LABORATORY ADMINISTRATION BUILDING, BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN, 1000 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn. Built 1912-17; McKim, Mead & White, architects (William Kendall)

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1183, Lot 1, in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated

On November 14, 2006, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Laboratory/Administration Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three people spoke in favor of designation including the President of Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and representatives of the Historic Districts Council and the Society for the Architecture of the City. In addition, the Commission received a letter of support from City Councilmember Letitia James.

Summary

The Laboratory Administration Building, designed by William Kendall of the renowned architectural firm, McKim, Mead & White, is located within the boundaries of and is an integral part of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Initially conceived of in 1910, the Laboratory Administration Building was constructed in stages, beginning in 1912. The building is modeled after small churches in the Lombardy region of Italy and is constructed in a Greek cross design with a cupola at the center of a symmetrical form. This Tuscan Revival style building is made of concrete and brick, with stucco finish and terra-cotta detailing. Included in the firm’s *A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915*, the Laboratory/Administration Building is considered to be a significant example of the firm’s late work. The Laboratory/Administration Building originally housed a physiological laboratory, an elementary laboratory, a photographic operating room and dark room, research rooms, and an assembly room with a basement for storage of collections and publications. Presently, the building is home to a botanical and horticultural library, administrative offices, and a visitors center and auditorium.

Brooklyn Botanic Garden was created by a 1909 agreement between the City of New York and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (now the Brooklyn Museum). Further support came from Alfred Treadway White, a prominent Brooklyn citizen who had offered funds to create a scientific botanic garden in 1905. The triangle of land behind the Institute’s building, flanked by Eastern Parkway and Washington and Flatbush avenues was set aside in the Olmsted Brothers’ original plans for Prospect Park as the location for large institutional buildings. The Olmsted Brothers’ firm, successor firm to Olmsted, Vaux & Company, worked with McKim, Mead & White to site the administration building, conservatories, and the various gardens in the new botanic garden. Brooklyn Botanic Garden is one of New York City’s most significant botanic gardens and one of Brooklyn’s most prominent cultural institutions. The Laboratory/Administration Building is the most significant building from the garden’s first phase of development.
DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Brooklyn Botanic Garden, located at 1000 Washington Avenue, is the fourth botanic garden planned for Brooklyn. The first botanic garden was created by Andre Parmentier in 1825 in the present-day Prospect Heights section of Brooklyn. A subsequent effort to create a botanic garden was launched in 1855 by Thomas Hunt, a prominent citizen of Brooklyn. Together with funds from Henry A. Kent, the first garden plan had an endowment of $87,500 and was to be located between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and 57th and 60th Streets. Even though adequately endowed, this plan was never realized. A third plan was, however, laid out near the Litchfield Mansion within the boundaries of Prospect Park. Little is known about this proposed garden; however it appears on an 1869 map of the City of Brooklyn. In maps of subsequent years, it is not noted.\(^1\)

As Prospect Park was laid out and developed, forward-thinking citizens began to explore the idea of a separate botanic garden. Businessman and prominent citizen Alfred Treadway White established a committee to draft a proposal for a botanic garden and arboretum. On May 18, 1897, the Legislature of the State of New York authorized the establishment of a botanic garden and arboretum for the collection and propagation of plants, flowers, shrubs, and trees and also for the advancement of knowledge and research pertaining to botanical science, the exhibition of ornamental and decorative horticulture, and for entertainment, recreation, and education of the general public.\(^2\) An undeveloped section of Prospect Park called the East Side Lands, previously used by the City Parks Department as a dump for ashes, was vacant and in 1902 was officially designated as Institute Park. A triangular parcel fronting Eastern Parkway, Institute Park became the site of the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.\(^3\)

