

ADELAIDE L.T. DOUGLAS RESIDENCE, 57 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1909-11; architect Horace Trumbauer.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 893, Lot 5.

On May 8, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Adelaide L.T. Douglas Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Republic of Guatemala which is purchasing the property has expressed approval of the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This elegant residence was built in 1909-11 for the New York socialite, Mrs. Adelaide Townsend Douglas, in the Murray Hill section of New York. Designed in the French Classic style of Louis XVI by architect Horace Trumbauer of Philadelphia, it is a fine example of his residential work in New York City.

Murray Hill had begun to be developed with residences in the mid-19th century. The area took its name from the country estate of Robert and Mary Murray.¹ According to legend, during the Revolutionary War, Mary Murray had detained General Howe at the family house on their country estate, thus allowing George Washington to escape further northward.² Following the opening of Lexington and Fourth Avenues through the area in 1848, rows of brownstone residences were quickly built along the side streets. Socially prominent and wealthy residents, such as A.T. Stewart and J.P. Morgan, moved into the area, concentrating their residences along Fifth and Madison Avenues. Although by the turn of the century commercial development was beginning to encroach upon Fifth Avenue, the streets to the east of Madison still remained fashionable, due in large part to the efforts of J.P. Morgan.³ Park Avenue, south of the new Grand Central Terminal--which was under construction between 1903 and 1913--and north of 34th Street, was an elegant residential thoroughfare. Consequently in 1909 Adelaide T. Douglas purchased a choice site on Park Avenue⁴ with the intention of building an elegant Manhattan residence.

Adelaide L. Townsend Douglas (1852-1935) was the wife of William Proctor Douglas (1842-1919), a vice-commander of the New York Yacht Club. Douglas owned the schooner "Sappho" which successfully defended the America's Cup against the British challenger "Livonia" in 1871. In 1835 Douglas's father, George Douglas, had purchased a large portion of the Wynant Van Zandt estate in the Little Neck section of Queens County, Long Island. These holdings passed to William P. Douglas in 1862;⁵ several years later he married Adelaide L. Townsend of New York and Bayside (also in Queens County, just west of Little Neck). The location was particularly advantageous for Douglas's yachting activities. When Douglas donated land and a building for a station to the North Shore Railroad in 1867, the area became known as Douglaston.⁶ As land values in the area rose, Douglas decided to have the family estate surveyed and sold for suburban real estate development; sales began, in 1906, under the name of Douglas Manor. The impressive family residence known as Douglas Manor, which originally had been built for Wynant Van Zandt, became the Douglas Manor Inn in 1906; in 1921 it was sold to the Douglaston

Country Club and still survives today. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas had maintained a Manhattan residence as well as the Douglas Manor, but in 1908 the couple separated.⁷ The following year Mrs. Douglas commissioned the fashionable Philadelphia architect, Horace Trumbauer, to design a house.⁸

Horace Trumbauer (1868-1938), a life-long resident of Philadelphia, achieved great prominence as an architect despite his lack of formal architectural training. At the age of 16 he went to work for the Philadelphia architects George W. and W.D. Hewitt, then opened his own office in 1892. One of his important early commissions was "Lynnewood Hall" at Elkins Park, Philadelphia, for Peter A.B. Widener (1898). This led later to several other commissions from Widener including the Widener Home for Crippled Children, the Widener Office Building, the Widener Memorial Training School, all in Philadelphia; and the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University. Among his other important Philadelphia commissions were the Free Library of Philadelphia (designed 1908, constructed 1917-27) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1919-1928). He also designed residences for many wealthy and socially-prominent members of Philadelphia, Washington, and New York society. Those houses for New York clients were built in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. Among them were those for James B. Duke--for whom he also planned Duke University--at 1 East 78th Street (1909-12) and for Mrs. Amory F. Carhart at 3 East 95th Street (1913-21); both are designated New York City Landmarks.

