Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 17, 2005, Designation List 363
LP-2175

RALPH BUNCHE HOUSE, 115-24 Grosvenor Road, Kew Gardens, Queens.
Built, 1927; Architects, Koch & Wagner.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 3319, Lot 18.

On May 17, 2005, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Ralph Bunche House and its related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were five speakers in favor of designation, including Dr. Benjamin Rivlin, Chairman Emeritus of the Ralph Bunche Institute, Marjorie Tivin representing the New York City Commission to the United Nations, the Chair of the Community Board 9, and representatives of the Landmarks Conservancy and the Historic Districts Council. Three representatives of the Kew Gardens Civic Association spoke in opposition to designation because they wanted the entire Kew Gardens area designated as an historic district rather than just one building. The owner of the building said he was "ambivalent" about designation, because it was already a National Historic Landmark.

Summary

Dr. Ralph Bunche and his family lived for more than thirty years in a neo-Tudor style residence constructed in 1927 and designed by the prominent Brooklyn architects Koch & Wagner, located in Kew Gardens, Queens. Bunche had an illustrious career in academia, international service and diplomacy, which included the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his role in negotiating armistice settlements between Israel and its Arab neighbors. He helped found, and then worked for the United Nations, first as head of its Trusteeship Division, later as advisor to three different Sectretaries-General. From 1954 until his death in 1971, Bunche served the organization as Under Secretary-General, the highest post ever held by an American. Dr. Bunche was instrumental in developing and administering the various UN peacekeeping and truce observation activities of those years, as well as helping to establish two important programs of the United Nations: the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Development Program. As an African-American, Dr. Bunche fought all his life to overcome the racial prejudice and barriers to advancement that existed in this country. Upon the establishment of the United Nations, Bunche and his family moved from Washington, D.C. to New York in 1947. They first lived in Jamaica, Queens, before buying this house in Kew Gardens in 1952. Kew Gardens was a garden city type development begun in the early years of the twentieth century that tended to attract open-minded residents and was racially integrated. The area had a mix of types and styles of homes, mostly historical revival styles, set in a lush, suburban atmosphere. The home and the neighborhood proved to be an ideal environment for this extraordinary man and his family. Bunche was, as U.N. Secretary General U Thant said, "An international institution in his own right, transcending both nationality and race in a way that is achieved by very few."[1]

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Ralph Bunche (1903-1971)[2]

Ralph Bunche was born in Detroit to Fred and Olive Bunch, but was orphaned in 1917.[3] Raised by his maternal grandmother in Los Angeles, Bunche worked hard to overcome assumptions about his lack of ability based on his race, starting with his admission to an academic high school that would prepare him to continue his education in college. Attending UCLA on a full scholarship, he participated in three varsity sports, was president of the debating society, and a leader of the student council, and still graduated *summa cum laude* and class valedictorian. After completing his masters degree at Harvard University, also on scholarship, Bunche joined the faculty of Howard University in Washington, D.C. and organized and chaired the political science department, alternating teaching there with doing research and completing his doctorate at Harvard. A Julius Rosenwald Fellowship enabled him to collect data in Africa for his dissertation, which contrasted the French administration of its colony in Dahomey with that in the neighboring territory of Togoland, which France administered under a League of Nations mandate. His dissertation won the Toppan Prize for the year's best, and in 1934 he became the first African American to be awarded a Ph.D. in Government and International Relations from Harvard University.

In 1930, Bunche married Ruth Ethel Harris and they lived in Washington, D.C. which was still racially segregated. Howard University, where he taught, was the intellectual center of young black scholar-activists and Bunche was one of their leaders. Bunche led protests for civil rights and racial equality, produced several significant scholarly papers on the subject, and helped found the National Negro Congress, an organization which brought Negro leaders in education, business and religion together with manual laborers and others to forge a combined effort toward civil rights. Bunche saw the struggle for racial equality in this country as part of a continuum with the struggle for human rights in other parts of the world, and he continued his studies of African indigenous populations under a grant from the Social Science Research Council. In 1937, Bunche worked with Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal on the historic Carnegie study of the life and status of blacks in the United States. This work resulted in the influential publication, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy.*

By 1941, his interest in conditions of African colonial states led to his work for the U.S. Office of the Coordinator of Information, and later he became head of the Africa Section of the Office of Strategic Services. After World War II, he joined the State Department's postwar planning unit regarding the future disposition of colonial territories. Bunche served as a specialist on colonial matters in the U.S. delegation to the Dunbarton Oaks conference (1944) which helped create the United Nations, and was an advisor to the San Francisco Conference (1945) where the UN charter was drafted. Upon its founding, Ralph Bunche joined the new international organization as the first head of the Trusteeship Division, overseeing the transition of countries emerging from years of colonial rule.