On December 28, 1909, the City of New York and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences entered into an agreement and legislation was authorized to establish a botanic garden and arboretum on a portion of Institute Park. The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, a well-established organization with an educational mission to support and expand cultural and scientific efforts in Brooklyn, was charged with establishing and maintaining the garden. The City of New York granted a portion of Institute Park bounded by Eastern Parkway on the north and Washington Avenue on the east. A March 1910 report of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences outlines that the Olmsted Brothers had been engaged to develop plans for the garden and arboretum; and in July of 1910, the Brooklyn Institute for Arts and Sciences hired C. Stuart Gager, a well-known botanist who was working in Missouri at the time, to serve as director. Even before moving to Brooklyn, Gager was passionately involved in the botanic garden project preparing preliminary plans for the laboratory and consulting with the Olmsted Brothers and McKim, Mead and White, the architectural firm chosen to design the laboratory and plant houses.\(^4\)

Most botanic institutions of the time emphasized scientific research and while the Brooklyn Botanic Garden was founded for this purpose, its mission also encompassed making this research and knowledge accessible to the public. Known for its emphasis on education from its beginnings, the garden became more notable in 1914 when it established the first children’s gardening program, which became the prototype for children’s gardens around the world. Likewise, the rock garden (1916) was the first public rock garden in the United States. The Botanic Garden’s Japanese Garden (1915), Cranford Memorial Rose Garden (1927) and esplanade of flowering Japanese cherry trees were developed under the guidance of C. Stuart Gager and landscape architect Harold Caparn, who shaped the various gardens from 1912 until 1945. In 1945, the garden boasted 1,250,000 visitors annually.\(^5\)

Laboratory Administration Building

In 1911, the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White filed permits for the construction of the Laboratory Building and adjacent plant houses. The original building permit notes the dimensions for the Laboratory Building as 48 feet front, 48 feet rear, and 75.4 feet deep. The two and a half stories were 35 feet in height. No buildings had to be demolished in order to construct the Laboratory Building. The foundation was of reinforced concrete and the upper wall material was brick.\(^6\)

The garden’s director, C. Stuart Gager worked closely with the architects on every aspect of the design and construction of the Laboratory Administration Building. On March 10, 1911, a letter went out from Gager, asking 28 colleagues to cast ballots for names of distinguished botanists of the past to be represented on the laboratory exterior. The result was that the names of 68 renowned botanists are inscribed along a frieze
and window tablets of the building. Included are a range of individuals notable in the world of horticulture and sciences, including DeVries, Strasburger, Knight, Darwin, and Linnaeus.7

In January 18, 1912, Cockerill & Little Company at 1969 Broadway, New York, the lowest bidder on the project, was awarded a contract for $55,800 for the construction of the first section of the Laboratory Building, the plant houses, and heating system.

Work on this initial section of the Laboratory Building began in April 1912. The building was scheduled to be completed in 150 working days from April 1. The construction went off schedule when there was a significant delay in delivery of the specified Spanish roof tiles because of devastating floods in Akron, Ohio and also because of national problems procuring steel.8 Over a year later, the southern section of the laboratory was completed. An article in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden RECORD, details the move into the new building.

On September 17-20, 1913, the Botanic Garden staff moved from the temporary quarters occupied since the fall of 1910, in the Central Museum, to the first section of the new laboratory building in the Garden. During the past three years, the work of developing the Garden has assumed such proportions that this first section was entirely outgrown before it was occupied, and the need for the second section is urgent. Application has been made for an appropriation for the construction of the next section.9

A request for appropriation of $69,500 was submitted to the City of New York on January 23, 1914 to construct two additional sections of the Laboratory Building. But by May of 1915, it was apparent that the state of the city’s finances would further delay the construction of this much needed space. City coffers had been emptied by the enormous cost of public improvements during this period. Realizing the urgent need for expanded accommodations, the chairman of the governing committee of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden secured private funds in the amount of $100,000 on the condition that the city appropriate equivalent corporate stock for the completion of the Laboratory Building and other permanent improvements to the garden. These terms were accepted by the City of New York, and the cornerstone for this section of the Laboratory Building was laid on April 20, 1916. The firm of Cockerill & Little was again selected as the general contractor, and Pierson U-Bar Company was selected to design the glazing and transoms of the entrance doors. This new section of the building echoed the southern section in its window arrangement, dimensions, octagons, and roof. The same building materials, brick and concrete, overlaid with stucco, were utilized. A year later the building was completed. The Laboratory/Administration Building housed a physiological laboratory, a elementary laboratory, a photographic operating room and dark room, research rooms, an assembly room, an herbarium, and a library with a basement for storage of collections and publications. Originally the Laboratory Building was connected to greenhouses and public conservatories on the southern end by a glass passageway.10

