

RACQUET AND TENNIS CLUB BUILDING, 370 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1916-18; architects McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1288, Lot 33.

On July 11, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Racquet and Tennis Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was continued to September 12, 1978 (Item No. 1) and again to November 14, 1978 (Item No. 1). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of five witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the three hearings. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other communications supporting this designation. The Racquet and Tennis Club has expressed reservations about the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Racquet and Tennis Club Building, a superb example of the work of the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, was built in 1916-18 as the third home of the Racquet and Tennis Club. Dominating the blockfront of Park Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets, the building is a notable essay in neo-Italian Renaissance architecture, embodying the principles of Beaux-Arts design to create a structure which is appropriate to the site and to the needs of the Racquet and Tennis Club.

The Club

The club, first organized in 1875 as the Racquet Court Club, occupied in a building at 55 West 26th Street. However, it was incorporated on February 21, 1890, as the Racquet and Tennis Club "to encourage all manly sports among its members."¹ From its beginnings the club was considered to be one of the wealthiest and most exclusive of New York's social and athletic organizations. In 1891 the club moved to a new building designed by architect Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz specifically for its purposes and located at 27 West 43rd Street. This section of the city soon became known as the clubhouse district. Among the club's distinguished neighbors on West 43rd Street were the Century Club, the Columbia Club, and the Academy of Medicine (now demolished), while on West 44th Street were the Harvard Club, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, and the New York Yacht Club.

Within a few years, however, the commercial development of the city began to encroach upon the area. After the construction in 1912 of Aeolian Hall, an 18-story office building on the south side of West 43rd Street which blocked the sunlight to the courts of the Racquet and Tennis Club, the organization began considering a move to a new location. The West 43rd Street site was seen as potentially very valuable, but the club was uncertain about being able to sell it at a high enough price to finance a new building. Moreover, some members wished to remain in the West 43rd Street building because so much had been invested in the playing courts, which were valued at \$200,000.² In 1916, Robert W. Goelet, a member of the club, offered to erect a new club building on Park Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets on land which he owned, and to lease both the land and the building to the club.³

Robert Walton Goelet (1880-1941), a member of the prominent New York family, was one of the wealthiest men in New York at the time of his death. Through real estate investment, his great-grandfather, Peter Goelet, had established the basis of the family fortune, and he was the third generation of Robert Goelets to further increase the family real estate interests. A 1902 graduate of Harvard College, Robert W. Goelet was also a director of many corporations. In addition to inheriting the family mansion at 591 Fifth Avenue, he also owned "Southside," a Shingle-style cottage of 1882 in Newport designed by McKim, Mead & White. He married Anne Marie Guestier in 1921, the daughter of a wealthy French wine merchant and estate owner. They were prominent in New York and Newport social circles and were ardent sports enthusiasts.⁴

Given his social position and athletic interests, it is not surprising that Goelet was a member of the Racquet and Tennis Club. He had inherited most of the Park Avenue properties proposed for the new Racquet and Tennis Club site from his father Robert Goelet, and had purchased the remainder in 1915 from the New York State Realty and Terminal Co., an affiliate of the New York Central Railroad.⁵

On June 27, 1916, the membership of the Racquet and Tennis Club voted to accept the Goelet proposal. Also, a syndicate of club members was formed to take over the club property on West 43rd Street and hold it until it could be sold at an advantageous price.⁶

The Site

Not only was Goelet's proposal thought to be financially favorable for the club, but the Park Avenue site was felt to be a most desirable location. For many years Park Avenue had been occupied by the below-grade tracks and tunnel of the New York Central Railroad and spanned by bridges. Spurred by legislation which would require the electrification of all passenger trains within Manhattan by 1910, the New York Central Railroad decided to build a completely new Grand Central Terminal and to place all tracks below ground. Construction began in 1903 and was completed in 1913. The scheme enabled Park Avenue to be transformed into an elegant boulevard with a central landscaped mall, thus making it one of the most valuable and desirable sections of the city. Luxurious apartment buildings, the new mode of living for affluent New Yorkers, were soon built as far north as 96th Street. St. Bartholomew's Church acquired its site on Park Avenue and 51st Street, and plans for its construction were underway in 1916. Since the club was leaving West 43rd Street because of commercial encroachments, Park Avenue, "where the permanency of the present residential character of the section is assured,"⁷ was seen as especially desirable. In keeping with the prestige of its new location, the club, acting through Robert Goelet, commissioned a design for the new building from the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White.