As part of his work with the UN, Bunche was appointed to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine that examined the question of the Partition of Palestine. After the outbreak of hostilities between the new State of Israel and its neighbors in 1948, Bunche was appointed as assistant to, and then (upon his assassination) successor to Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations Mediator. In spite of hugely difficult negotiations, he successfully reached armistice agreements between Israel and Egypt, and later Israel and Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. This led to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Bunche then turned down an offer from Harry Truman in 1953 to be Assistant Secretary of State, as well as a tenured professorship at Harvard, preferring to continue his work for the United Nations. Beginning in 1954, he was appointed Under-Secretary General of the United Nations, serving as a top-level advisor and trouble-shooter for Secretaries-General Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld, and U Thant. He developed and administered numerous UN peacekeeping and truce observation activities in areas of conflict throughout the world, including the Suez Canal, Congo, Cyprus, Yemen, and the Indo-Pakistan border, establishing, in the process, the new concept of UN peacekeeping. He played an important role in the development of two important United Nations programs: the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the UN Development Program, and was a major architect of decolonization programs throughout the world. He served as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for two decades, the highest rank an American had ever achieved in the organization, until his resignation due to ill health in 1971. He died later that same year.

During the active years of his career, Bunche spoke and published widely on topics dealing with race relations in the United States and peace and conflict situations throughout the world. He received numerous

honorary academic degrees, the Medal of Freedom from President Lyndon Johnson, and was the first person of color in the world to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Bunche dedicated his life to working for freedom and equality, peace and justice among all people, in the United States and throughout the world. A man who truly influenced his times, Bunche was "one of the world's foremost and admired figures."[4]

The Bunche Family

During the years that Ralph Bunche worked at Howard University and then for the U.S. Government, he and his family lived in Washington, D.C., near Howard University. In 1941, Bunche and his wife built a house at 1510 Jackson Street, NE. That house, designed by the prominent black architect Hilyard R. Robinson, is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

After the formation of the United Nations, the Bunche family moved to New York where the new organization was setting up its headquarters. Initially, the UN offices were established in Lake Success in Nassau County and the United Nations helped develop an apartment complex for UN workers nearby at Parkway Village in Jamaica, Queens.[5] The Bunche family lived there from 1947 until 1952.[6] They found the quarters quite crowded and were finally able to afford larger quarters because of the award money that came with the Nobel Prize. In 1952, Ralph and Ruth Bunche purchased a neo-Tudor style house nearby in Kew Gardens, Queens.[7] Mrs. Bunche had found the house while Ralph was incapacitated by phlebitis.[8] He was happy to concur with her desires since she was often left home with their children while he was working in far parts of the world. The owner of the house was an admirer of Mr. Bunche and lowered the price for him, as well as offering to sell him anything in the house that they wanted.[9] The family was quite happy with the house and gardens and lived in this house until Mrs. Bunche's death in 1988.

Although Bunche had been offered a job as Under Secretary of State in the Truman administration, he did not want to return to the segregation of the District of Columbia.[10] In New York, Bunche was able to live in an integrated neighborhood, first with other UN families and later in a comfortable, early twentieth century railroad suburb.

Kew Gardens[11]

Located in central Queens, the area known as Kew Gardens is bounded by the Jackie Robinson (originally Interborough) Parkway and Queens Boulevard on the north, Kew Gardens Road on the east, Myrtle Avenue on the south and Forest Park on the west. The development of this area began when a new rail line for the Long Island Railroad was established in the 1860s, linking the outer reaches of Long Island to a ferry in Queens that would transport passengers into Manhattan. This expansion made large tracts of land in Queens attractive to developers, one of whom was New York lawyer Albon P. Mann.

In 1869 Mann purchased five large farmsteads north of the Jamaica Turnpike. Over the course of the next forty years, Mann, along with landscape architect Edward Richmond, created the development known as Richmond Hill on the southern part of this property. The area north of 84th Avenue was initially set aside as the Richmond Hill Country Club (demolished).

