

METROPOLITAN CHAPTER OF THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN AMERICA



Fall 2005



METROPOLITAN CHAPTER PROPOSES TO PUSH OUT THE BOUNDARIES OF SOHO-CAST IRON HISTORIC DISTRICT

This fall the Metropolitan Chapter embarks on one of its largest preservation initiatives, a push to expand the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District. This proposal grew out of our first project financed by the Margot Gayle Fund for Preservation of Victorian Heritage, a survey of New York City's cast-iron-fronted buildings not protected by historic district designation. Victorian Society in America founder Margot Gayle and her group, Friends of Cast Iron, were instrumental in getting the original district established in 1973. This act preserved the largest concentration of Victorian cast-iron full and partial facades in the world.

The Chapter's Preservation Committee recently undertook a survey of the unprotected buildings of SoHo and determined that the local historic district boundaries should be expanded to better reflect and protect the entirety of this historic commercial neighborhood. The Committee toured the area with close attention to the edges, taking as a starting point the New York State Register boundaries, which include both sides of West Broadway and Crosby Street. The local Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) district boundaries only included the east side of West Broadway and the west side of Crosby Street. The map on page four of the newsletter shows the local SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District boundaries and our proposed expansion to the west and east.

The Committee discovered that, while the lack of LPC regulation on the west side of West Broadway had a negative impact over the past three



From left to right, 419-421 Broome Street, designed by Griffith Thomas, 1873; 423 Broome Street, designed by D. & J. Jardine, 1883-84; and 425-427 Broome Street, designed by Edward H. Kendall, 1874

decades, the architectural integrity of the streetscape is still largely intact. The buildings on the east side of Crosby Street merit designation due not only to their architectural significance, but also because they add to the appreciation and understanding of nineteenth-century New York commercial architecture. These mostly masonry and cast-iron-fronted store and loft buildings are very similar to those within the historic district.

Committee research has also uncovered gems by important architects that lay just outside the district that should be included. The proposed new boundaries would protect such fine cast-iron-fronted buildings as 386-388 West Broadway, 1871, designed by Robert Mook and 392-394 West Broadway, 1872, whose architect was John H. Whitenack. Prominently situated on the northeast corner of Howard and Crosby Streets is an 1872 building designed by D. & J. Jardine (illustrated on the enclosed postcard) backed by an impressive L-shaped building with facades on Crosby and Howard Streets by Detlef Lienau, 1864-65, with additions from c. 1870. Another Jardine-designed building from 1883-1884 is at 423 Broome Street.

The hyper-inflated nature of the New York real estate market is such that every effort should be made to preserve these significant historic buildings before they are more directly imperiled. The 1973 designation helped create

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HELP US EXPAND THE SOHO-CAST IRON HISTORIC DISTRICT!

Fill out the enclosed postcard and mail it to us.

We will present them to the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Contact us at (212) 886-3742 or info@metrosva.org, if you would like more postcards to pass out!





Our Gothic tracery, ogee arches and crockets that ornament this newsletter come from Cass Gilbert's masterpiece, the Woolworth Building. Finished in 1913, this structure marked a turning point in New York City skyscraper design, a fascinating topic covered in our October 11 lecture by noted architectural historian, Sarah Landau.

The building was commissioned by Frank Winfield Woolworth, owner of the famed international five-and-dime store chain. Tradition holds that Woolworth paid all of the \$13.5 million of the construction costs in cash. At 792 feet in height, his new corporate headquarters surpassed the Metropolitan Life Tower as the tallest building in the world. The Woolworth Building held that title until 1929 when the Chrysler Building topped it.

Gilbert created this New York icon using the latest in twentieth-century building technology, a steel-girder skeleton, and clad it in a respectable skin of Gothic ornament. The lacy decoration covers its surface from its limestone base to its terra-cotta sides to its peaked roof that was originally gilded. The building is pivotal in the history of New York skyscrapers because it abandons the traditional "bas, column, capitol" organization used on such building as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower and points the way to great skyscrapers of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Empire State Building.

In the month of July, Chapter President Shawn Brennan testified at Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) hearings in support of granting landmark designation to two properties and requested that the LPC refuse to grant a 74-711 application for another.

The Chapter supported landmark designation of two very different structures. The first, the Drake-Dehart House at 134 Main Street in Tottenville, S.I., is a quaint Greek Revival wood-framed house built in the 1840s that survived into the twenty-first century with much of its delicate Victorian additions intact. The house was long owned by a family associated with the area's oyster trade so it was not only architecturally but also historically important. The house illustrates the threat these Victorian survivors face. When the house was put up for sale recently, the ads for the property touted the possibilities of its destruction and the redevelopment of the parcel as a commercial property.

At the same public hearing, the Chapter also supported granting landmark protection to the 1913 Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, 184 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn, a clean, modern structure of poured concrete void of ornament with a dramatic curved cornice. The building was designed by noted architect Cass Gilbert for the largest grocery wholesaler of the period, Austin, Nichols & Company, and preservationists were concerned about the owners' plans for redevelopment. The important building was a precursor to Gilbert's great 1918 Army Terminal and is an important survivor of northern Brooklyn's industrial waterfront.

