

(FORMER) SUNSET PARK COURT HOUSE, 4201 Fourth Avenue, Brooklyn. Built 1931; Mortimer Dickerson Metcalfe, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map 724, Lot 1.

On April 24, 2001, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the (former) Sunset Park Court House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Three witnesses spoke in support of the designation including a representative from the New York City Police Department and the Historic Districts Council.

Summary

The former Sunset Park Court House is an impressive Classical Revival style building located on Fourth Avenue between 42nd and 43rd streets in the southwestern section of Brooklyn. It is one of only two courthouse buildings known to have been designed by Mortimer D. Metcalfe, a New York architect who assisted with the design of Grand Central Terminal, served as New York State Deputy Architect under State Architect Franklin Ware, and independently designed several buildings in Palm Beach, Florida. The Sunset Park Court House was built in 1931 to house the magistrates' and municipal courts and today is one of the neighborhood's few remaining civic buildings. Largely intact on the exterior with only a few minor alterations, the building represents an era of prolific courthouse construction in New York City. Its imposing Ionic-columned porticos on the 42nd and 43rd street façades and its grand quoins culminating in American eagle capitals, moldings, meticulously-articulated limestone details, and window treatment make the Sunset Park Court House a rich and faithful translation of the Classical Revival style. The building is currently used by Community Board Seven as its headquarters and also by the New York City Police Department to house its main applicant processing division.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of Sunset Park

Located along New York Bay in the southwestern section of Brooklyn, the neighborhood now known as Sunset Park was one of the first areas of Brooklyn to be settled. The area was inhabited by farmers in the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it was not until the 1830s when Brooklyn officially changed in status from a town to a city that surveyors began to map out city streets and development occurred. In 1890, Irving T. Bush recognized the area's great potential for development and built a series of piers, warehouses, and factories linked by rail; the complex stretched from 32nd to 51st streets and was the largest commercial and industrial facility in New York, providing employment for over 20,000 workers. This, coupled with the 1905-1915 construction of the subway line under Fourth Avenue brought a substantial increase in development. The initial wave of residential and commercial development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was followed by a second wave of development in the early 1930s of infill housing and public, religious, and institutional buildings. At the time of the courthouse construction, Sunset Park was noted for its thriving Scandinavian immigrant population. The residential center of this growing neighborhood was Fourth Avenue, the broad parkway where several churches and public buildings had been erected.¹ Two notable religious and civic structures--St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church and Parish School (1905, Raymond F. Almirall, architect) and the former 68th Precinct Station House and Stable (1886, Emile M. Gruwe, architect, a designated New York City Landmark)² were joined by the Sunset Park Courthouse in 1931 to form a small cluster of civic and religious buildings that acted as Sunset Park's social center. By the late 1940s several factors led to the decline of Sunset Park--the advent of the Depression, the cessation of the Third Avenue elevated line and the subsequent construction of the Gowanus Expressway. The move of the maritime industry from Brooklyn to New Jersey in the 1960s and the attendant loss of jobs intensified economic decline in Sunset Park. A combination of local, state, and federal aid in the 1970s helped to improve the area's economy, and during the 1980s, Sunset Park experienced an influx of Asian and Latin-American immigrants and a commercial and industrial resurgence.

Twentieth Century Municipal and Magistrates' Courthouses in New York City

Prior to the twentieth century, courts were largely

housed along with other governmental functions in city or village halls. After 1851, Brooklyn City Hall (now Brooklyn Borough Hall) was used for most court sessions. With New York's growing population, local courts hearing civil cases were expanded in the 1880s, and by 1898, they had been reorganized as the municipal court. At the same time the local police court evolved into a separate magistrates' court, but this court was often still located near, or even connected to, a police station.³ For example in Sunset Park, the new magistrates' court built in 1931 was located across the street from the existing 68th Police Precinct House.

At least ten municipal and magistrates' courts were built in the early twentieth century in New York. By 1918, there were thirty-one magistrates courts handling more than 200,000 arraignments. In Brooklyn, magistrates' courts were built at Gates Avenue (1903-4), Snyder Avenue (1912-2), Liberty Avenue (1929), and in Sunset Park (1931). The 1930s was the busiest decade for court building, with eleven buildings constructed; all but one from this period still exist but have been put to other uses. Over half of the eleven were built between 1930-1932--the boom years for court construction in New York City, and most of these were designed in a Classical Revival style. Mary B. Dierickx in *The Architecture of Public Justice* describes the design of courthouses of this period as follows:

Classical styles predominate.... There are design elements commonly associated with courthouses: a long flight of steps; prominent entrance often marked by columns; low height; high bases, often in stone or set apart by water tables, and classical details such as a molded or dentillated cornice and pedimented doors and windows.⁴