By 1910, a new rail line was run through this northern section and a new rail station was opened in an area called Kew Gardens, named after the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, in England.[12] Kew Gardens was developed by Albon Mann's three sons, Alrick, Arthur and Albon, Jr. during the next thirty years. The Mann brothers invested significantly in amenities for the community, hoping to attract enough wealthy buyers to bring a significant return on their investment. They helped establish important institutions such as the Kew Gardens Country Club, Forest Park, the community church and the local elementary school. They built a commercial area, so they could set the architectural style of these buildings, and also so they could collect the rent for themselves. It consisted of a neo-Tudor style village center with stores on the ground story and apartments above, all centered on the rail station. The Manns laid out the original streets in a winding system that reflected the area's topography, and planted pin oaks along the streets for added greenery. Since they could not do all the development at once themselves, they sold off parcels to other developers, but always with restrictive covenants to control what was constructed. As a result, the neighborhood filled with a variety of housing types: apartments, townhouses, and single-family buildings ranging in size from cottages to mansions. In this way, the Mann brothers attracted upper and lower middle class residents who wanted the benefits of a garden suburb. The facilities and institutions they developed helped create a sense of community among the residents, who often were people of artistic pursuits, as well as those of a variety of religions and ethnicities.

The Bunche House

The house was constructed in 1927 as part of the development of Kew Gardens. The lot was originally sold by the Kew Gardens Corporation to Elena Goodale in 1920[13] and then to Louis Frisse in 1926[14] who had the house constructed.[15] The property changed hands in 1948, and again in 1949, this time to Jack Sturm, who sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Bunche in 1952.[16]

The Brooklyn architectural firm of Koch & Wagner was chosen to design the house. Arthur R. Koch (1874-1952)[17] and Charles C. Wagner (1876-1957)[18] had formed a partnership in 1910 which they maintained until 1951, when Wagner retired to Florida. During that period, they were responsible for the designs of numerous industrial, commercial and residential properties, primarily in Brooklyn and Queens. Both men had been born in Brooklyn and graduated from Pratt Institute, and both men served terms as president of the Brooklyn chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Previous to 1910, Wagner worked for several years on the design of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In addition to architecture, Koch helped found and then served on the board of the People's National Bank. He was also a director of the East River Savings and Loan Association and the Bohack Realty Corporation. Mr. Wagner served as a director of the Bay Ridge Savings and Loan Association. Throughout their long careers, Koch & Wagner designed many bank buildings throughout Brooklyn, including several for the People's National Bank, and others that were developed by the Bohack Realty Corporation. They had a long and productive career, and seemed to specialize in commercial designs for urban environments. While they did create some residential designs, a free-standing suburban house was a rather unusual type for this firm.

Suburban Housing in the Early Twentieth Century

During the early years of the twentieth century, American suburbs were expanding rapidly with numerous single-family homes, built to provide housing for the growing middle-class. These houses often had designs and details that related to some historical style previously developed in America or Europe. The historically-inspired architectural styles that developed in the early twentieth century have been called academic, meaning "art is self-consciously taught, rather than learned by apprenticeship, as had been characteristic of architectural education heretofore."[19]

Several trends influenced the architectural developments of this period. Previously, many homes were created by carpenter-designers and only the elite had received a specific architectural education. Now, many more American designers were receiving formal training, and those who did were increasingly self-conscious about the role of architecture in society. This new awareness was coupled, by the end of the nineteenth century, with America's expanding power and growing role in the world. These new design professionals as well as a more educated public began to call for a more dignified artistic expression in architecture and its related fields.

