

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR ETHICAL CULTURE (not including the school building),
2 West 64th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1909-10; architect Robert D. Kohn.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1116, Lot 29 in part, consisting
of the land on which the described building is situated.

On September 25, 1973 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New York Society for Ethical Culture and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing was continued until November 27, 1973 (Item No. 3). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the second hearing one witness spoke in favor of designation, and the representative of the New York Society for Ethical Culture opposed the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The meeting house of the New York Society for Ethical Culture is one of the finest works of the architect Robert D. Kohn and one of the few buildings in New York City designed in the Art Nouveau style. Built in 1909-10, the building provided an appropriate meeting place for the Society, and it became a tangible symbol of the Society's work.

The New York Society for Ethical Culture was founded in 1876 by Dr. Felix Adler, son of a Reformed Jewish rabbi, who had himself been trained in the rabbinical tradition. On May 15 of that year Dr. Adler addressed an organization meeting of several hundred people at Standard Hall on 42nd Street and Broadway. The Ethical Movement as conceived by Adler was intended "to unite in one group, in one bond, those who had this religious feeling and those who simply cared for moral betterment ... Our ethical religion has its basis in the effort to improve the world and ourselves morally." The organization grew rapidly and moved from its original meeting place at Standard Hall to Chickering Hall and then in 1892 to Carnegie Hall. Dr. Adler also trained interested young men as Leaders who founded new Societies throughout the United States.

One of the Society's most important activities was its school which set up a system of "unsectarian moral instruction ... to demonstrate practically how ethical ideas might be conveyed to the minds of children independently of theological dogmas."

In 1897 a committee was appointed to find a site and raise funds for a permanent Society building. The school building at 63rd Street and Central Park West, designed by the firm of Carrère & Hastings--with Robert D. Kohn as associated architect--opened in 1904. Kohn, a close friend of Felix Adler, designed the meeting house at 64th Street and Central Park West which was built in 1909-10.

Kohn was a pioneer in his use of the Art Nouveau style for this building, as heretofore it had come to the United States from Europe only in the form of architectural fittings and objets d'art. Kohn received his architectural training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and his Art Nouveau work grew out of the Beaux-Arts style.

Working with his wife, the sculptor Estelle Rumbold Kohn, they achieved a new architecture to adorn the city both in the Ethical Culture building and in the New York Evening Post building. It is of particular significance that Kohn was not only the architect for the Ethical Culture meeting house but was at one time a Leader of the congregation and served as President of the Society from 1921-44.

A contemporary account in *Architecture* magazine states "... the Ethical Culture Society's building is certainly quite the best piece of Art Nouveau architecture yet designed in this country, and compares well with the magnificent German department store buildings whose excellence is so great as to almost promise a future for this style." Although Kohn did not employ the elaborate

plant-like forms most commonly associated with Art Nouveau architecture and used by Victor Horta in Brussels and Hector Guimard in Paris, his work seems more akin to that of the Austrians, Otto Wagner and Josef Hoffmann. In the Ethical Culture meeting house, the massing of the forms, the style of the sculpture, and the somewhat abstract quality of the decorative details give the building its Art Nouveau character.

The massive stone structure of the Society for Ethical Culture meeting house " ... attempts the most specific architectural expression possible of the special purpose and character of the interior," to quote a contemporary account in the Architectural Record. The building is situated so that the entrance facade fronts on 64th Street. It is strikingly accented by a triple window grouping which lights the auditorium. Each bay consists of a tall round-arched window set above three smaller window openings. Two windows flanked by short columns are set above each large window. At this level each window group is flanked by shallow niches intended to hold sculptured figures of "Servants of Humanity" set on large corbels. Set below the center bay is the main entrance crowned by a pedimented panel with a group of sculptured figures by Estelle Rumbold Kohn. The main portion of the facade terminates in a massive dentilled cornice crowned by a low balustrade. The upper portion of the wall with three window openings terminates in a shallow pediment-like parapet.

The facade on Central Park West is very similar to that on 64th Street and such decorative features as the rolled molding at the base and the cornice are carefully placed so as to harmonize with the school building. This facade was planned with a blind wall to shut out "annoying and confusing" side light and street car noise from the auditorium. Three large paneled sections terminating in window groups flanked by columns and niches, like those on the 64th Street facade, add interest to this side of the building. The cornice and upper wall section are continued from the 64th Street side. The upper windows on both sides open onto smaller rooms above the auditorium.

The importance of this structure to those who built it is exemplified by a quotation from Dr. Adler above the speaker's platform in the auditorium, "The Place where Men meet to seek the Highest is Holy Ground."

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 New York Society for Ethical Culture 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 meeting house of the New York Society for Ethical Culture is a rare, fine and irreplaceable example of Art Nouveau architecture in New York City, that it is one of the finest works of architect Robert D. Kohn who had a special interest in the Ethical Movement as a Leader and as President of the New York Society, and that it is both a tangible symbol of the Society's permanent social contribution and a rich architectural element of the fabric of our City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 New York Society for Ethical Culture (not including the school building), 2 West 64th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its Landmark Site that part of Lot 29 of Block 1116 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.