

FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, SCIENTIST, OF NEW YORK CITY, 1 West 96th Street,
Borough of Manhattan. Built 1899 1903 architects Carrère & Hastings.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1832, Lot 29

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the First Church of Christ, Scientist of New York City and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing was continued until November 27, 1973 (Item No. 5). One witness spoke in favor of designation. The hearing was again continued until March 26, 1974 (Item No. 3). Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation at that time. These hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Some members of this Church have indicated that they favor the designation of their building. The Board of Trustees has informed the Commission that at the Church's membership meeting on May 18, 1974, a majority of those present voted against the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The First Church of Christ, Scientist, built in 1899 1903 at the northwest corner of Central Park West and 96th Street, was designed by the noted architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings and is in the finest tradition of Beaux-Arts classicism. Although the firm designed few churches, the Christian Science building is very much in keeping with its designs for other public buildings.

The Christian Science Society in New York City held its first regular Sunday service on November 27, 1887. In 1888, the Society was incorporated as the "Church of Christ, Scientist" under the ministry of Mrs. Augusta E. Stetson. In 1896 the name was changed to the "First Church of Christ, Scientist, New York City". The congregation had chosen to meet in halls and renovated church buildings until they had the financial means to build a structure suitable to their needs and appropriate to the Christian Science ideals. "The building is a material representation of that which the church that built it stands for in the realm of ideals...it shadows forth to a degree the thought which created it," wrote Omen R. Washburn in the Architectural Record in February 1904. Carrère & Hastings were commissioned to design a building with an auditorium which would seat 2,000 people. The cornerstone was laid on November 30, 1899. Nothing was spared in the erection of the building: the architects were prestigious, the best design was sought, and the finest material--white Concord granite--was used. All funds were raised before construction, and the building was completed free of debt.

John D. Carrère and Thomas Hastings, the architects, were among the leading exponents of the Beaux Arts style in the United States. Both partners had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. By the turn of the century, they were considered to be one of the country's leading architectural firms. The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and many fine town houses in New York City best exemplify their work.

This church is striking in appearance, and is indicative of the freedom of design achieved by the best architects working in the Beaux Arts tradition. Although they used classical elements they had learned to emancipate their designs from rigid restrictions.

The design of the present structure must have created a special challenge. Christian Science was a young religion, and the architectural styles of Christian Science churches varied greatly. Many felt that the best prototype was the Congregational type of church, and the contemporary architectural critic, Montgomery Schuyler, considered the First Church of Christ, Scientist, to be a "very substantial" meeting house.

The church edifice, with its broad wall surfaces and recessed entry, is dominated by its striking entrance tower with four-sided lantern and slightly truncated polygonal spire. The entrance is flanked by fluted and banded columns supporting a pediment. Rising above the entrance is a deeply recessed tall stained glass window crowned by an elaborate cartouche and flanked by large Ionic columns. Each side of the lantern contains a round arched opening flanked by

Ionic columns and crowned by a pediment. A stone urn is placed at each corner of the lantern.

The central section of the building, set back from the tower serves two functions. It not only contains the auditorium, but it also has two floors for offices and classrooms above the auditorium--signalized by small windows on the exterior. Low pavilion-like sections flank the central tower and the main section on Central Park West; these contain secondary entrances on the Central Park West facade, while the sides have tall round-arched stained glass windows. Continuous dentilled cornices crown these sections, while the central block is surmounted by a more massive modillioned cornice which continues around the tower. Adding further emphasis to the front of the building at street level and unifying the corner pavilions with the central section is a low base of rusticated horizontal banding.

The decoration and architectural details of the interior were given the same careful attention as the exterior by the artist Charles H. Cottrell. John La Farge, the noted artist, designed the large stained glass window above the entrance door, depicting Jesus and Mary in the Garden after the Resurrection, which adds a striking note to the east front.

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 First Church of Christ, Scientist of New York City 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 First Church of Christ, Scientist of New York City is an outstanding example of Beaux-Arts classical design by the noted firm of Carrère & Hastings, that the building is distinguished by an unusual entrance facade, that it was the first church erected by this congregation and continues to serve its needs, and that its many fine architectural details give the building great distinction.

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 First Church of Christ, Scientist of New York City, 1 West 96th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1832, Lot 29, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.