With its finely proportioned plan and entrance supported by six Ionic columns, the Sunset Park Court House is an excellent example of a rich and faithful translation of this Classical style. In 1962, the New York City court system was reorganized and became more centralized; and many of these local courthouses, including the one in Sunset Park became obsolete.⁵

Sunset Park Court House

In June 24, 1930, Mortimer Dickerson Metcalfe filed permits for the construction of the Sunset Park Court House. The building permit notes the new courthouse would be three stories with a basement. The foundations were of reinforced-concrete and stone;

the upper walls were limestone with common brick backing. Floor construction was steel beam and girder with cinder and stone. Load-bearing capacity for the public space was one hundred pounds per square foot; the office space was sixty pounds per square foot and the roof was forty pounds per square foot. Building permits for the interior allowed for three, four, and six inch terra cotta and eight inch brick. The walls and ceilings were plastered, and the floor surface was cement with marble trim. Doors were of metal or wood. There were no elevators. Outside window frames and sash were of sheet metal. The roofing was soft copper.⁶ The cost of construction was estimated to be \$475,000.⁷

Mortimer Metcalfe designed the courthouse to be an imposing civic presence in the bustling Sunset Park neighborhood. The high basement and entry porticos lifted the building above the busy traffic of the surrounding streets and daily activities taking place on the sidewalks. His use of limestone, the classical style and stylized eagles identified the building's civic purpose. Metcalfe employed classical forms to clearly articulate each component of the courthouse. Entryways to the two different courts located in the building were placed at opposite sides through separate porticos, with the Municipal Court's entrance on 42nd Street and the Magistrates' Court entrance on 43rd Street. The large arched windows on Fourth Avenue suggest the presence of the court rooms within. Pediments delineate the main entry doors, quoins articulate each corner of the building, and simple molded surrounds frame the windows.

Metcalfe used these forms and details of the classical style to locate the building within a hierarchy of civic buildings. He designed the courthouse to be freestanding with four fully developed facades clad in limestone. This, together with the entrance porticos supported by Ionic columns, Ionic pilasters, and restrained but elegant classical detail indicated that the courthouse was of greater consequence than public libraries, fire stations, police stations, or even traffic courts that typically lacked porticos. The architect chose not to use classicism's most elaborate forms of Corinthian columns, pediments, or domes, signaling that this courthouse was of lesser status than a state or federal court building, city hall, or state or national capitol. Other architects such as McKim, Mead & White, Carrère and Hastings, Cass Gilbert, and Warren and Wetmore used this approach to classical forms to create distinctive public buildings that they hoped would be easily identified by the general public. Metcalfe's Sunset Part Court House is an elegant late example of this same use of classical form.

The 1931 Report of the President of the Borough of Brooklyn stated that there was "rapid progress and advancement made on the erection of the new Fourth Avenue Courts Building..."⁸ The 1932 Report of the President of the Borough of Brooklyn recounted the completion of the construction of the 5th District Municipal Court and detailed expenditures for general construction at \$438,83.00; plumbing at \$13,980.00; and heating and ventilation at \$32,900.⁹

A 1946 Sanborn Map confirms that the Sunset Park Court House was still in use as a magistrates' and municipal court through that date.¹⁰ In 1962, with the reorganization of courts in New York City, the Sunset Park Court House closed. By 1970 the building was in use as the New York City Job Preparation Center.¹¹ During this period Community Board Seven moved into the building. In addition, a youth rehabilitation organization Genesis, also occupied the courthouse.¹² In 1973, the Sunset Park Senior Citizens Center joined other non-profit and community groups as tenants of the building.¹³ By 1987, the building was in a state of extreme disrepair and city officials slated it for renovation. Renovations were projected to take a year and cost around \$640,000.¹⁴ The building continued in use as a community facility until renovations actually occurred.

By 1996, Helpern Architects completed its renovation of the courthouse. The firm's work included repairing, cleaning, repointing, and restoring the limestone façades and repairing portions of the copper roof including flashing and gutters. New interior thermal windows replaced some of the original windows. In addition, the firm installed bird deterrent systems and anti-graffiti coatings. An air-conditioning unit was also added to the structure.¹⁵ The New York City Police Department moved in after the renovation was completed.