Finally, the Chapter joined other concerned preservationists to persuade the LPC to refuse a 74-711 application, which would grant certain concessions to a developer in exchange for the restoration and preserva-



Front Door and Overview of Samuel Tredwell Skidmore House, 37 East 4th Street, Manhattan, c. 1845

tion of a designated landmark, in this case the Samuel Tredwell Skidmore House. This elegant structure, along with the Old Merchants House, are the last two surviving Greek Revival townhouses on East 4th Street. However, the LPC won a court case against the owners of Skidmore House back in December because of their shocking neglect of this already landmark-protected building. Preservationists were concerned that before any concessions to the developer are considered all necessary repairs should be undertaken to stabilize the building before construction begins on the large tower planned to butt up against the house on the east side.

These three cases represent some of our city's current preservation issues: unsympathetic, unregulated development of Victorian suburban communities, the preservation of our industrial heritage along the city's waterfront and the impact of large scale construction on existing landmarks. We will keep our members updated on how the commission rules on these three issues and others in future newsletters. ❁

FRANK FURNESS FOCUS OF PHILADELPHIA TRIP

On October 1, the Metropolitan Chapter will explore the work of the great nineteenth-century architect, Frank Furness during an all-day bus tour. This excursion will reveal Victorian Philadelphia through the work of one of our nation's great nineteenth-century architects. Michael J. Lewis, author of the book, *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (Norton 2001), will lead the tour. He is associate professor at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he teaches the history of American art and architecture.

Son of a Unitarian preacher, Frank Furness (1839-1912) trained at the atelier of Richard Morris Hunt in New York City in the late 1850s. After service in the Civil War and a few more years at Hunt's studio, he returned to a post-Civil War Philadelphia in the midst of an industrial boom. Over the course of his career, he designed over 600 buildings in an individualistic style



Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, designed by Frank Furness, 1871-76, Bond and Cherry Streets, Philadelphia

that evolved out of current architectural trends of the period. His unique design sensibility that drew from the French Neo-Grec and English modern Gothic styles

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METROPOLITAN CHAPTER CALENDAR

LECTURE SERIES

All Lectures are held at Donnell Library Auditorium, 20 West 53rd Street, FREE, *no reservation required.*

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 6 PM

"Is Mr. Ruskin Living Too Long?"

Paul Stirton, senior lecturer in history of art and fellow of the Centre for Whistler Studies, University of Glasgow and co-author of *Is Mr. Ruskin Living Too Long?: Selected Writings of E. W. Godwin on Victorian Architecture, Design and Culture* (White Cockade, Oxford, 2005).

The relationship between E.W. Godwin and James McNeill Whistler and the wider circle of artists, writers, actors and society figures that grew around them will be explored. Godwin began his career as an architect but moved increasingly into interior design, textiles, fashion, journalism and theater. Godwin's witty, opinionated writings point to the new criticism and sensibility that swept British artistic circles in the 1870s.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 6 PM

Inventing the New York Skyscraper

Sarah Bradford Landau, professor of art history, New York University; co-author, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913* (1996); New York City Landmarks Preservation Commissioner, 1987-96

Between the Civil War and World War I, the New York City commercial building dramatically increased in height, climbing from five to 55 stories. That phenomenon, and the factors that made it possible, distinguish New York as having played a critically important role in the invention of the skyscraper. Key New York buildings of the first great skyscraper age will be examined.



Footsteps.... "My wife! Mum's the word!"
From the "French Maid" series by Underwood and Underwood.
Courtesy Sheldon Aronowitz collection

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 6 PM

Victorian Television

Greg Dinkins and the New York Stereoscopic Society, Mr. Dinkins is a 3-D photographer, curator and founder and director of the New

York Stereoscopic Society

Stereoviews became the most common publishing medium for photography in the late nineteenth century, reflecting a wide ranging appetite for information, entertainment and gee-whizery. Then, as now, New York City institutions and celebrities were integral to the media culture. Special 3-D glasses will be provided for stereoscopic viewing.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 6 PM

Oscar Wilde in New York

John Cooper, contributor to the Oscar Wilde academic journal *Oscholars*, moderator of Yahoo's Oscar Wilde Internet Discussion Group and business manager, Victorian Society in America

Oscar Wilde, at 27 a novice poet and playwright, arrived in New York in 1882 to lecture on Aesthetic Movement principles, touring 150 North American venues in a year. He shocked and delighted Gilded Age America with his sparkling conversation and witty sayings. The lecture draws on new research, chiefly about New York in 1882.

TOURS

Members receive detailed flyers closer to an event's scheduled time. To reserve for tours, return flyer's reservation form with check. If you are not a member, contact us to receive a flyer.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 8 AM

Frank Furness's Philadelphia

Join Michael J. Lewis, author of *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (Norton 2001), on a day bus tour exploring the work of the great nineteenth-century architect, Frank Furness (1839-1912). Highlights include houses not normally open to the public and the great University of Pennsylvania Library (1888-1890).