The Architects

By 1916 McKim, Mead & White had enjoyed a position of great prestige for over 30 years. Founded in 1879 by Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909), William Rutherford Mead (1846-1928), and Stanford White (1853-1906), the firm began to achieve a national reputation with its designs for the Henry Villard Houses (1882-86), a designated New York City Landmark, and the Boston Public Library (1887-95). This reputation was consolidated and expanded by the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893 in Chicago, which set a trend for monumental neo-classical architecture and formal urban planning. Through the skill of its members and the breadth of its resources, the firm was able to produce a vast number of designs in

a variety of classical styles for many types of buildings, ranging from residences to monumental public edifices. Due to the sheer number of executed commissions, as well as to the important role the office played in the training of younger architects, the firm exerted a tremendous influence on American architecture during the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries. Writing in 1925, the British critic C.H. Reilly characterized the work of McKim, Mead & White, as "summing up the finest aspirations of a great people at a great epoch."⁸

The influence of McKim, Mead & White in New York was especially strong. They designed numerous buildings in and around the city, of which 72 have been designated as New York City Landmarks in recognition of their aesthetic, cultural, and historic significance, or are located in designated Historic Districts. As Wayne Andrews wrote in 1951, "New York City, minus McKim, Mead and White would be as poor a thing as a parade without banners."⁹

In 1906--several months before the death of Stanford White--William Mitchel Kendall, Burt Leslie Fenner, and William Symmes Richardson, all of whom had been with the firm for many years, were made full partners. Partnership was granted to Teunis J. Van der Bent in 1909 and to Lawrence Grant White, the son of Stanford White, in 1920. Many of the important buildings of the firm from 1904 on were the work of the younger partners.¹⁰ Commenting in 1922 on the works of the firm after 1909 (the year of McKim's death), Lionel Moses writes, "Instinctively it occurs to one's mind that the same artistic impulses are at work now as at the previous period; that the same spirit of art still exists."¹¹

The firm had already designed many of the most important club buildings in New York, including the Century Club, the Harvard Club, the Lambs Club, the University Club, the Players Club, the first Colony Club, and the Metropolitan Club, and appropriately it was given the commission for the new Racquet and Tennis Club Building.¹² William Symmes Richardson is credited with the design.¹³

William Symmes Richardson (1873-1931) joined the firm in 1895, following his studies at the University of California, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He became White's principal assistant, and later assumed design responsibility for such important commissions as Pennsylvania Station, the Hotel Pennsylvania, the National City Bank on Wall Street--all in New York, the Girard Trust Co. Building in Philadelphia, and the Bank of Montreal, Winnipeg.¹⁴

The Design

In his design for the Racquet and Tennis Club, Richardson employed the forms of Italian Renaissance architecture which the firm had first helped popularize in its earlier designs for the Villard Houses and the Boston Public Library. An earlier club design which effectively employed the 16th-century Italian palazzo mode was the University Club (1897-1900). In its creative synthesis of these Italian Renaissance forms, the Racquet and Tennis Club design is a reflection of the principles taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris where the partners of the firm, including Richardson, had studied. Beaux-Arts theory of the 19th century advocated the continuity of contemporary architectural design with that of the past. As a means of achieving that continuity, the architectural student was instructed to learn from examples of the past and to creatively combine architectural elements from those examples. In addition, the firm advocated the use of Renaissance forms for their symbolic associations--linking the glories of the Italian Renaissance with the new "American Renaissance" they and their contemporaries were helping to create in the United States.