Mortimer Dickerson Metcalfe

Born in Brooklyn in 1880, Mortimer Dickerson Metcalfe practiced architecture both in New York and in Palm Beach, Florida. Little is known about his formal training, but later in his career he was associated with several of New York's most prestigious architectural firms, among them F. B. and A. Ware, architects, and the highly successful Warren and Wetmore. His obituary in the *Palm Beach Post* notes that he was an "assistant in designing Grand Central Station and several hotels."¹⁶ Although it appears that Metcalfe maintained a separate practice, in 1905 his office was located at 1170 Broadway, the building where James Ware and Sons also had an architectural practice.¹⁷ In 1911 and 1912, Mortimer Metcalfe served

as New York State Deputy Architect under Franklin B. Ware,¹⁸ and in 1919 he joined F. B. and A. Ware, architects in a proposal for a monumental water gate and entrance to New York City at Battery Park. The project entitled "Gateway to the Nation" was, however, never actually built.¹⁹

Other institutional buildings designed by Metcalfe include the former Brooklyn Traffic Court at 363 Liberty Avenue, which he completed in 1929 now being reused for the offices of Community Board Five and space for the New York City Police Athletic League.²⁰ In 1926, Metcalfe also completed the design for the Palm Beach Hotel, a Spanish Revival building in Palm Beach, Florida. Mortimer Metcalfe came to Palm Beach in 1923 and resided there until his return to New York in 1929. Between 1929 and 1952, he divided his time between Florida and Shelter Island, New York. He was part of a wave of New York architects who came to Palm Beach and left an architectural imprint. During his time there, he also designed the Palm Beach Post Office and St. Edward's Catholic Church—both significant architectural additions to the Palm Beach landscape. In 1952, Metcalfe returned permanently to Palm Beach and resided there until his death in 1957.²¹

Description

The Sunset Park Court House is a Classical Revival style limestone building three stories high above a full rusticated basement. The I-shaped building has two principal façades of almost identical design with entrances on 42nd and 43rd Streets. The building's western façade, which fronts Fourth Avenue, and the eastern facade which faces Fifth Avenue, are likewise almost identical in design. The site on which the courthouse stands slopes downward on Fourth Avenue, creating a change in grade for the basement and stair to the two entrance porticos. The entire courthouse is surrounded by a non-historic metal fence that protects an areaway. A 1996 renovation of the building replaced some of the historic windows on the exterior of the building, added non-historic lighting, and added an air-conditioning unit to the eastern elevation of the building.

42nd Street Façade: The 42nd Street façade is five bays with a projecting central portico that is three bays wide. The portico consists of six Ionic columns, paired at the left and right ends and two singular columns on either side of the entrance. The portico has a simple architrave with frieze above, carrying the words "Municipal Court," followed on each side by two disks in relief. Above the frieze is dentil molding and a stone cornice with balustrade. The entablature and

balustrade continue around the perimeter of the building. An imposing staircase of fifteen steps with non-historic railing leads to an original entrance with non-historic metal double doors topped by an historic four-light transom. This first floor entrance is detailed with a simple surround crowned by scrolled brackets, dentil molding, and pediment. Within the pediment is a round stone medallion with the seal of the Borough of Brooklyn encircled with a laurel wreath design and flanked by curling ribbons and leaves. Historic brass lanterns resting on scrolled brackets flank the entrance. The ground floor has four large, square-headed six-over-six double hung sash windows with three-light transoms above; the second floor has five smaller, six-over-six double-hung, sash windows. All windows have original molded surrounds. Some windows retain historic glass. Windows are covered with non-historic metal bars or mesh for security. An original stringcourse with wave motif delineates the first and second floors. The stone ceiling of the portico is coffered with decorative metal rosette medallions. Rusticated quoins with vermiculated finish beginning on the ground floor extend to the architrave above the second floor and are finished with an egg-and-dart molding with a stylized American eagle imposed over the molding. Six full pilasters are directly behind the entrance to the portico. Half pilasters of the same order extend underneath the corner quoins and the pilasters to the farthest right and left of the entrance. A balustrade separates the second and third floors. The third floor has five, six-over-six, double-hung sash windows, each with a three-light transom. All windows on the 42nd Street façade are aligned horizontally and vertically in symmetrical rows. Non-historic light fixtures are to the right and left of the entrance, and a security camera has been added also on the right between pilasters, pointing to the entrance. There are no penetrations of the ashlar basement on the 42nd Street façade. The 42nd Street wing is topped by a copper hipped roof.