Price to be announced
reserve by date will be in flyer

SATURDAY, DATE TO BE ANNOUNCED

The Hallowed Halls of Bronx Community College

Join us on an exploration of the former New York University Heights campus that was designed by Stanford White and constructed at the turn of the last century. Highlights will include the splendid Hall of Fame (1900) and the Gould Memorial Library (1897-1899) with its dramatic view of the Hudson River.

Price to be announced
reserve by date will be in flyer

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1 PM

Fabulous Victorian Flatbush

Ron Schweiger, Brooklyn Borough Historian, will lead a walk through the turn-of-the-century communities of tree-lined streets that make up this neighborhood. You will find out who the builders and developers were, how much the homes cost when they were built a century ago and much more. Along the way, see where such noted figures as Nelly Bly lived and take a peak inside a 1908 bungalow.

\$20/members, \$30/nonmembers
reserve by October 28

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1PM

Visiting Awardees: Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Transit Museum

Come see these two great institutions, singled out for Metropolitan Chapter Awards this year. Learn more about BAM's history and the recent restoration of this architectural jewel's cornice from Archivist Sharon Lehner who will pull material from their collection to show us. Then we will visit the Transit Museum for a special tour on the early history of New York's subway system.

\$20/members, \$30/nonmembers
reserve by November 11

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10, 8:45 AM

Holiday Harking in Newark!

Our second annual holiday tour will focus on Victorian Newark. The first stop will be the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, an imposing Gothic cathedral started in 1898. Then we go to the Ballantine House for an exclusive tour by Ulysses Grant Dietz, Curator of Decorative Arts. The 1876 house will be decked out for Christmas, using some of the original owners surviving decorations. After a leisurely lunch at a Portuguese restaurant in the Iron Bound, we have a guided bus tour of Newark. The last stop is the New Jersey Historical Society.

\$95*/members, \$105*/nonmembers
*includes lunch and reception
reserve by November 10



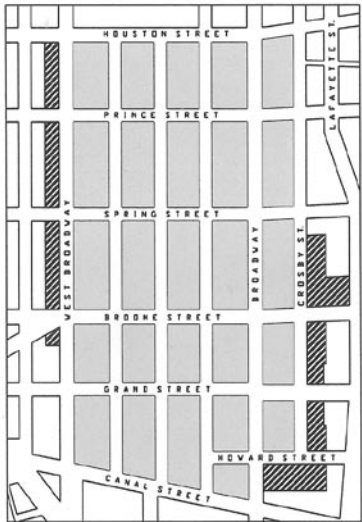
The Ballantine House dining room decorated
to reproduce an 1891 Christmas
Photo courtesy the Newark Museum

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» SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District continued from first page «



the vibrant and prosperous SoHo that exists today. This further designation, we firmly believe, will ensure the neighborhood's continued renaissance.

The Committee has prepared a comprehensive booklet containing its research and the proposed new boundaries. This will be sent to members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The committee will also be soliciting the support of other preservation organizations, community groups and local officials. The Metropolitan Chapter encourages our members to help us to further preserve this important neighborhood by filling out the enclosed postcard and

mailing it back to us. These will then be hand delivered to the commission so that we can show public support for this important initiative. ❀

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» Frank Furness Focus Tour continued from second page «

infused everything from art galleries to churches to railroad depots to homes.

The tour will include buildings covering the whole range of his career. Furness's three great Philadelphia masterpieces will be included: the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, designed in 1871, the First Unitarian Church, 1883-1886 and the University of Pennsylvania Library, constructed from 1888-1890. In 1973 major work restored the Academy's galleries and public spaces to their original polychrome brilliance. The library at the opening was considered one of the finest in the country, with a design that was developed with the help of Medvil Dewey, the originator of the Dewey Decimal System. In contrast to these grand public commissions, the tour will also gain access to Furness houses that are not normally opened to the public. By focusing only on buildings spanning a 30-year period, the development of Furness's unique style will become apparent, from confident interpreter of the modern Gothic to unique visionary with an architectural vocabulary all his own. ❀

RESTORATION OF BAYARD CONDUCT BUILDING BRINGS HOME NATIONAL AWARD

The restoration of the Bayard Condict Building façade was awarded a commendation on May 1 by the national Victorian Society in America at its Annual Meeting in Puerto Rico. Mary Rowan, board member of the Metropolitan Chapter, accepted the award on behalf of the owner, Shulsky Properties. The meticulous restoration and cleaning was carried out by Wank Adams Slavin Associates (see the Spring 2003 newsletter for more pictures and information).

The 1898 building at 65 Bleecker in Manhattan is the only Louis Sullivan design in New York City. The careful restoration involved removing, repairing and reinstalling 1,300 of the 7,000 terra-cotta pieces that make up the façade. Instead of replacing with cast copies, almost all the damaged pieces were repaired with epoxy and polyester and then reinstalled after cleaning the corroding cast-iron columns and replacing steel anchors. Only 30 pieces were replaced with copies. The façade was also cleaned and repointed. The approximate cost of the job was \$800,000. ❀

