

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL, 15 East 97th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1902; architect John Bergesen.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1603, Lot 11.

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 16). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses representing the Cathedral spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral was built in 1901-02 from the designs of John Bergesen, a New York City architect of Russian origin. Its style is derived from Baroque architecture as it had evolved in Moscow. The construction in New York City of a traditional Russian church provided local parishioners with a familiar and reassuring place of worship.

The St. Nicholas congregation, which was established in 1894, met in a rented house at 323 Second Avenue until a permanent building could be erected. The purchase of the 75 by 100 foot lot, on which the present church buildings stand, was undertaken by Dean Alexander Hotovitsky on behalf of the congregation in September 1899. The lot was smaller than what had initially been sought, and it was not a corner site, but the high cost of real estate in New York limited the selection. The New York City congregation was unable to fully finance the building, so the Synod of Russia was given Imperial permission to collect money throughout the Russian Empire.

The ceremony of laying the cornerstone took place on May 22, 1901, the day of the Feast of Translation, commemorating the transfer of the relics of St. Nicholas from Myra in Lycia, Asia Minor, to Bari, Italy in 1087. On November 23, 1902, a consecration service, the first to be held in the completed church, was led by Bishop Tikhon, the head of the Russian Church in the Aleutian Islands and North America. Bishop Charles Chapman Grafton, representing the Episcopal Church, participated in the service. The Russian Holy Synod elevated St. Nicholas Church to Cathedral status in December 1903, and the Diocesan Seat of North America was transferred from San Francisco to New York in 1905. Restoration work was carried out on the Cathedral between 1954 and 1960. Today St. Nicholas Cathedral continues to serve the needs of the Russian Orthodox Church in this country as it has since its founding.

The Cathedral, with its onion-dome cupolas topped by gilt crosses, and the attached rectory present an unexpected and impressive facade on East 97th Street. Shortly after the church was dedicated the Russian Orthodox American Messenger described it as follows:

Everything is familiar and traditional in the new structure. Standing as it is, among the tall apartment buildings of routine style, it strikes one like a ray of sun on a cloudy day. Its graceful and creative facade attracts and fascinates the eye. Set upon a granite foundation, the Church becomes light in the measure of its rising upwards. The central portion of gray stone is ornamented with delicate carving, wrapped by garlands of colored brick, terra-cotta, and majolica of varying hues. The green of a slate roof, the snow-white of cherubims against a ground of blue and gold, the red of bricks--all unite in subdued color accord. The edifice is surmounted by five cupolas each crowned by a gilded cross. In the opinion of many the new Church was considered to be one of the most beautiful buildings in New York and the only one of its style.

The broad front entrance of this brick building is contained within a central two-story gabled bay. Pendant arches with cherubim heads in the spandrels are set into the wide segmental-arched entranceway. Above this, three tall round-arched windows fill the gable. A terra-cotta frieze embellished by Greek crosses

within linked circles is featured beneath the cornice of the gable. A blue and gold diamond-patterned band stretches across the facade at the base of the roof. The facade is flanked by wide brick pilasters, each surmounted by a small turret topped with an onion dome. A flat platform, embellished by colorful panels, is set back from the sloping front roof. Rising at the four corners of the platform are cupolas also crowned by onion domes. A dominant central dome, with ogee arches at the base and round-arched windows above, rises from the platform.

The sanctuary of the Cathedral seats 900 people. A hall for a school and for meetings, space for a printing press, storerooms, quarters for a superintendent, and service facilities were provided in the basement.

A three-story rectory, immediately to the west of the church, is an integral part of the architectural composition. The round-arched entrance, surrounded by bead-and-reel and rope moldings, is surmounted by a low triangular pediment decorated with a shell motif. At the second floor three arched window openings are separated by paired colonnettes. Within each opening are a pair of pendant arches. The third floor windows are crowned by pedimented dormers projecting from the sloping roof. A terra-cotta band, continued from the church, accents the base of the roof.

The colorful elements of the composition are architecturally unified into a rich and exuberant example of Russian Baroque architecture. St. Nicholas Cathedral is important both for its architectural design and for the role played in the City's history by the Russian Orthodox Church in North America.

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 St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral 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 St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral is a fine example of Russian Baroque architecture in New York City, that this impressive building displays such typical features as onion-domed cupolas, colorful terra-cotta decorations and intricate stone carvings, that it has served for many years as the Diocesan Seat of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, and that it continues to serve the needs of the Church in New York City and the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, 15 East 97th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1603, Lot 11, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.