

Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 14, 1965, Calendar No. 13
LP-0020

UNITED STATES CUSTOM HOUSE, Bowling Green, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1901, Completed 1907, architect Cass Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 12, Lot 1.

On September 21, 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the United States Custom House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Calendar No. 20). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five persons spoke in favor of the designation of the building. In a letter to the Commission, the Regional Administrator of the Federal Government's General Services Administration questioned the proposal to designate the building since Federally-owned property is not subject to regulation by local laws.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The seven-story stone Custom House was designed in the Eclectic French Renaissance Style, Art and industry joined to produce one of the splendid buildings of its period. This is a truly monumental structure, and the decorations proclaim that this is the chief building of New York as a seaport. On pedestals advanced from the base of the building are four sculptured groups, heroic in size, representing the Four Continents. The keystones of the main windows are carved with heads typifying the eight races of mankind. Over each of the columns of the main facade are heroic statues representing the twelve commercial centers of the ancient and modern worlds. The principle facade is crowned by a giant cartouche bearing the arms of the United States. A head of Mercury, the ancient God of Commerce, appears on each of the capitals of the forty-four columns which encircle the building.

The question has been raised by the Federal Government as to whether this building should be designated by New York City as a Landmark. The Commission wishes to honor a building of which New Yorkers are proud. The Commission is cognizant of the jurisdictional question. Nevertheless, it is very important for the Government of New York City to state officially its deep concern that this building be preserved. There should be no uncertainty about this in anyone's mind.

The Commission would be negligent if it failed to act in this situation. At some time in the future this building may be in jeopardy. Our designation will be especially helpful in alerting New York City's elected representatives in Washington of the importance of saving this building. At present the Commission's specialists can be of service in providing advice so that the architectural integrity of this building is maintained. Indeed a fine relationship already exists with many local representatives of the Federal Government.

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 United States Custom House 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 United States Custom House makes remarkable use of architecture and sculpture to create a monumental building which is a high point in the achievements of its period.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 United States Custom House, Bowling Green, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 12, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.