The Racquet and Tennis Club Building occupies an entire blockfront on Park Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets, and, in accordance with Beaux-Arts principles, it is carefully scaled to the width of the Avenue. Because of that width, the broad facade may be seen to great advantage. A powerful yet restrained rectangular block, fully visible on three sides, the building rises five stories on a rusticated granite base. The use of such a base is a characteristic feature of Italian palazzi. The large stone blocks forming the base are very carefully sculpted and joined. The excellence of workmanship is a tribute to the firm of Marc Eidlitz and Son, the builder and contractor for the building. The base is pierced by large arched openings. Those flanking the club entrance open onto commercial facilities, an innovative feature at the time of construction.¹⁵ The vousoirs of these arches create a pointed profile, a feature which seems to have been adopted from the Palazzi Spannochi and Antinori in Florence.¹⁶ Smaller rectangular openings pierce the base of the side walls. The end arches in these walls provide access to the vaulted driveway running through the building at ground floor level. Stone quoins mark the corners of the building above the ground floor, contrasting with the smooth beige brick of the upper walls. As is appropriate for the floor housing the main rooms--lounges, dining room, library--of the club, the second floor is treated as a piano nobile. Full-length windows with rusticated enframements and cornices light the principal rooms. A distinctive feature, recalling the original design of the Century Club, is a central loggia recessed behind three arched openings. The piers supporting the arches have Corinthian capitals incorporating racquets into the foliage--a witty allusion to the purpose of the club--and the club shield is placed above the center arch. French doors provide access to the loggia from the inside hall lounge. Small, simply enframed windows mark the third floor. A dentiled string course separates the third and fourth stories. The major courts for racquets, tennis, and squash are located on the upper floors,¹⁷ and their location is indicated on the exterior by the placement of large blind arches with rusticated enframements at the fourth story. This type of functional expressionism reflects another principle of Beaux-Arts design. The terra-cotta frieze at the fifth floor, which is pierced by unobtrusive small windows, incorporates racquets into the pattern, another allusion to the club's purpose. A balustraded roof parapet above a decorative cornice

provides a fitting and appropriately scaled termination to the design. If reminiscent of an Italian palazzo, the club building is, however, an original design, planned for a specific site and purpose, one that reflects its time and place in the city of New York, a fitting symbol for the prestigious club that commissioned it.

The Result

The Racquet and Tennis Club officially moved into its new quarters on April 15, 1918. It was praised as "one of the finest clubhouses in this city,"¹⁸ and as having "the advantages of imposing situation and of architectural suitability to its purpose and its surroundings."¹⁹ In addition to expanded playing courts and other athletic facilities, the club was able to broaden its activities into other related directions, building up an extensive library devoted entirely to sporting books and also a collection of art works devoted to sporting subjects.²⁰ "Old King Cole," the mural by Maxfield Parrish which now may be seen in the St. Regis Hotel, was lent to the club for a number of years by member Vincent Astor.

Ironically, that "permanent" residential character which had made Park Avenue so desirable a location began to change after World War II, as the apartment buildings began to be replaced by large office buildings. With the advent of two modern glass skyscrapers on Park Avenue--Lever House of 1950-52 by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and the Seagram Building of 1954-58 by Mies van der Rohe in association with Philip Johnson--critics and journalists of the Modern Movement began to take notice of the adjacent Racquet and Tennis Club Building. Far from scorning its neo-Italian Renaissance design, these writers praised its subtlety and classical composition as a complement to Lever House and the Seagram Building.²¹ Most thought-provoking are the comments of Reyner Banham:

Few architectural confrontations can be as fascinating, or as inscrutable, as that between the Seagram Building and the Racquet Club, facing one another across Park Avenue, and Lever House, oblique from Seagram but flanking the Racquet Club. The club is a most expert exercise in Beaux-Arts expertise by McKim, Mead and White, the American partnership who showed the French in the nineties that the Ecole des Beaux-Arts could be beaten at its own game of brilliant cliché-mongering. The Racquet Club is an exercice de style, and a skill in resolving visual problems that still strikes a chord in the architects of today. Indeed, this dialogue is a discourse upon style in the grandest manner, in which the club puts down a basic proposition of traditional skill, and the other two discourse upon it in modern terms.²²

Because of such qualities as its monumental scale, its refined and restrained detail, and its functional expressionism, the Racquet and Tennis Club Building has continued to attract the attention and admiration of the architectural profession.²³ and many others. It continues to dominate its Park Avenue site and is in scale and harmony with the width of the street. As a reminder of the early residential character of Park Avenue, the Racquet and Tennis Club Building has special distinction. Among the many distinctive works of McKim, Mead & White in New York City, it remains outstanding. As architect Hugh Hardy so eloquently wrote, "the courtly Renaissance manners of the Racquet & Tennis Club would be worthy of preservation in any civilized urban center."²⁴

