

Exploring Union Square's landmarked buildings

By Wally Dobelis

In this year of many anniversaries of political, civil rights and social significance, we should also celebrate those of direct impact on helping New York maintain its historic past, letting us preserve our architectural and social accomplishments. The Landmarks Law of 1965 was prompted by widespread popular anger over the loss of Pennsylvania Station, and the Union Square Community Coalition was formed in 1980 to recover the badly neglected park and its neighboring 14th Street areas from a large population of derelicts and drug addicts.

USCC was successful in helping clean up the park and gaining landmark designations for the Ladies' Mile and East 17th Street/Irving Place Historic Districts, as well as in obtaining individual landmark designations for 14 local buildings, and is looking forward to securing the designation for five more worthy buildings.

All of the above are described in a gracious eight-page pamphlet, with a double-page cover photograph of a 1933 Labor rally of the type that made the Union Square North Plaza famous for free speech and assembly. This review attempts to identify the 19 buildings with short descriptions, in a manner of an excursion or walk around the park area, all within three blocks of the Square.

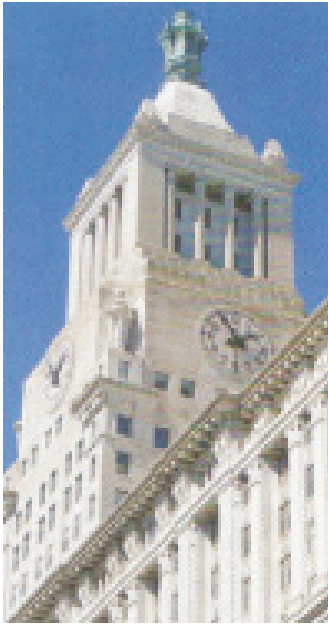
Starting at the southwest corner of Union Square with the Lincoln Building at One Union Square West (1890), we will proceed clockwise around the park. This large building was named for the Abraham Lincoln statue opposite it, but placed outside the park. Old Abe was subsequently moved into the center of the park.

Across from the Lincoln at 22 East 14th Street is the equally large former Baumann Brothers furniture and carpet emporium, with interesting cast-iron decorations of sunbursts and garlands, all in a framework of large windows. Now, re-cross 14th Street and walk north of the Lincoln Building. Just one block away on Union Square West, we find, at 31 Union Square West, the first skyscraper in the area (1903), the former Bank of the Metropolis, now housing the Blue Water Grill. Next to it at 33 Union Square West (1893) is the Decker Brothers Piano building, built in a Spanish-Moorish style. Recently restored by architect Joseph Pell Lombardi, it has an elegant roof area. Alas, the minaret at the top still needs recovery.

Moving north then east around the corner into 17th Street at 33 East 17th Street,



Photos courtesy of the Union Square Community Coalition
Daryl Roth Theatre Building



(Above) Consolidated Edison building (Right) Former Guardian Life Insurance Building



Former Tammany Hall

we find the former headquarters of The Century and St. Nicholas magazines in a fine Queen Anne style building (1881), now a major Barnes and Noble multi-story retail location. A door or two east, observe that at 200 East 17th Street on the corner of Park Avenue South, the tall Everett Building of corporate offices (1908), built on the site of the venerable Everett Hotel, has the topmost floors of the two principal facades decorated with rose-colored terracotta tiles.

Across the avenue at 201 Park Avenue South is the former headquarters structure of the Guardian Life Insurance Company of America (1911), with one of the largest mansard roofs in New York. The company was founded in 1860 by German refugee parliamentarian Hugo Wesendonck, the brother-in-law of poetess Mathilde, whose Wesendonck Lieder were put to music by Richard Wagner, an

other German revolutionary. The firm, originally named Germania Life, changed its name to avoid the stigma of World War I. Note that the name chosen has a matching letter count as Germania, anecdotally suggested to allow the thrifty owners reuse the heavy old roof-long light fixtures. GLIC moved around 2000 to Hanover Square, near its original 1860 premises on Wall Street, and the Park Avenue South office building has been turned into a W Hotel.

The space east of 201 Park Avenue South, a short structure designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (1963) at 105 East 17th Street, was built in a modern style calculated to mix well with the 19th century town houses on the opposite side of East 17th Street, now part of the Historic District.