Fourth Avenue (western) Façade: The Fourth Avenue façade extends the blockfront between 42nd and 43rd streets. The façade consists of two slightly projecting wings and a recessed center section. The northern and southern wings carry on the design of the 42nd and 43rd streets facades respectively with limestone base, quoins capped by stylized American eagles, stringcourse, pilasters, frieze with disks in relief, dentil molding, and double hung windows with transoms. Certain elements of the wing sections such as the entablature, balustrades, and pilasters are continued on the recessed center section of the Fourth Avenue façade; however, a different window type is used in the center section. On the recessed portion of the first floor

level, there are five, semicircular arched windows that extend two stories and are crowned with scrolled bracket crowns. These windows have the original metal sash with radial transoms above. Non-historic metal casement security doors cover each window. On the third floor of the recessed section of the Fourth Avenue façade, semicircular windows repeat the window design of the lower floor. Projected moldings run across the third floor of the center section at the springing point of the arched windows. A series of ornamental courses just under the roofline of the recessed portion of the façade includes an arcade design, topped by a chevron detail, and then a simple molding. This section is capped by a pitched copper roof and concludes on the 42nd and 43rd street sides in prominent stone gables with a non-historic antenna on the 42nd street side. There are historic light fixtures on the first floor wings of the Fourth Avenue façade and non-historic ones on the center section. The basement level of the entire Fourth Avenue facade has fenestration. In the recessed basement level, non-historic metal, one-over-one double hung windows replace the original windows. Non-historic fencing protects the basement well. To the north and south of the recessed section of the building, the basement level wings have six small windows that have been replaced by non-historic ones. Non-historic air vents are at each end of the bank of windows. A cornerstone with "1931" is on the northwestern corner of the building.

43rd Street Façade: The 43rd Street façade is identical to the 42nd Street façade with several exceptions. Within the pediment over the entrance is the official seal of New York City. The frieze over the entrance of the 43rd Street façade carries the words "Magistrates Court," and the light fixtures flanking the entrance are

historic. On the left column flanking the entrance of the 43rd Street façade are historic metal numbers "4201" and "40." The window on the first floor to the right of the entrance has been changed to a door, providing handicapped access next to the main entrance. In addition a non-historic spotlight is on the window to the left of the entrance, and a security camera has been placed on the left pilaster to face the entrance; a non-historic sign for Community Board Seven has also been placed on the western corner quoins of the 43rd Street façade. Five steps with non-historic metal railing lead to the entrance. A non-historic flagpole extends from the top balcony in the center of the building.

Eastern Façade: The eastern façade extends the length of the blockfront between 42nd and 43rd streets and faces Fifth Avenue. It is almost identical to the Fourth Avenue façade with several exceptions. An original chimney with a molded cap stretches from the basement to above the cornice between the recessed center section and the projecting wing toward the 42nd Street façade. The northern wing retains an original side entrance that has a metal door with transom above. Historic light fixtures remain near the 43rd Street façade adjacent to the quoins at the top of the first floor windows. Non-historic light fixtures have been added near the quoins toward the recessed center section. A large air-conditioning unit enclosed in a metal shed has been placed next to the recessed section of the eastern façade.

Researched by
Isabel T. Hill
Consultant

NOTES

1. David Ment and Mary S. Donovan, *The People of Brooklyn-A History of Two Neighborhoods* (Brooklyn, New York: The Brooklyn Educational & Cultural Alliance, 1980), 63-72.
2. Elliot Willensky and Norval White, *AIA Guide to New York City* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers), 615-6.
3. Mary B. Dierickx, *The Architecture of Public Justice* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), v-viii.
4. *Ibid.*, ix,xii.