In this context academic does not indicate a particular style, but rather refers to an approach toward earlier, historical styles in which their concepts and details are used, but refined and rearranged to meet contemporary design requirements. This academic approach could be manifested in many different design types, including Beaux-Arts, Colonial Revival, Arts and Crafts, Tudor Revival, Spanish Revival and many more. Although it would seem that these are very different, their common elements were "a willingness to use applied ornament, generous scale, systematically disciplined adaptation of past styles; and a vague generalized sort of associationism."[20] Although decorative ornament had been used on buildings in earlier periods, during this time a more thorough and scientifically-based study of historical architecture led to a more correct application of certain details that were seen as integral to a specific style. In addition, these historical details were used in a more restrained way than during the previous picturesque period. Archeology, more common travel to distant locales, and greater communication through academic and professional journals had increased awareness of the physical reality of historical buildings. Buildings in these academic styles had a social function in addition to a practical one. Public buildings were "to proclaim the grandeur of the city, to help citizens perceive themselves as part of it, to make individual lives somehow nobler by being set in relationship to a grand past."[21] In domestic architecture, the academic styles reinforced the status quo by confirming the pretensions of the emerging middle and upper class. From Fifth Avenue mansions to revival style suburban houses, and then filtering down to working class bungalows, homeowners were able to associate themselves with the history and culture of countries that had long and distinguished histories. There was also a desire to create an American style of architecture, although what this meant varied widely depending on who defined it. Academic styles were widely adopted and accepted by Americans of all economic levels, especially the middle

class. It thus became an approach that could apply to all Americans and could reinforce the American ideal of present or future equality.[22]

Suburbs from coast to coast soon filled with these houses. These buildings were publicized in architectural magazines and available from mail order companies, and could be constructed in any locality. Some were built on a grand scale and others were highly simplified, but houses with historical references became the norm in American suburban life. Architects such as Koch & Wagner would have been trained in using the historical references popular at the time. As a comfortable suburb being developed during this period, Kew Gardens had many houses that reflected this tendency toward historical revival designs. The house later occupied by Ralph Bunche and his family was in the neo-Tudor style. It has stucco walls with randomly protruding bricks and stones, and half-timber framing suggestive of this medieval style of construction, even though it was built with twentieth century construction techniques. Sited on a rise and now surrounded by mature trees and bushes, the goal of the designers was to make the house look as picturesque in its setting as possible.

Description

The house at 115-24 Grovesnor Road is a 2 ½ story neo-Tudor style residence faced in stucco pierced by random bricks and stones. Some wooden half-timbering is located near the tops of the gables. The house maintains its original wooden doors with iron strapping and original leaded glass windows and slate roof. Located in a suburban setting of single-family homes, the house is surrounded by mature trees and bushes. It is set on the crest of a hill, with a terraced flagstone walkway leading from the street to the front door. There is an attached garage that is inset into the hill at the basement level. It is faced with random ashlar stone and has a stone-framed, segmentally-arched opening filled by wooden doors with small plain glass lights and metal strapping.

The house is three bays wide with a central, full height, projecting gable capped by a clipped roof. Within the gable the doorway is set deep within a round arched, stone-trimmed opening and holds of a wooden door with a small rectangular window covered by a decorative iron grille. An original iron and glass lantern is located on the wall next to the door. Within the gable, there is a small, rectangular window above the doorway, and a large, double-height window to the side of the entrance. This window, which is fronted by a small, iron balcony, has leaded glass casements with a decorative stained glass motif of a knight on horseback located at the bottom center of the window. There is a pair of small rectangular windows near the top of the gable, surrounded by half-timber framing.

To one side of the central gable, and recessed slightly, is a stucco-faced chimney. The lower section of the chimney projects toward the front, creating another small roof and shape variety. The single bay on that side of the house has a segmentally-arched opening on the ground story and a tri-partite window grouping on the second story, both with casement window sash.

The bay on the other side of the central gable is also recessed. There is a segmentally-arched, stone-trimmed window opening on the ground story and a multi-sided projecting bay window on the second story, both with casement window sash. A small shed dormer projects from the roof at the third story, above the bay window.

To the west side of the main section of the house is a small, open stone porch, while on the east side is a one-story, stone-faced sunroom with floor to ceiling casement windows. It is recessed behind a patio and the stone walls that rise up from the garage below.

Report researched and written by
Virginia Kurshan
Research Department

NOTES

[1] Quoted in the "Biography of Ralph Johnson Bunche" by Benjamin Rivlin at www.ralphbunchecentenary.org.

[2] Information on Ralph Bunche comes from the following sources: Web sites, www.ralphbunchecentenary.org; www.nobelprize.org; and www.worldpolicy.org; which in turn were based on several biographies, including Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche, An American Life* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1993); Alvin J. Kugelmass, *Ralph J. Bunche, Fighter for Peace* (New York: Julian Messner, 1952); and Benjamin Rivlin, Ralphe Bunche: *The Man and His Times (*NY: Holmes & Meier, 1990).

