

STRECKER LABORATORY, Roosevelt Island (formerly Blackwell's Island and then Welfare Island), located approximately opposite East 52nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1892; architects Withers & Dickson.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 25, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Strecker Laboratory and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. While expressing reservations, the representatives of the Roosevelt Island Development Corporation have agreed to the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The small Romanesque Revival Strecker Memorial Laboratory is situated at the southern end of Roosevelt Island between the Smallpox Hospital and Charity Hospital, and provides an interesting contrast to them both in scale and style. Designed by New York architects Withers & Dickson and constructed in 1892, it was administered under the direction of the Charity (later City) Hospital to conduct pathological and bacteriological work. The building was the gift of the daughter of a Mr. Strecker, and as Dr. Charles G. Child, Jr., wrote in his history of City Hospital (1904), it was "an illustration of what lasting good an intelligent woman can do to perpetuate the memory of a dear one."

Pathological medicine made rapid advances during the 19th century, and laboratories such as this one reflect the increasingly scientific nature of its study and investigation. The Strecker Memorial Laboratory housed at the first floor a room for the routine examination of specimens, an autopsy room and a mortuary. At the second floor were rooms for more detailed research and experimentation. In 1905, the laboratory was remodeled, probably at the urging of the head pathologist, Horst Oertel. Oertel was an émigré to this country, and well acquainted with the pioneering work in pathology being carried on in Europe by such prominent individuals as Rudolf Virchow. The remodeling, which included the addition of a third story to the laboratory, provided facilities for histological examinations as well as museum and library space. In 1907, Oertel received an endowment from the Russell Sage Foundation, and the "Russell Sage Institute of Pathology" was first housed in the Strecker Memorial Laboratory. When new facilities for this Institute were built, it moved, while the Strecker Laboratory continued as the pathological center for City Hospital and the City Home (formerly the Almshouse).

Frederick Clarke Withers (1828-1901), the senior partner in the firm which designed the laboratory, was an Englishman trained in Great Britain, who came to the United States in 1852 at the invitation of the renowned American landscape architect, Andrew Jackson Downing. Unfortunately, Downing was drowned that same year following the explosion of the steamboat Henry Clay. Withers then became associated with Calvert Vaux, Downing's former partner. In 1857 Withers was one of the first to be asked to join newly founded American Institute of Architects. Although he always retained his British citizenship, he volunteered for service in the Union Army in 1861. He returned home an invalid the following year, but recovered, and resumed practice in New York City, joining Vaux along with Frederick Law Olmsted in a partnership that lasted until 1871. In 1888 he formed a partnership with Walter Dickson (1834-1903). Together, as supervising architects for the Commission of Charities and Correction, they designed several buildings on Roosevelt Island, among them the Strecker Memorial Laboratory and three brick structures for the Almshouse. With his former partner Calvert Vaux, Withers had previously designed several buildings for the Commission of Charities and Correction, most notably the High Victorian Gothic Jefferson Market Courthouse, located in the Greenwich Village Historic District, which is the best-known of Withers' New York

City works. Among his many other New York commissions were the commercial building at 448 Broome Street in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, the high altar, reredos and robing room of Trinity Church, and the lich gate of the "Little Church Around the Corner" (Church of the Transfiguration). Primarily considered an ecclesiastical architect, Withers published the influential book Church Architecture in 1873. The Chapel of the Good Shepherd of 1888-89 on Roosevelt Island admirably illustrates his conception of church architecture. Walter Dickson, who had practiced architecture in Albany for many years before coming to New York, designed the Albany Post Office and the Albany City Prison. In New York, he and Withers designed the new City Prison which replaced the original "Tombs."

The Strecker Memorial Laboratory, though small in size, is monumental in its overall effect. It is basically Romanesque Revival in style, somewhat in the manner of the late work of H.H. Richardson, as suggested by the broad arched openings and the use of rough-faced stone--grey gneiss quarried on the island and used for many of the institutional buildings there. The use of contrasting orange brick for quoins, string courses, enframements, and arches gives the building a vivid polychromatic effect that is reminiscent of Withers' earlier compositions in the Victorian Gothic mode. Because of the change in style from Gothic, which Withers generally favored, to Romanesque and because of the building type--non-ecclesiastical--it could be surmised that Dickson was largely responsible for the design.

The type of Romanesque Revival architecture which Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) developed became very popular among American architects in the 1880s and early 1890s. Broad arches, rough stone facing, modest use of polychromy, and the asymmetrical massing of elements are hallmarks of the style. It was widely used for domestic, public, and institutional buildings. Montgomery Schuyler, noted 19th-century architectural critic, felt that the Romanesque Revival offered a firm foundation on which to build the elements of a "true and living architecture, such as for four centuries the world has not seen." [Architectural Record I (Oct. - Dec. 1891)]. The Strecker Memorial Laboratory is designed in a late version of the Romanesque Revival characteristic of its date.

The building is T-shaped in plan with a curved vestibule at the south end. The main section of the building with skylighted flat roof was originally two stories high; the third story was added in 1905 by architect William Flanagan, Jr., and harmonizes completely with the original design. At the north end, the front is dominated by an arched entrance. The inscription "Strecker Memorial Laboratory" is executed in terra cotta on a plaque above the doorway. Flat brick arches and brick enframements accent the windows on the front. The window treatment of the sides of the main section is most distinctive; at the first and second floors a single bold brick arch encompasses a triple window at each floor. A brick spandrel panel executed in a handsome basketwork pattern separates the windows between the two floors. Similarly, at the third floor a brick arch encompasses a triple window. This type of window treatment is reminiscent, on a smaller scale, of that used by H. H. Richardson in his design for the famous Marshall Field Wholesale Store in Chicago of 1885-87.

Another section with skylighted gabled roof extends south from the high main section of the building. It is treated as one story above an elevated basement. Giving additional light to the large room on the upper level are long rows of windows on each side, set just beneath the overhanging eaves of the roof. This section terminates in a gabled south end with raking cornice. Filling much of the gable is a large arched opening subdivided into six vertical window units. This design is very similar to that of the windows in the side walls of the main section of the building but much larger. Set beneath this opening is the low one-story projecting curved vestibule with flat roof. Within are steps leading up to the large room at the upper level of this section.

The laboratory is an outstanding architectural composition with its fine massing of elements of varying sizes effectively organized into a coherent whole. Equally striking is the functional use of materials where the rock-faced local gray stone walls are contrasted with smooth orange brick trim. While small in size, it nonetheless achieves a remarkable sense of monumentality.

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 Strecker Laboratory 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 Strecker Memorial Laboratory, is a handsome late Romanesque Revival building designed by a prominent New York architectural firm, that it is an outstanding architectural composition and displays a striking use of forms and materials, that it is designed in a version of the Romanesque Revival style characteristic of the late 19th century, that it reflects the qualities of some of the outstanding architecture in this country, that at the time it was constructed it was the model of a complete and scientifically advanced pathological laboratory, and that although small in size, it achieves a remarkable sense of monumentality.

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 Strecker Laboratory, Roosevelt Island, located approximately opposite East 52nd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 on which the described building is situated.