In his designs for residential architecture Trumbauer favored the stylistic prototypes of 17th and 18th-century France. Such designs tended to be somewhat more restrained and less exuberant than those favored around 1900, but they are still in the Beaux-Arts tradition. The house Trumbauer designed for Adelaide Douglas falls into this mode. Working within the restraints imposed by the standard 25-foot wide New York City rowhouse, Trumbauer was able to create an elegant design based on the French Classic style of Louis XVI. Six stories high and faced with granite and limestone, the house rests on a rusticated base which forms the ground floor. It is pierced by segmental-arched openings with bracketed keystones. The grooves of the brackets are adorned with bell-flowers. Unfortunately the original doorway has been replaced but an original molding may be seen in the vestibule. A graceful wrought-iron fence encloses the areaway. Above the ground floor an impressive cornice, which also serves as a balcony, sets off the main portion of the facade at the second and third stories. This cornice is supported on heavy, paired guttae-adorned modillions which in turn are linked by swags. The cornice is surmounted by a delicate wrought-iron railing which shields the French doors at the second floor. These openings are flanked by pilasters which rise to the third floor. Carved stone panels in relief are set above the transoms over the French doors. They depict classically-inspired figures of children singing and playing musical instruments. The casement windows at the third floor are flanked by ornate incense burners with swags and boukrania, also carved in relief, which rest on the tops of the pilasters. Wrought-iron railings shield the windows. The fourth story rises above a modillioned cornice with a grooved frieze decorated with bellflowers. This story takes the form of a colonnade with arched window openings set back from the columns. Wrought-iron railings also shield these windows. A dentilled cornice and parapet set off the slate-covered mansard roof which forms the fifth story. The roof has a decorative copper coping, and it is pierced by three

copper-clad pedimented domers. The sixth story is set back from the building line and only the parapet is visible from the street. It is also shielded by a wrought-iron railing. The variety of ornamental detail, both in stone and in wrought iron, is particularly characteristic of the Louis XVI style, and it is one of the qualities which helps to give the building its special character.

Following Mrs. Douglas's death, the house was converted into apartments. In 1959 it was purchased by the United States Olympic Association to serve as its headquarters, Olympic House. This year it was purchased by the Guatemalan Mission to the United Nations. Despite changes to the interior of the house, the exterior remains almost entirely intact. As such it is a reminder of the period before World War I when Park Avenue was an elegant residential thoroughfare.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Anita Pins, An Historic District in Murray Hill (New York: The Murray Hill Committee, Inc., 1977), p. 9.
2. Pins, p. 7.
3. Pins, p. 12.
4. Section 3, Liber Deeds 143, Page 437, New York County Register's Office. Mrs. Douglas purchased her property from the Rapid Transit Subway Construction Company which had built the city's first subway line beneath Park Avenue five years earlier.
5. Lester Leake Riley, The Chronicle of Little Neck and Douglaston, Long Island ([New York]: Little Neck - Douglaston Division of the Long Island Tercentenary Commemoration of Queens, 1936), p. 17.
6. Riley, p. 23, cites the date as 1876, but Historical Collections of the Borough of Queens, New York City, vol. 10: Douglaston, Little Neck, and Whitestone (Jamaica, New York: Works Projects Administration, 1938), p. 22, gives the date as 1867. Also Beers Atlas of Long Island (1873), shows the "Town of Douglaston" with the depot and the railroad tracks.
7. The Social Register of 1908 (published Nov. 1907) lists Mr. and Mrs. William P. Douglas living at 4 East 46th Street. The Social Register for the summer of 1908 lists Mrs. Douglas at 4 East 46th Street and Mr. Douglas at 12 West 76th Street. They remain listed at separate addresses until his death in 1919. In his will Douglas left her the income from a third of his real estate "regardless of whether or not she renounced her dower rights." New York Times, June 12, 1919, p. 25.

8. No contemporary published accounts of the house have been found, an unusual situation among Trumbauer's clients. Because of her marital circumstances Mrs. Douglas may have wished to keep the house out of the architectural press.

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 Adelaide L.T. Douglas Residence 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 Adelaide L.T. Douglas Residence is an elegant structure designed in the French Classic style of Louis XVI; that it is a fine example of the residential work of Horace Trumbauer in New York City; that among its notable features are the rusticated base, the second story balcony, and the graceful carved ornament; that it was built for a prominent New York socialite; and that it is a reminder of the period when Park Avenue was an elegant residential thoroughfare.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Adelaide L.T. Douglas Residence, 57 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 893, Lot 5, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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Adelaide L.T. Douglas Residence
Built 1909-11

Photo Credit:
David Bishop

Architect:
Horace Trumbauer