[3] Bunche added the final e to his name when he moved to Los Angeles in 1917.

[4] Rivlin, www.ralphbunchecentenary.org.

[5] Parkway Village, designed by Leonard Schultze, consists of 107 two and three story apartment buildings on approximately 40 acres of land. The development was built with the support of the United Nations so that there would be housing for its many staff members who would otherwise not be able to rent in Manhattan's segregated housing market. At the time it was expected that the United Nations would be headquartered in Flushing Meadows, with the Security Council and Secretariat offices in nearby Lake Success. In 1952, the United Nations dropped its role in Parkway Village and in 1983, the development was converted to co-operative housing.

[6] Ruth complained about the small apartment, that "the girls didn't even have a place to keep their things …and little Ralph can't even enjoy his toys and with no place to study…" Urquhart, 238.

[7] Queens County Register's Office, Deed and Conveyances, Liber 6350, page 631.

[8] Peggy Mann, *Ralph Bunche, UN Peacemaker* (NY: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1975), 274-5.

[9] Urquhart, 238.

[10] " 'Jim Crow' Factor in Bunche's Decision," *The New York Times* (June 3, 1949), 6.

[11] Information about Kew Gardens comes from, Barry Lewis, *Kew Gardens: Urban Village in the Big City* (New York: Kew Gardens Council for Recreation and the Arts, 1999).

[12] The Pennsylvania Railroad took over the Long Island Railroad in 1901 and proceeded to electrify the lines. This required a realignment and thus new tracks between Long Island City and Jamaica.

[13] Queens County Register's Office, Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 2273, page 493.

[14] Queens County Register's Office, Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 2904, page 59567.

[15] Property deeds show Mr. Frisse being the owner at the time of construction, however the owner listed on the New Building permit in the Building Department records is Charles. A. Gall of Forest Hills.

[16] Queens County Register's Office, Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 6350, page 631.

[17] "Arthur R. Koch, 77, Architect for 50 Years and Bank Director," *Brooklyn Eagle* (Jan. 11, 1952).

[18] "Charles Wagner, an Architect, 81," *The New York Times* (Dec. 20, 1957).

[19] Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture, Social Function and Cultural Expression* (NY: Harper Collins Publ., 1992), 216.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Gowans, 220.

[22] Gowans, 223.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, architecture and other features of the building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Ralph Bunche House has a special character and a 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 the Ralph Bunche House in Kew Gardens was the residence of Ralph Bunche and his family for more than thirty years, from 1951 until his wife, Ruth Bunche, died in 1988; that the house was Bunche's residence during his long and illustrious career with the United Nations, during which time he successfully helped negotiate peace settlements in several of the world's most difficult areas of conflict; that Ralph Bunche was a remarkable man, achieving high positions in academia and international diplomacy, while continuously fighting at home for the civil rights of African Americans; that throughout his career, Bunche's many accomplishments included being the first African-American to attain a doctorate from the political science department at Harvard University, organizing and chairing the political science department at Howard University, being the highest-ranking African American at the time in the United States State Department; helping to organize the United Nations, being appointed as the first head of the United Nations Trusteeship Council to oversee the transition of former colonial states to independence, negotiating armistice settlements between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1949 and between Israel and Egypt after the Suez War in 1956, and serving as Under Secretary-General of the United Nations during which time he helped establish the role of the United Nations as the world's peacekeeper; that Ralph Bunche was recognized during his lifetime for his extraordinary achievements, and that among his many honors were the Spingarn Prize from the NAACP, the Medal of Freedom awarded by President Johnson in 1961, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950; that this picturesque, neo-Tudor style house was constructed in 1927 by the prominent Brooklyn architects Koch & Wagner as part of the development of Kew Gardens; that this neo-Tudor style building, set amid lush greenery in the garden served as a quiet refuge for Bunche and his family during his busy career, and at a time when many areas of New York City did not welcome black families.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Ralph Bunche House, 115-24 Grosvenor Road, Borough of Queens, and designates Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 3319, Lot 18 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair; Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair
Stephen Byrns, Joan Gerner, Christopher Moore, Richard Olcott
Thomas Pike, Jan Pokorny, Elizabeth Ryan, Vicki Match Suna, Commissioners