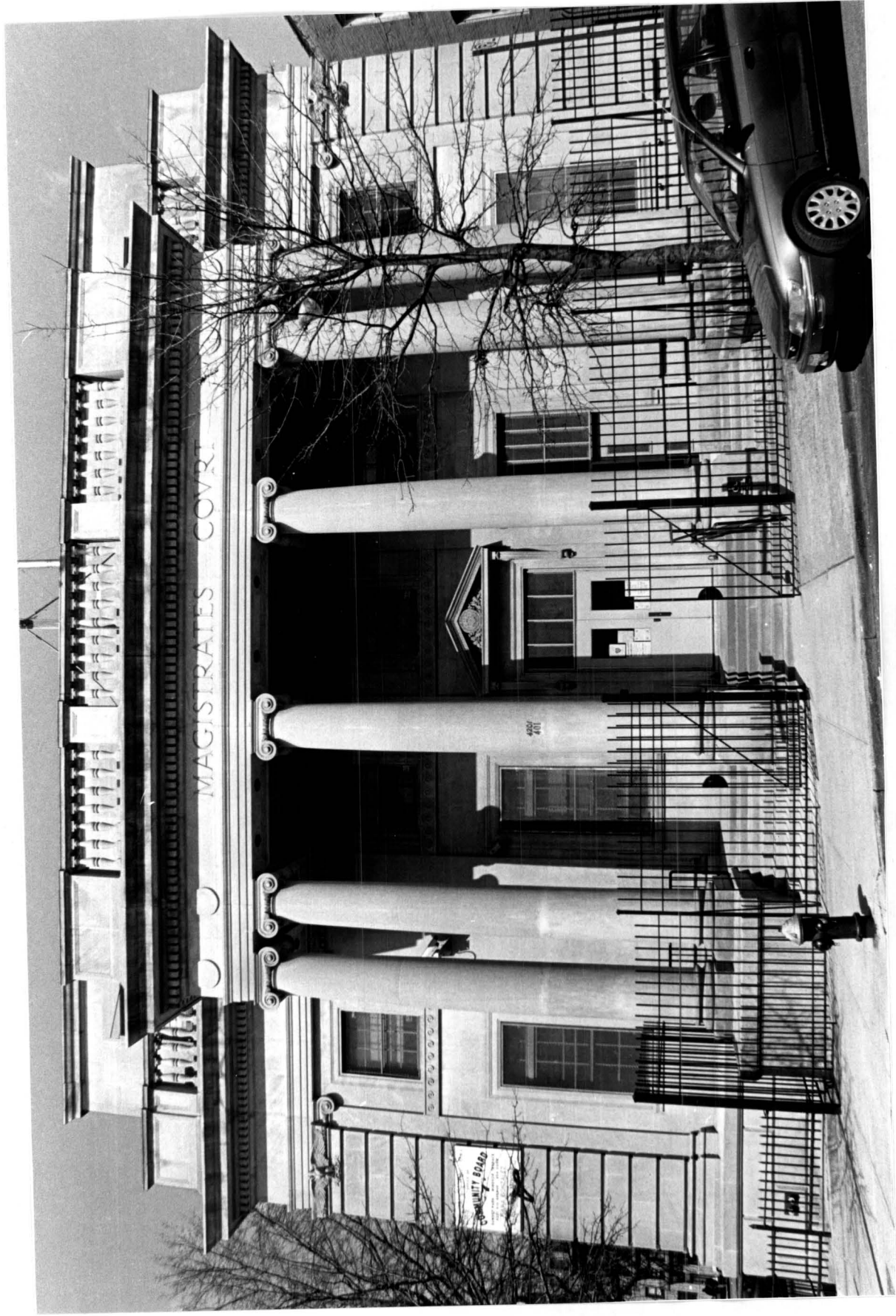
5. Kenneth Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and New York-Historical Society, 1995), 290-293.
6. New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of Brooklyn, New Building Application 9209.
7. New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of Brooklyn, New Building Application 7738.
8. Report of the President of the Borough of Brooklyn 1931, (Brooklyn, New York: Office of the Borough President), 13.
9. Report of the President of the Borough of Brooklyn, 1932 (Brooklyn, New York: Office of the Borough President), 44.
10. *Insurance Maps of Brooklyn, New York* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1946) Vol. 6A.
11. *Insurance Maps of Brooklyn, New York* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1970) Vol. 6A.
12. Mary O'Flaherty, "The Generation Gap to be Bridged Here," *Sunday News*, December 2, 1973.
13. James Harney, "A Lengthy Struggle by Sunset Park Senior Citizens," *Daily News*, October 9, 1980.
14. "Historic Sunset Park Courthouse About to be Rehabbed," *Daily News*, December 22, 1987.
15. Interview with Christos Rellas, Helpern Architects, May 15, 2001.
16. Obituary, *The New York Times*, February 20, 1957; Obituary, *Palm Beach Post*, February 19, 1957.
17. James Ward Architects in Practice-New York City 1900-1940 (Union, New Jersey: J & D Associates, 1989), 52, 82..
18. Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co., 1956), 632; Edgar L. Murlin, *New York Red Book* (Albany, New York: J. B. Lyon Company, 1911), 628; Edgar L. Murlin, *New York Red Book* (Albany, New York: J. B. Lyon Company, 1912), 566.
19. *American Architect* Vol. 115 (April 30, 1919), 603-605.
20. Dierickx, xxiii.
21. Obituary, *Palm Beach Post*, February 19, 1957.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 (former) Sunset Park Court House has a special character and 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 (former) Sunset Park Court House is an impressive Classical Revival style building in the Sunset Park neighborhood; that it is one of the few surviving historic civic buildings in this area of Brooklyn; that it is representative of an era of prolific courthouse development in New York City; that it was constructed in 1931 by the City of New York at a cost of \$475,000; that it is one of two known buildings in New York City designed by New York architect Mortimer Metcalfe, who served as New York State Deputy Architect under Franklin B. Ware; that with its finely proportioned plan and elegant porticos with Ionic columns, pediments, and moldings, the courthouse is a rich and faithful translation of the Classical Revival style; and that the building exterior is largely intact with only minor alterations.

