

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 21, 1966, Number 7
LP-0279

TURTLE BAY GARDENS HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan. The property bounded by the western property line of 227-229 East 48th Street, the western property line of 226 East 49th Street, East 49th Street, the eastern property line of 246 East 49th Street, the eastern property line of 247 East 48th Street and East 48th Street.

On May 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Turtle Bay Gardens Historic District. (Item No. 32). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including the representative of the Turtle Bay Gardens Committee who welcomed designation. The Committee also stated that it wished no interference with their own restrictive covenants, which will run for about seventeen more years. Letters and other communications favoring designation were received by the Commission from residents of Turtle Bay. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The twenty houses which share Turtle Bay Gardens are four stories high, including the English basements and entrances. Some of them have an additional attic story in the rear, but the street facade is generally uniform in height. The house fronts are extremely simple in design, of harmonious neutral colors, with well proportioned windows, regularly spaced. The rhythm established by the repetitive window pattern is accented and enlivened by an occasional central window, on the second floor, which is treated with classic enframing and pediment. On the garden side the houses are extremely simple with delicate individual balconies and porches making interesting accents. The houses provide a most attractive setting for the gardens.

Residential architecture of the "twenties" is best remembered for its charm. It is exactly this phase of our architecture which finds its most charming expression in Turtle Bay Gardens. This work often reminiscent of simple Italian antecedents, relied largely on stucco walls contrasted with brickwork or tile. Terra cotta urns or figurines usually served as ornament and lent an air of gayety to the architecture. At Turtle Bay, a touch of humor is achieved by using a cast iron turtle in the gate posts of the entrance railing.

A beautiful garden shared by the houses on the two streets takes the place of conventional backyards. Low masonry walls separate individual private gardens from each other, and from a central esplanade which is shared by all. Two old willow trees, benches, and a fountain, a copy of one at the Villa Medici in Rome, grace the central esplanade. The openness achieved in this enclosed space is reminiscent of an intimate Italian garden. It is an oasis in the City.

The name "Turtle Bay" was derived from the cove off the East River, extending from 45th to 48th Street. This cove has long since been filled in and is now the site of the United Nations Park. A small stream, originating at Second Avenue and 48th Street, ran down into this cove. Historical records noted a profusion of turtles in this area with the "turtle feast" a happy occasion for the local residents. The name "Turtle Bay" was in common usage in wills and deeds by 1712.

The idea of creating this interior garden court was the inspiration of Mrs. Walton Martin who bought the existing buildings in 1919-20. They were originally built in the 1860's. She filled in the generally swampy backyards and redesigned the houses. The plans of no two houses are alike, although kitchens are generally located on the street side and living rooms usually face the gardens.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Turtle Bay Gardens Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Turtle Bay Gardens Historical District is one of New York's most intimate and picturesque neighborhoods with the gardens open to view where they may be seen by all the residents, that the houses are extremely handsome and the variety of their porches and balconies lend interest and charm to the setting, that it is a fine example of cooperation and understanding among neighbors and that it represents a planning ideal which sets an example for the rest of the City.

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 an Historic District the Turtle Bay Gardens Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, consisting of the property bounded by the western property line of 227-229 East 48th Street, the western property line of 226 East 49th Street, East 49th Street, the eastern property line of 246 East 49th Street, the eastern property line of 247 East 48th Street and East 48th Street.