

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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BROWN MEMORIAL TOWER, Broadway & West 120th Street, JAMES TOWER & JAMES MEMORIAL CHAPEL, Claremont Avenue between West 120th Street and West 122nd Street, Union Theological Seminary, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1908, completed 1910; architects Allen & Collins.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1992, Lot 13 in part, consisting of the land on which the described buildings are situated.

On December 27, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Union Theological Seminary Block and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 85). At that time no speakers appeared to testify. The Commission continued the public hearing until January 31, 1967 (Item No. 6). At that time two speakers favored designation. The Union Theological Seminary has indicated to the Commission that it is in favor of the designation of the two Towers and the Memorial Chapel.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Rising high above the lower buildings adjacent to them, in the quadrangle of the Union Theological Seminary, the Brown Memorial Tower in the southeast corner and the James Tower set in the middle of the Claremont Avenue side are among the finest examples of the English Perpendicular Gothic style of architecture in New York. There is a sophisticated restraint revealed in their design coupled with a delicate precision in the execution of the details that seems to impart a special quality to the masonry. These striking towers are expressions in masonry of the intent of the designer and manifest the art and skill of the master stone carvers who produced them.

At the base of these square towers, buttresses project boldly from the corners, stepping inward as they rise to the top and terminating in pinnacles with delicate finials. Parapets at the roof line are panelled and ornately decorated. In the upper half of the Brown Memorial Tower, the unusually tall windows with their thin mullions and fine shafts of stone end as handsome, intricate tracery. The windows in the James Tower, though shorter, have much the same quality.

The Brown Memorial Tower doorway is impressive and imposing in size. A broad flight of steps leads up to the transomed double doors recessed within the wide reveal of an enriched archway. These doors open into a projected vestibule, embellished with decorated tympani, columns, niches, moldings and ornamented panels. Set back above the vestibule, an enormous arch rises above the first floor. Within its deep reveal, two tiers of windows light the high lobby under the Tower. The arch with its traceried windows is repeated in the south elevation facing 120th Street.

The James Memorial Chapel on Claremont Avenue extends south from the Tower of the same name. The walls of the east and west elevations are evenly divided into seven bays separated by stepped buttresses. The treatment of the clerestory windows in both facades is identical. Enframed within a pointed arch, they have two mullions dividing the tall arches terminating in handsome tracery at the top. The north arch with the balcony behind it has stained glass in the upper two thirds; the two south arches where the choir stalls are located only have glass within the tracery at the top, while the other four arches contain full stained glass windows. On the Claremont Avenue side the buttresses rise above the crenellated parapet wall and terminate in finials. Both doorways to the Chapel are distinctive and distinguished in design. Between the buttresses of the east elevation facing the inner courtyard, there are a series of low arched windows at ground floor level. Behind them is a cloistered walkway or arcade. The Chapel is also a fine example of the English Perpendicular Gothic Style.

History of the Seminary

Union Theological Seminary is a graduate school for training men and women for every type of Christian ministry. Established in 1836, Union Seminary's first building, dedicated on December 12, 1838, was located near Washington Square at Nine University Place. In 1884 the Seminary moved to its second home on Lenox Hill, with the central entrance at what is now Seven Hundred Park Avenue. The complex of buildings on Morningside Heights, constituting the rectangle enclosing two city blocks, surrounds a secluded and beautifully landscaped inner quadrangle, which was completed in 1910.

The buildings were designed by the architects Allen & Collins who won the commission in competition. The materials consist of trap rock, set up in random ashlar with limestone ashlar trim.

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 Brown Memorial Tower, James Tower & James Memorial Chapel have 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, Brown Memorial Tower and James Memorial Chapel and Tower of Union Theological Seminary are outstanding examples of the English Perpendicular Gothic style of architecture, that this complex of buildings represents a fine execution both in design and materials, that the buildings enhance the site upon which they were placed and that they provide a setting of great architectural dignity and prestige for the internationally known institution which they serve.

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 Brown Memorial Tower at Broadway at West 120th Street, James Tower & James Memorial Chapel Claremont Avenue between West 120th Street and West 122nd Street, Union Theological Seminary, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1992, Lot 13 which contains the land on which the described buildings are situated.