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 (former) Sunset Park Court House, 4201 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 724, Lot 1 as its Landmark Site.



(Former) Sunset Park Court House
4201 4th Avenue, Brooklyn
Photo: Carl Forster



42nd Street Elevation

(Former) Sunset Park Court House

4th Avenue Elevation



Photos: Carl Forster



42nd Street Entrance

(Former) Sunset Park Court House

Photos: Carl Foster



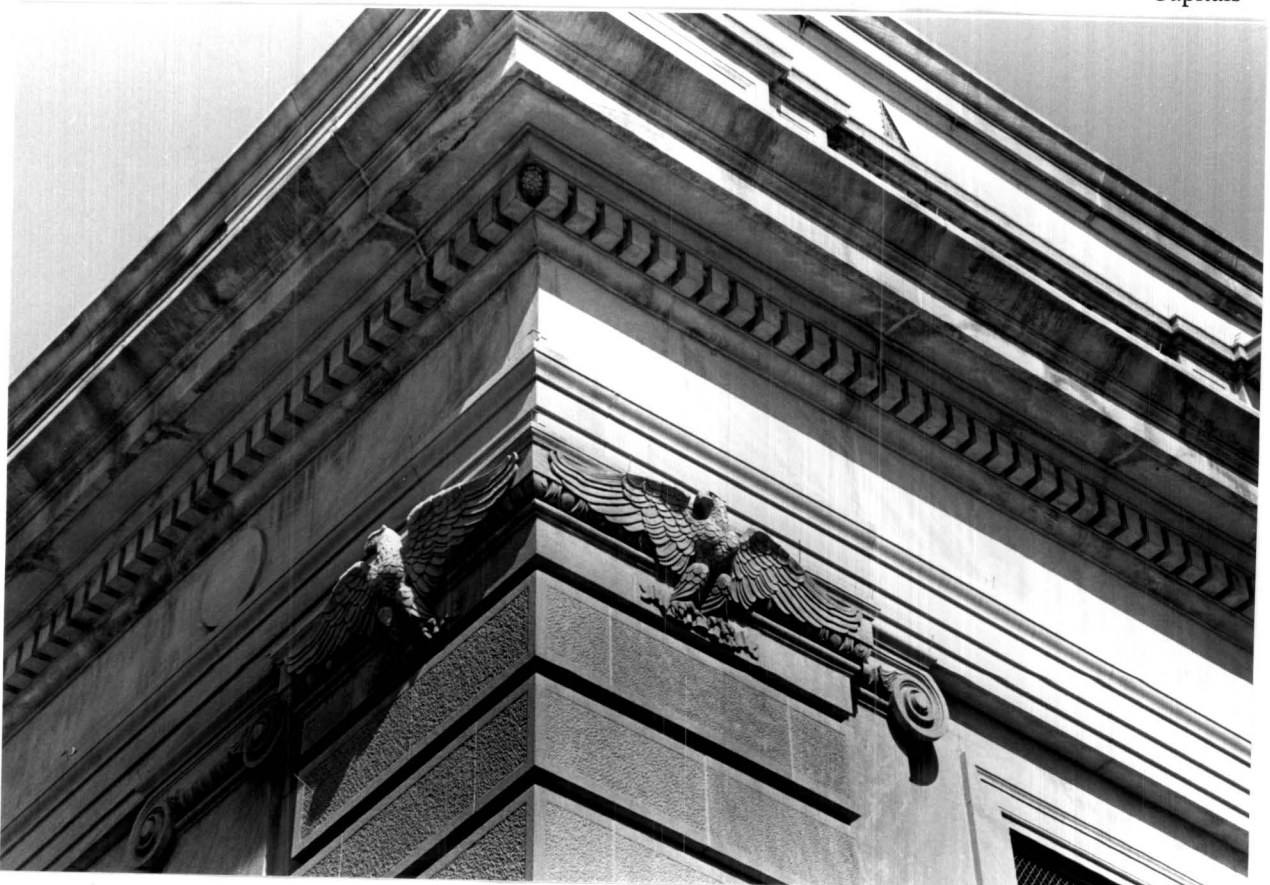
Rear Elevation

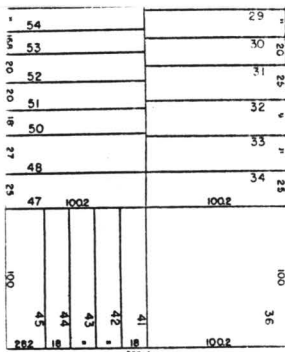


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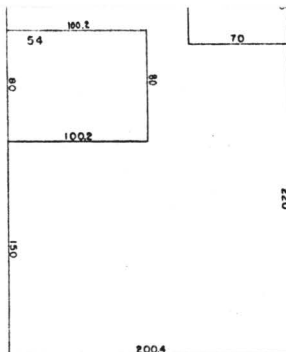
(Former) Sunset Park Court House