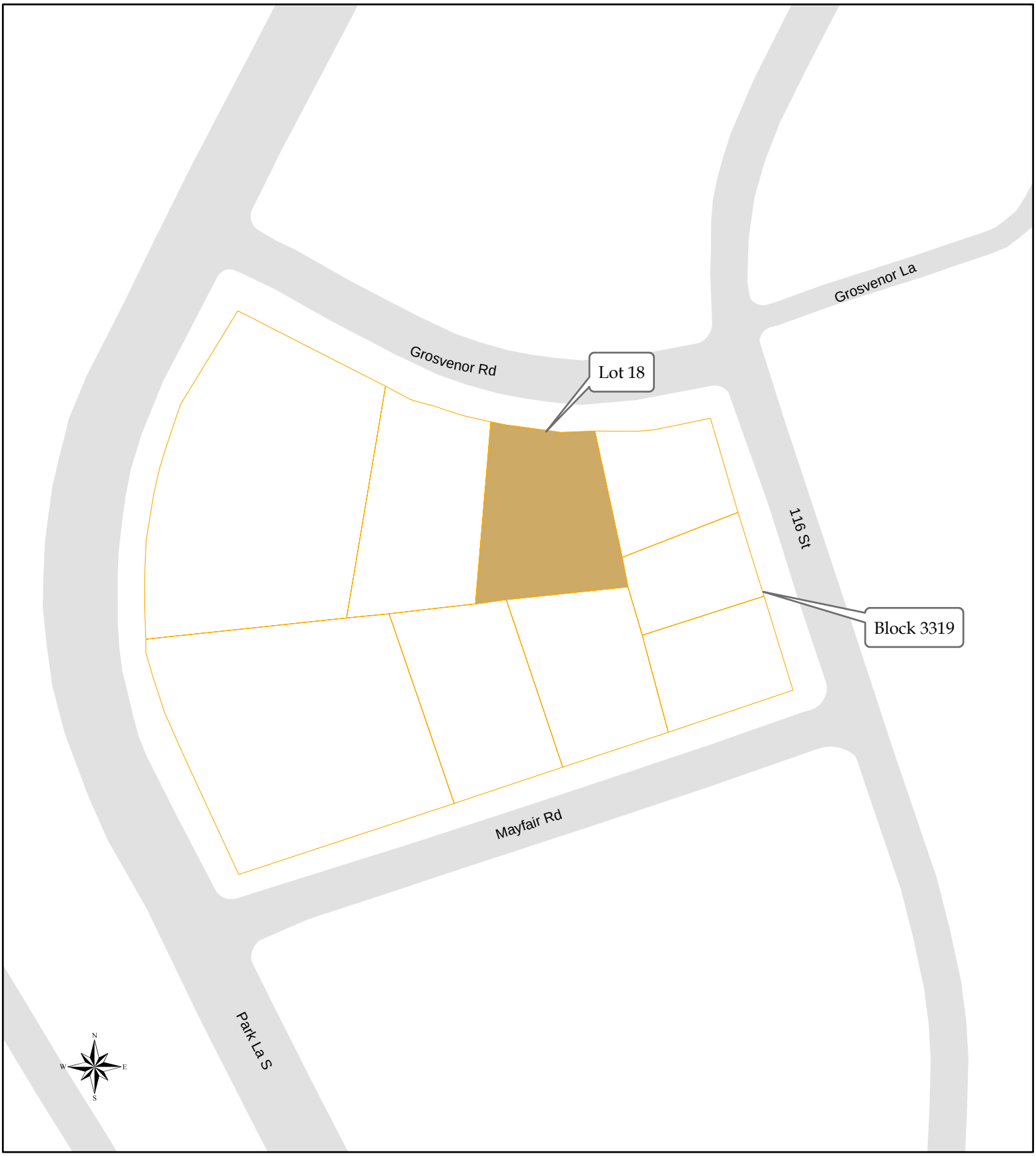
Ralph Bunche House
115-24 Grosvenor Road
Kew Gardens, New York
Photo: Carl Forster