Report prepared by Marjorie Pearson,
Director of Research

FOOTNOTES

1. Racquet and Tennis Club, Club Book (New York, 1892).
2. New York Tribune, April 21, 1916.
3. New York Evening Post, April 20, 1916; New York Press, April 21, 1916; New York Sun, April 21, 1916; New York Times, April 21, 1916, p. 6; New York Tribune, April 21, 1916. In his will Goelet made provision to transfer the title to the club, see New York Times, July 12, 1941, p. 15.
4. New York Times, May 3, 1941, p. 15.
5. New York County, Liber Deeds, Register's Office, New York County, Section 5, liber 58, p. 61; Section 5, liber 190, p. 398.
6. Boston Evening Transcript, April 21, 1916; New York Evening Post, April 20, 1916; and July 15, 1916.
7. New York Evening Post, April 20, 1916.
8. C.H. Reilly, McKim, Mead & White (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1924), p. 24.
9. Wayne Andrews, "McKim, Mead & White: Their Mark Remains," New York Times Magazine, January 7, 1951, pp. 18-21.
10. Leland Roth, The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White, 1870-1920: A Building List (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1978), p. xxxvi.
11. Lionel Moses, "McKim, Mead & White - A History," American Architect, 121 (May 24, 1922), 417.
12. It must also be remembered that Robert W. Goelet commissioned the building on behalf of the club, and the association of the Goelet family with the McKim, Mead & White firm was a long one. Buildings by the firm for the family include "Southside" in Newport (1882); the Goelet Building, 900 Broadway (1886); and the Goelet Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery (1899).
13. Leland Roth makes this attribution in "Notes on the Plates," A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1973), p. 73; and The Urban Architecture of McKim, Mead and White: 1870-1910 (Ph.D diss, Yale University, 1973), p. 761. Curiously, in his Building List, p. 128, Roth credits Kendall. In the McKim, Mead & White Archives (File 265) at the New-York Historical Society is a letter, dated May 1, 1962, from M.B. Steinmann of the McKim, Mead & White firm, stating that W.S. Richardson was the member of the firm in charge of the design of the Racquet and Tennis Club.
14. American Art Annual 28 (1931), 416; New York Times, April 7, 1931, p. 27; "Richardson, W(illiam) Symmes," Who Was Who in America, (1897-1942).
15. George Mead Rushmore, Racquet and Tennis Club: Some History and Some Memories (New York: Racquet and Tennis Club, [1964]), p.37.

16. Roth, Urban Architecture, p. 761. Roth also suggests that an American source for the design may be the University Club in San Francisco by Bliss & Faville, an architectural firm which was associated with McKim, Mead & White on a number of San Francisco projects. The club was published in Brickbuilder, 10 (1910), pl. 160, 161.
17. The playing courts were constructed by Bickley, Mineral, Black of London, the foremost specialists in that field.
18. New York Evening Post, July 15, 1916.
19. C. Owen Lublin, "An Imposing New Clubhouse on Park Avenue," Town and Country, 74 (October 10, 1918), 27.
20. Racquet and Tennis Club, Catalogue of Books, Pictures and Sporting Prints (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1916); Racquet and Tennis Club, A Guide to the Library of the Racquet and Tennis Club (New York, 1942).
21. Arthur Drexler, Architectural Record (July 1958), 140; William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 251.
22. Reyner Banham, Age of the Masters (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 114.
23. See files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LP-1000).
24. Letter of June 21, 1978, from Hugh Hardy to Kent Barwick, Chairman, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 305 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10007.