By 1942, the Laboratory/Administration Building had outgrown its physical plant and the firm of McKim, Mead & White was again called upon to design an extension to the building on the Washington Avenue façade. The estimated cost of this addition was approximately $200,000. Lack of City funds was the reason that this extension was never built.11

In 1984-85, Davis Brody & Associates completed minor alterations to the laboratory building including renovation of interior spaces on the southern end of the building as part of a larger project to construct a new conservatory. In 1991, the architectural firm of John Blatteau Associates did general repairs to the building such as cleaning, caulking, painting, replacing broken glass, and modifying existing iron railing.12

McKim, Mead & White Architects13

Established in 1879 by Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909), William Rutherford Mead (1846-1928), and Stanford White (1853-1906), the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White gained pre-eminence because of its masterful interpretation of classical models. Each partner brought to the firm a special skill, and these skills were complementary. McKim was the idealist. A graduate of Harvard College, McKim also had attended the famous Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and had worked in the studio of Henry Hobson Richardson for two years. He was an outstanding scholar with a breadth of knowledge and understanding of classical as well as early American buildings. Stanford White’s talent was as a skilled artist, putting together details and colors in unique ways. Like McKim, White had worked in Henry Hobson Richardson’s office as his principal assistant. In 1878, he left that office to travel in Europe. Upon his return, he joined McKim and Mead, forming an architectural partnership that would last until the deaths of McKim and White. William Rutherford Mead graduated from Amherst College and apprenticed for three years with Russell Sturgis. In 1871, he
traveled to Italy to study classical architecture. Upon his return, he joined McKim in partnership. Mead offered a balance to McKim and White and essentially ran the day-to-day operations of the firm.

McKim, Mead & White successfully used Renaissance sources to create new designs that were easily comprehended and uniquely American. They respected and called upon classical antecedents to make new and exciting buildings throughout the country that satisfied a need in the American psyche for a clear architectural identity and structure as well as a desire for elaborate detail.

During their collaboration, the firm designed a total of 784 commissions and became the largest and most important architectural office in the country. With a staff of over one hundred, the firm became a prestigious training ground for architects starting out in the practice. There were few architectural schools in the United States in the 1880s, and increasing recognition of the firm of McKim, Mead & White made working there a sought-after destination for training.

Although William Rutherford Mead outlived McKim and White, after the death of his other two partners, he turned over the day-to-day operations of the firm to a second generation of younger members and took on a position as advisor. The successor firm consisted of the following five architects: William Kendall, Burt Leslie Fenner, William Symmes Richardson, Lawrence Grant White, and Teunis J. Van der Bent. The later designs of the firm followed the initial classical principles but practiced a style with simpler concepts and less ornamentation.

Some of McKim, Mead & White’s most well-known buildings that are also New York City Landmarks include the Bowery Savings Bank (1893-1895), First Presbyterian Church (1893-94), Judson Memorial Church, Tower, and Hall (1888-1896), the Colony Club (1904-08), the Villard Houses (1882-1885), the William H. and Ada S. Moore House (1898-1900), Low Memorial Library (1894-1897), 998 Fifth Avenue Apartments (1910-1912), the Payne and Helen Hay Whitney House (1902-1909), the University Club (1896-1900), New York Public Library, Hamilton Grange Branch (1905-1906), and the Brooklyn Museum (1893-1915).

William Kendall (1856-1941)

A graduate of Harvard College in 1876, William Kendall went on to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then did advanced study in France and Italy. He joined the firm of McKim, Mead, and White in 1882 as draftsman and became closely allied with McKim. With the majority of his time being spent on the replanning of Washington, D. C. and on the Chicago World’s Fair, McKim delegated much of his work to Kendall. In 1906, Kendall became a partner in the firm and assumed responsibility for the design of many of McKim, Mead, and White’s outstanding works in the United States and abroad. His works include the following New York City Landmarks: the United States General Post Office (1908-13), Casa Italiana (1926-1927) and the Municipal Building (1907-1914). Kendall is particularly known for his innovative design of the Municipal Building, combining this skyscraper office building with underground subway lines. In other cities, his work includes the Butler Art Gallery in Youngtown, Ohio; City Hall in Burlington, Vermont; and the American Academy in Rome.