Ralph Bunche House
Photo: Carl Forster

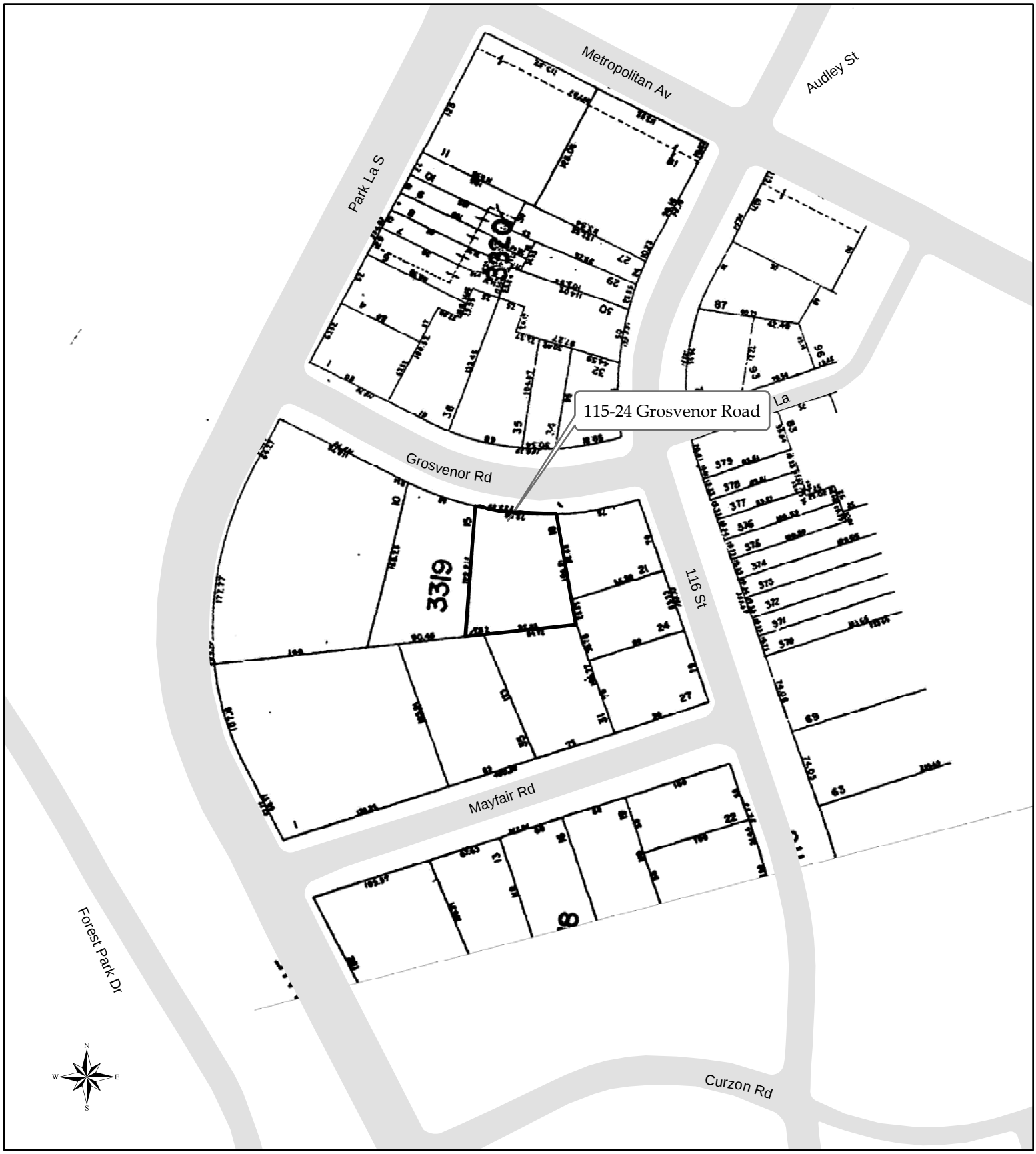
Ralph Bunche House
Door and Window Details
Photos: Carl Forster

Ralph Bunche House
Kew Gardens, Queens
Photo: Carl Forster

Ralph Bunche House
Window and Garage Details
Photos: Carl Forster



Ralph Bunche House, 115-24 Grosvenor Road, Kew Gardens, Queens
Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 3319, Lot 18
Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 03C, December 2003



Ralph Bunche House, 115-24 Grosvenro Road, Kew Gardens, Queens
Landmark Site: Borough of Queens, Tax Map Block 3319, Lot 18
Graphic Source: Sanborn Building & Property Atlas, Queens, Volume 4, Plate 13