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 Racquet and Tennis Club Building 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 Racquet and Tennis Club Building is a superb example of the work of the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White; that in its creative synthesis of Italian Renaissance forms, the design is a reflection of the principles taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris; that among its notable features are the rusticated ground floor base, the second story loggia, and the blind arches which are functionally expressive of the placement of the racquet and tennis courts within; that it was built in 1916-18 as the third home of the Racquet and Tennis Club, a prestigious social and athletic organization; that as a reminder of the early residential character of Park Avenue, the building has special distinction; that the structure was carefully planned for its Park Avenue site and that it still occupies a prominent position on Park Avenue; and that the Racquet and Tennis Club Building is a fitting symbol for the prestigious club that commissioned it.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Racquet and Tennis Club Building, 370 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1288, Lot 33, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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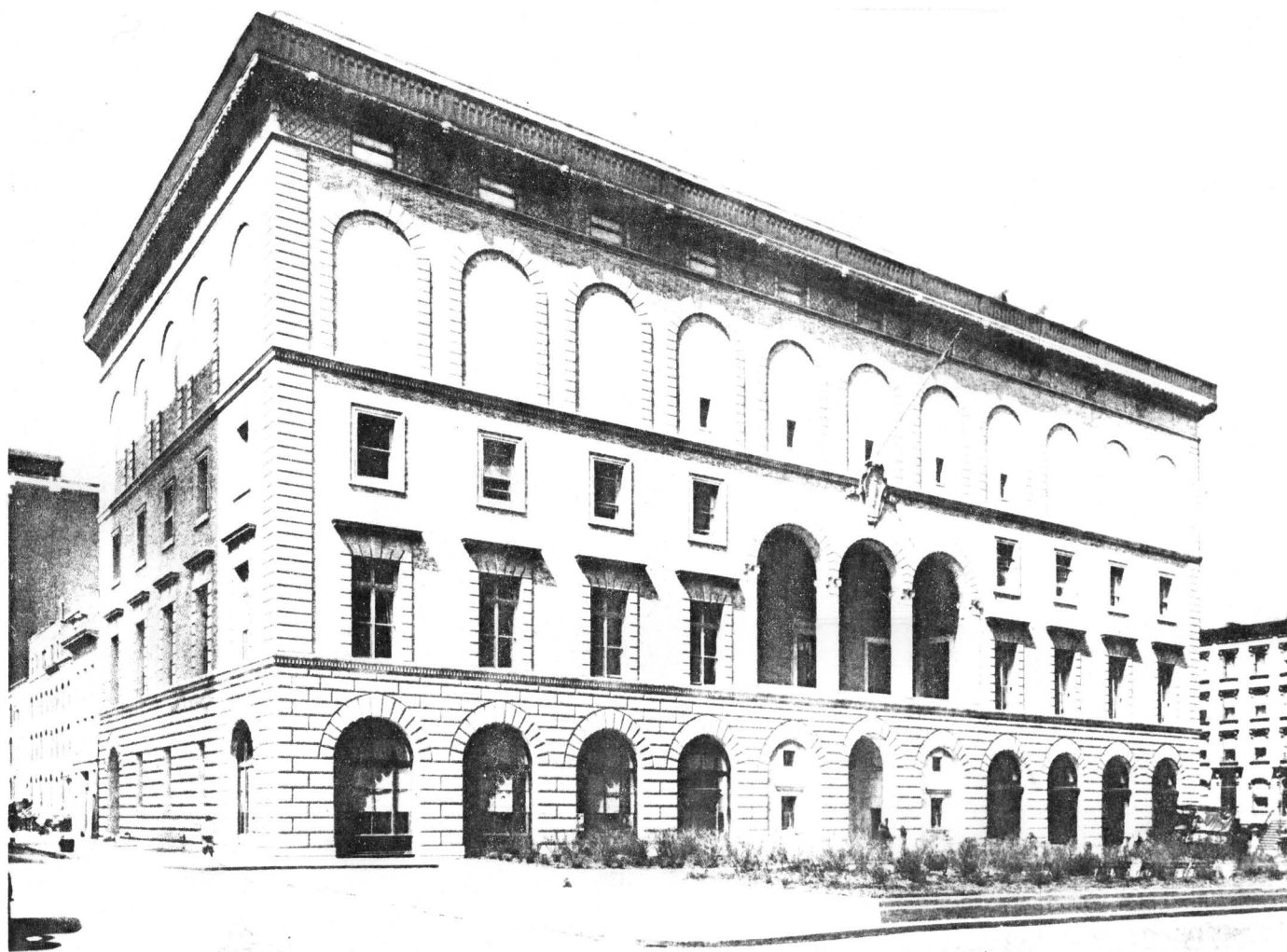
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FACADE

