buildings into the existing urban fabric. At 40 and 240 Central Park South, the designers were careful to preserve the existing streetwall that framed the park, as well as to relate to the lower scale on West 58th Street by constructing separate towers of different heights connected by garden courtyards. These buildings also contributed to the ornamental roofscape of Central Park South, with fanciful enclosures for water tanks and mechanical equipment, albeit in modern "functionalist" guise. The striking complex of staggered apartment towers that comprise 240 Central Park South is located at the western end of the proposed district, and visually concludes the dramatic cadence of high-rise turrets along Central Park South.

Luxury Lane (1950-1964)

After World War II, construction on the hotel blocks of Central Park South initially involved ground floor modifications including new entrances, cafes, and shops. When the building industry picked up again, the character of Central Park South was transformed by the construction of expensive new apartment buildings designed to attract a fashionable international clientele. In 1961, *The New York Times* noted that "...the three-block strip of Fifty-Ninth Street probably has more doormen, limousines and poodles than

⁹ Lewis Mumford, "The Park Gets a New Setting," The New Yorker (October 4, 1930), p.62.

¹⁰ Robert A.M.Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, & Thomas Mellins, New York 1930 (New York: Rizzoli 1987), p. 217.

any other part of the city.”¹¹ Most of the new residential construction consisted of contextual though unremarkable buildings that filled gaps in the streetwall by replacing smaller townhouses with 21-story apartment buildings. 200 Central Park South, designed by Wechsler and Scimenti in 1964, managed to be both contextual and noticeable. A continuous sweeping curve of glass and balconies, located at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Central Park South, the building maximized the number of apartments facing the park while maintaining the established streetwall. Architectural Critic Paul Goldberger championed this building, noting that the broad “swoop” was a fine, and at that time novel way to deal with a corner lot opposite the park.¹²

The former Gallery of Modern Art, located at the extreme western end of the proposed district at Columbus Circle, is the district’s most significant postwar building. Designed by one of America’s foremost 20th century architects, Edward Durrell Stone, and originally commissioned by Huntington Hartford in 1957 to house his eclectic art collection, the marble-clad building opened to the public in 1964. Although it has since changed ownership more than once, it has always been maintained as a cultural institution open to the public. Controversial from the start, the building is notable as the first major design to break with the International Style. It is also the only contemporary building to relate to the curve of Columbus Circle, as well as to set an appropriate stage for the Columbus and Maine Monuments. New York City is fortunate to have the Gallery of Modern Art as part of a collection of distinguished museum buildings designed by world leaders of modern architecture, including Stone’s earlier Museum of Modern Art (1939), Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum (1959), and Marcel Breuer’s Whitney Museum (1966).

Special Zoning (1968)

Some buildings, however, were not so well integrated into the area. In the 1960s building boom, midtown office construction was beginning to encroach upon the predominantly residential and hotel-oriented buildings located just south of Central Park. When McKim, Mead & White’s majestic Savoy Plaza Hotel was razed in 1967 and replaced by the mammoth General Motors Building, preservationists and city planners realized the necessity to safeguard the unique character of this area. Preservationists successfully rallied to landmark the Plaza Hotel, which was rumored to be the next victim of the office-construction boom. The City Planning Commission contributed to the preservation effort in 1968 by enacting a special hotel zoning district for the Central Park South area. Designed to protect the existing high-rise hotels, the new zoning allowed only residential and hotel-related construction in the district. The Planning Commission stated that “to

¹¹ Arnold H. Lubasch, “‘Luxury Lane’ Set to Grow 500 Units,” The New York Times (August 6, 1961) section 8, p. 1.

¹² Goldberger, op. cit., p.180.

permit the street corners facing the park to build the conventional way of street speculation, encouraging new business buildings to establish completely a new dominance, would deprive the people of New York and their visitors of an aspect of the city which they prize.”¹³ Although the special zoning was effective at curbing office construction in the area, the shortcomings of this type of regulation became apparent when the new Park Lane Hotel opened in 1971, on a site that was originally intended for an office building. A sheer slab of vertical glass panels with blank masonry sidewalls, the 46-story building became the tallest on Central Park South and violated the established 21-story streetwall. The banal, flat-roofed tower was out of scale with the neighboring hotels and acontextual to the romantic roofscape of Central Park South.

In the intensive real-estate market of 1997, the integrity of the district is again at risk. It is remarkable that Central Park South has survived relatively intact through major real-estate building booms. The skyline of Central Park South appears today virtually identical to how it looked in the 1930s, when the romantic roofscape of hotel towers was first established. The small-scale buildings of West 58th Street, including some fine Beaux Arts apartment buildings and former stables, is also surprisingly intact, and has served to provide necessary breathing room between the fanciful Central Park South skyline and the dark-glass midtown office towers to the south. We are fortunate to have this dramatic backdrop for our landmarked park, and we owe it to ourselves, to visitors, and to posterity to preserve this legacy of urban design.

¹³ Charles G. Bennett, “City Acts to Save Midtown Hotels”, The New York Times (October 17, 1968), p.8.