And now we come to the first four of newly proposed five landmarks. Practically next to the Skidmore at 121 East 17th Street is an el-

egant original carriage house (1854), which has served as residence, office, cafe and now houses a restaurant, The House. Farther east, across Irving Place at 129 East 17th Street, is a red six-story seemingly oversized town house, known to be the first apartment house in New York City. It was designed by Napoleon Le Brun of Metropolitan Life tower frame and still serves the original purpose. Farther east at 141 East 17th near the corner of Third Avenue (1889) is a two story red structure which I knew 40 years ago as Willie's Grocery and Deli. In 1922, it was the founding office of Time magazine in an apartment rented by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden for \$55 a month, resulting in a journal that revolutionized journalism. Luce and Willie are now gone (the latter apparently disappeared owing cash), and the deli became a bicycle shop. There is a note in Margot Gayle's book about cast-iron structures in New York that demystifies the cast-iron appearance of the building and suggests that it was built on the remnants of an 18th century farmhouse.

The next new proposed building for landmarking is a gorgeous townhouse at 136 East 16th Street (1850 and 1889), a fine example of a transformation of single to multiple family residence, former home of the late architect Joseph Roberto.

Coming back to East 17th and Park Avenue South and the structures already landmarked, we find some less mysterious but equally historic buildings: the old houses in the Historic District.

At 44 Union Square East is a beauty, the old Tammany Hall, once the headquarters of the Democratic Party. With the advent of post-WWII Democratic Reform party, the old machine lost power and in 1943 sold the luxurious red and white meeting hall and office building to the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. The huge auditorium became a rental space for union meetings with many a deal negotiated right there on the street in station wagons (beer extra).

Subsequently the building was sold again and the hall became the Roundabout, then the Union Square Theatre, also a theater and film school. It was landmarked in 2013, with many restructuring caveats, particularly pertaining to roof-level additions.

Continuing on our clockwise path around the park, at 20 Union Square East at the corner of East 15th Street is the former Union Square savings Bank (1907) a classical design on a Greek temple pattern. Designed by Henry Bacon (who also designed the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.), the building has

been the Daryl Roth Theatre for several years. Note the magnificent four columns. A few doors east at 109-111 East 15th Street, the former Century Association Clubhouse (1869) was another Gilded Age phenomenon. Union

(Guardian Life), originally named Germania Life, changed its name to avoid the stigma of World War I. Note that the name chosen has a matching letter count as Germania, anecdotally suggested to allow the thrifty owners to reuse the heavy old roof-long light fixtures.

Square has always been an entertainment center, clean and otherwise.

Moving east to Irving Place and then south, at 4 Irving Place between East 15th and 14th Streets a whole block is occupied by the Consolidated Edison Company (1911-1929). The Con Ed clock, visible through many bedroom windows, is an important feature in the neighbors' lives, and letters to editors would be sent whenever the clock stopped functioning.

At 126-128 East 13th Street, east of Fourth Avenue,

is a gracious horse carriage house (1904) built by Van Tassel and Kearney, a Beaux-Arts survivor from the Gilded Era. Originally a Horse Auction Mart and subsequently artist Frank Stella's studio, it now serves as work space for various dance companies. Farther south at 34 1/2 East 12th Street, west of Broadway in a dark group of houses (1855), was one of the first NYC all-girls' public schools. The building still serves as a juvenile and other activities center.

To complete our list of five landmarking candidates with a charmer, let's go to the McCreery Dry Goods Store at 801 Broadway at East 11th Street, an early department store (1868) with colossal cast-iron facades. Despite the loss of its great mansard roof in a 1972 fire, it is now a solid apartment building.

If you are asking why these 19 buildings were selected by the preservationists of USCC, please note that there are other local community groups equally interested. Our historic heritage is watched over quite well by preservationists.

Wally Dobelis thanks Jack Taylor for information and references to the work of researchers, writers and artists, such as Andrew S. Dolkart, Christopher Gray, Margot Gayle and Edmund V. Gillon Jr. Photography credits for the booklet are due to Geoffrey Croft. If you are interested in the work of this local preservationist group, write to the USCC, P.O. Box 71, Cooper Station, NY 10276.