In 1929, Kendall received an award from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for the most meritorious building of the year. That same year, he was appointed to be on a United States Commission to plan and design cemeteries in France and Italy for American soldiers who were killed there, and then was chosen to design war memorials in Italy and France. In later years, Kendall retired and in May of 1941 passed away in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Description

The Laboratory Building, modeled after churches in the Lombardy region of Italy, is designed as a Greek cross with a cupola at the center of a symmetrical form. The cupola is faced with terra cotta and has slender rounded-arch windows, each with ten panes. The roof of the cupola is a shingle design, and six finials surround a small obelisk that crowns the cupola. The Laboratory Building central and two wing sections are each topped by octagons with round windows. The central section octagon has a round window in each face. Each window has six panels that radiate from a center circle. The octagons on the wing sections are smaller but also have round windows on each face but the windows are divided into five sections, the center one being a circle. Two openings on each of the wing octagons have been filled with vents.

The walls of the laboratory building are brick and reinforced concrete with stucco finish. Terra-cotta detailing is prominent on the central section. Little change has been made to the building’s exterior. A series
of hipped and pitched concrete-scab roofs, originally covered with Spanish roof tiles and featuring overhanging eaves supported by decorative wooden brackets, are now covered with copper. A pipe-like copper railing sits on each roof. The names of 68 scientists are inscribed along a frieze that surrounds the building on the second level and on window tablets. A string course delineates the first and second stories.

Western Elevation-The western elevation which faces the garden itself is the main entryway to the Laboratory Building. The main entrance was originally on the second level. French doors with sidelights and a fanlight above are metal and glass. The entry is surrounded by a rounded arch with twisted terra-cotta design on the perimeter and plain-paneled terra-cotta trim regularly interrupted by rosettes surrounded by square panels. The rounded arch is crowned by a simple terra-cotta scallop. Iron lanterns flank the entrance. Stone balustrades flank the platform and steps that lead to the main door. (This area is currently (2007) being restored.)

The first story entrance to the laboratory is now the favored entry point and has been altered with simple non-historic iron railings. Three double doors provide access to this level. The center door is larger, but all three are similar in design with metal and glass similar to the design of the larger door on the second story entrance. The first story doors have simple limestone lintels above, and coursed limestone panels separate the center door from the two smaller ones that flank it.

The western elevation is recessed at each end. The first floor fenestration of the western elevation is either paired, full-sized, double-hung sash windows (on the northern end) or smaller, single fixed-pane windows (on the southern end). Under the roofline of the recessed sections are tablets with the names of distinguished botanists, punctuated by an acanthus-leaf design at the end. Some of the botanists and scientists included are Mendel, Strasburger, Hofmeister, DeVries, Cesalpini, and Knight. The names of Linnaeus and Darwin are above the windows flanking the main entrance. These windows are smaller, one-over-one double hung sash windows with terra-cotta pediments, trim and consoles. The center section has a large, round window with alternating beading and rope design over the main entrance. The second story windows are larger with rounded arched, glass transoms and non-historic window grilles. Non-historic railing surrounds the first floor, center section. On the northerly end of this elevation, non-historic HVAC equipment has been placed inside the railing.

Southern Elevation-The southern façade retains some of its original fenestration; however, the two windows on the easterly side on the second story have been filled to accommodate a new one-story entrance to the Garden from Washington Avenue, displacing the name of botanist Louis Charles Joseph Gaston de Saporta. The center window has been altered and now functions as an entrance to the gift shop. The windows flanking the entrance to the children’s shop are wooden with fixed geometrical panes, some of which have been replaced. A non-historic reproduction lantern flanks the westerly side of the entrance to the children’s shop. Non-historic window grilles cover several of the second story windows.