Capitals

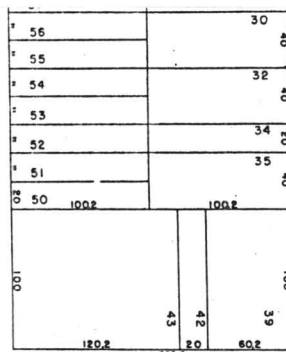




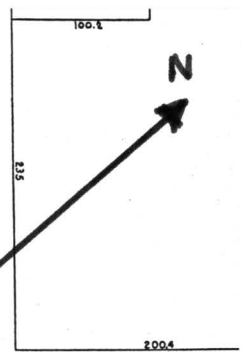
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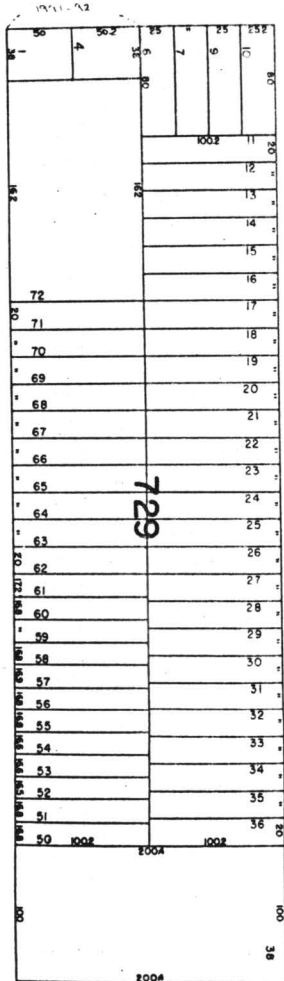