From: A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915, pl. 399

Racquet and Tennis Club Building
370 Park Avenue

1916-18

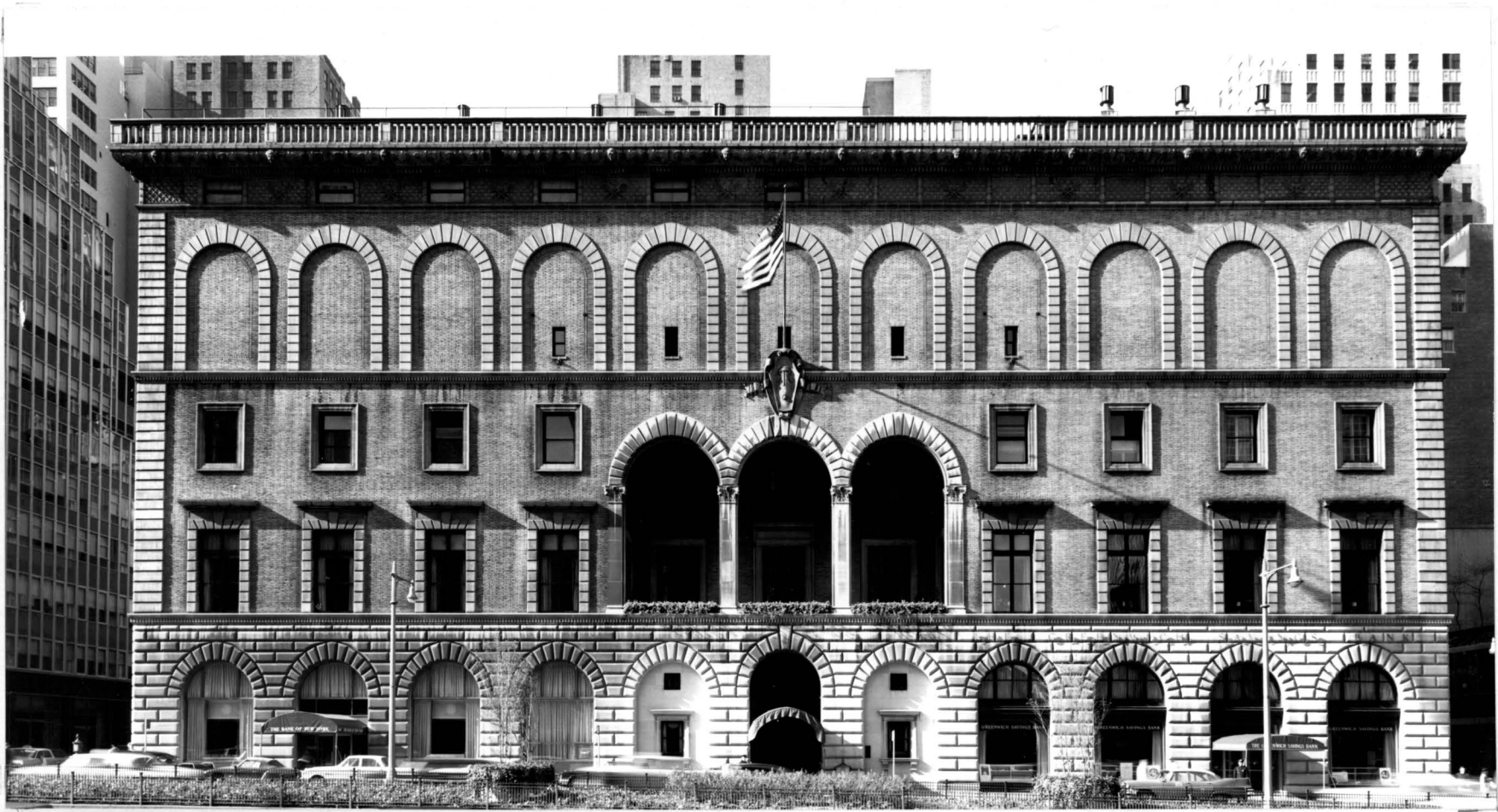


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Racquet and Tennis Club Building
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McKim, Mead & White