Eastern Elevation-The eastern façade facing Washington Avenue retains much of its historic fenestration and detail. Rounded-arch windows flanking the rotunda section of the first story are intact. The windows in the rotunda section have been sealed; however, their recessed outline is visible. Between each window in the rotunda section is a decorative marble diamond and slightly above the window line but between the windows is a decorative grey marble circle. On the first story, some windows have been replaced and non-historic window grilles are on all first and some second story windows. A portico with simple ionic columns originally served as a main entrance from Washington Avenue. Simple rosettes on each end of the architrave frame a centered building number. This door is still intact but is not used for public entry. The door is metal and glass, fabricated in a similar design to the entrance doors on the western elevation. A second entrance on the northerly side of the Washington Avenue elevation is metal and glass in a similar design as the original main entrance. Non-historic railing with a disabled access ramp is on the southerly side of this façade and wraps around to the new entrance which is adjacent and connects to the Laboratory Building.

Northern Elevation-The northern façade is one and a half stories above ground with symmetrical window arrangement. A series of three rounded arched transoms are above paired double-hung sash windows and a center entrance which leads to a bluestone-surfaced terrace running the width of this face. This entry has non-historic railing and a ramp to the left to comply with disabled access regulations. Bluestone steps with non-historic iron railing lead to the Fragrance Garden, which was developed in 1955. Non-historic ironwork covers
all windows on this elevation. Recessed sections on either side of the main northern elevation each has a simple, double-hung, sash window. Above each window is a recessed tablet with the name of a distinguished botanist. On this elevation, the name is punctuated by a decorative panel with an acanthus leaf.

Report prepared by
Isabel Hill, consultant

NOTES

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 Laboratory Administration Building has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and culture characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Laboratory Administration Building, designed by William Kendall of the renowned architectural firm, McKim, Mead & White, is located within the boundaries of and is an integral part of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden; that the Laboratory Administration Building, initially conceived of in 1910, was constructed in stages, beginning in 1912; that the building is modeled after small churches in the Lombardy region of Italy and is constructed in a Greek cross design with a cupola at the center of a symmetrical form; that this Tuscan Revival style building is made of concrete and brick, with stucco finish and terra-cotta detailing; that the Laboratory/Administration Building is considered to be a significant example of the firm’s late work and is included in the firm’s A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915; that the Laboratory/Administration Building originally housed a physiological laboratory, an elementary laboratory, a photographic operating room and dark room, research rooms, and an assembly room with a basement for storage of collections and publications; that presently, the building is home to a botanical and horticultural library, administrative offices, and a visitors center and auditorium; that the Brooklyn Botanic Garden was created by a 1909 agreement between the City of New York and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (now the Brooklyn Museum); that further support came from Alfred Treadway White, a prominent Brooklyn citizen who had offered funds to create a scientific botanic garden in 1905; that the triangle of land behind the Institute’s building, flanked by Eastern Parkway and Washington and Flatbush avenues was set aside in the Olmsted Brothers’ original plans for Prospect Park as the location for large institutional buildings; that the Olmsted Brothers’ firm, successor firm to Olmsted, Vaux & Company, worked with McKim, Mead & White to site the administration building, conservatories, and the various gardens in the new botanic garden; that the Brooklyn Botanic Garden is one of New York City’s most significant botanic gardens and one of Brooklyn’s most prominent cultural institutions; and that the Laboratory/Administration Building is the most significant building from the garden’s first phase of development.

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 Laboratory Administration Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 1000 Washington Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1183, Lot 1, in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair
Joan Gerber, Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter,
Thomas Pike, Jan Pokorny, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Façade Toward Garden

Photo: A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915, Plate 377
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Façade Toward Street
Photo: A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915, Plate 377
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Façade Toward Garden
Photo: Carl Forster
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Façade Toward Garden
*Photo: Carl Forster*
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
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*Photo: Carl Forster*
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Façade Toward Street
*Photo: Carl Forster*
Laboratory Administrative Building, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Cupola Detail
*Photo: Carl Forster*
LABORATORY ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING, BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN (LP-2214),
1000 Washington Avenue. Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1183, Lot 1 in part.

Designated: March 13, 2007

Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.