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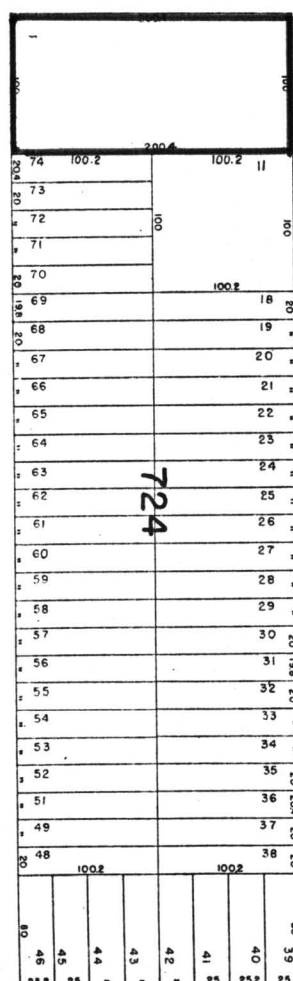
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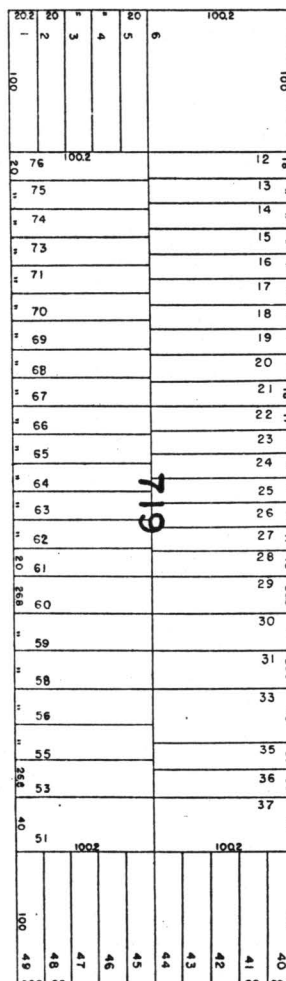
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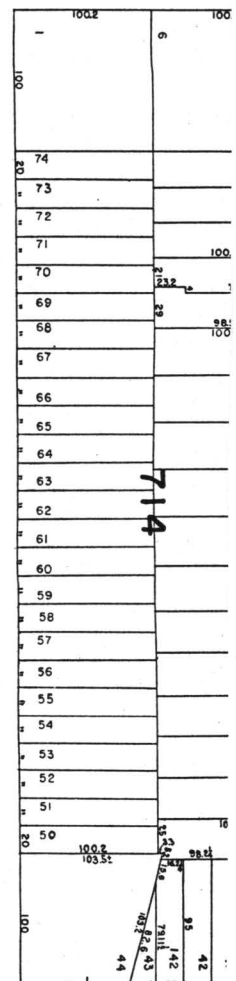
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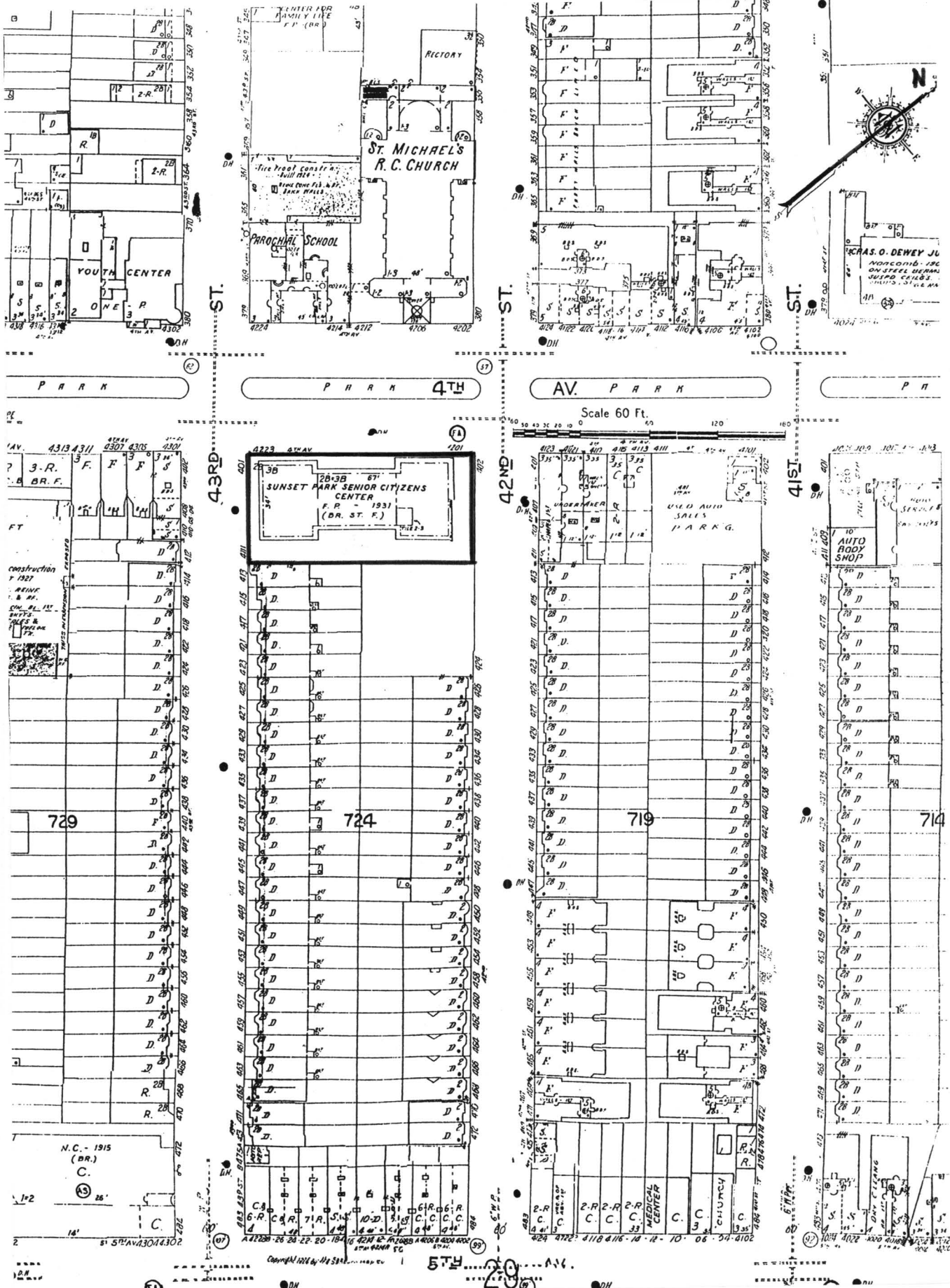
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(FORMER) SUNSET PARK COURT HOUSE

4201 Fourth Avenue, Brooklyn

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 724, Lot 1

Source: *Sanborn Building & Property Atlas*, 2000-01, Brooklyn, NY, Vol. 6A, Pl. 21



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Source: Sanborn Building & Property Atlas, 2000-01, Brooklyn, NY, Vol. 6A, Pl. 21