

SAINT CECILIA'S CHURCH, 120 East 106th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1883-87; architects Napoleon Le Brun & Sons.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1633, Lot 61.

On July 13, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Saint Cecilia's Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No.4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Saint Cecilia's Church, in the heart of that section of East Harlem known as "El Barrio," was completed in 1887 according to the designs of the noted architectural firm of Napoleon Le Brun & Sons. Saint Cecilia's Church with the adjoining Saint Cecilia's Convent, both in the Romanesque Revival style, gracefully complement each other and the surrounding area.

Harlem as a community traces its origins back to the first Dutch settlers of 1658 who named it "New Haarlem." From the mid to late 19th century the character of Harlem changed from rural to suburban. By the 1890s the Interboro Rapid Transit Railroad extended its lines to connect Harlem with New York City which gave impetus to the urban expansion and to the development of this area. In the early 1900s Harlem became available to black residents, but East Harlem, containing the largest Italian and Russian Jewish communities in New York City as well as an Irish community, regarded itself as a separate district. East Harlem, from 96th Street to 125th Street and east of Madison Avenue, remained a stable area well into the 1920s when there was an influx of Hispanic nationals from Latin America. These nationals settled around the older Puerto Rican community between Fifth and Lexington Avenues from 100th to 120th Streets known as "El Barrio," "The District," or "The Neighborhood." "El Barrio" consequently spread northward to Black Harlem and southward to Yorkville, replacing all but a few of the old Italian communities which had earlier characterized East Harlem.

Saint Cecilia's Church was one of the first to be established in the area. The Very Reverend Hugh Flattery became the first pastor of the Church of Saint Cecilia in 1873. Shortly thereafter he converted the Old Red House at 105th Street, formerly a resort hotel, into a parochial residence for the use of the church. It soon became necessary to consider building a church; however, in 1879 Flattery died and his dream was to be carried on by his successor the Very Reverend Monsignor William P. Flannelly. Property on East 106th Street was purchased for the church by Father Flannelly in March 1881, from Addison and Mary Brown for the sum of twenty five thousand eight hundred dollars. A portion of the property was later used for St. Cecilia's Convent. Napoleon Le Brun & Sons were chosen as architects for the church structure. Work did not begin until 1883; the cornerstone was laid on September 9 of that year. In 1884 the congregation held its first services in the new edifice on the fourth Sunday of Epiphany in the basement chapel. Reverend Michael J. Phelan, known throughout the diocese as "The Builder of Churches," was designated pastor of Saint Cecilia's parish in 1884 after the untimely death of Father Flannelly. Father Phelan remained pastor for the next thirty-eight years and was responsible for the completion of the church in 1887. The church has been in continuous use over the past ninety-two years with a changing but faithful congregation.

The architectural firm of Napoleon Le Brun & Sons designed a number of notable religious and secular buildings in both Philadelphia and New York. Among their achievements were the Academy of Music and the interior of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia and the Fire Department Headquarters at East 67th Street in New York City. Also in New York is the Home Life Insurance Building and the designated New York City Landmark, Firehouse Engine Co. No. 31 on Lafayette Street. The firm is best remembered for the Metropolitan Life Insurance tower which received the award "for the most meritorious work of 1909" from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. This tower, overlooking Madison Square, represented the culmination of their efforts in dealing with steel skeleton skyscraper construction.

The firm made the working drawings, provided the ornamental details, and wrote the specifications for the construction of the church. By agreement with the rector, however, the firm was ~~not~~ involved in the actual supervision during the construction of the building. Father Phelan himself assumed responsibility for its construction, acting as general contractor. He commissioned the various tradesmen including the bricklayers, carpenters, and plasterers, many of whom were members of the parish. By taking charge of the project in this way he was able to save a sizeable amount of money for the congregation.

Napoleon Le Brun & Sons designed Saint Cecilia's as a simplified basilica in the popular Romanesque Revival style. The church is a symmetrical structure composed of interrelated masses which are unified through the use of a common vocabulary of textured brick and terracotta. In the central gable is an exceptionally rich high relief terra-cotta panel depicting Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, playing an organ accompanied by a cherub. One of most striking features of the building is the handsome portico with three arches, accentuated by alternating brick and foliate terra-cotta voussoirs in the Victorian Gothic polychromatic tradition. The gables above the arches are decorated with foliate motifs surmounted by bands of molded denticulated brick. The terra-cotta copings of the gables are surmounted by crosses. Above the portico are seven stained-glass windows with decorative round-arched enframements which rest on ornate columns.

The cornice above these windows is accentuated by decorative brick corbels with brick dentils above them, visually setting off the upper half of the main front gable and extending around the flanking octagonal towers. The central panel depicting Saint Cecilia is enframed by clustered shafts supporting an arch which also enframes a bulls-eye window with rich terra-cotta rinceau. Two arched stained-glass windows flank this central panel.

Filling the main gable above the central arch is textured diaperwork, also executed in terra cotta. Two octagonal towers with peaked roof flank the front end of the nave. From these extend one-story double-pitch roof side wings with arched windows facing the street. Each tower is punctuated vertically by two arched windows trimmed with molded brick and terra cotta, similar to the other arch enframements. The arches rest on impost blocks with decorative floral patterns.

To the east of the church is an accessway which separates it from the corner school building while the end of the western one-story wing abuts the Convent of Saint Cecilia.

Saint Cecilia's Church remains as a tangible reminder of the 19th-century development of East Harlem. A dignified Romanesque Revival structure, the church has been in continuous use since 1884 serving the needs of the community and enhancing the area.

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 Saint Cecilia's Church 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, Saint Cecilia's Church is a handsome building in the Romanesque Revival style, that the fine details are skillfully executed in terra cotta and molded brick, that among its striking features are the portico and the sculpture depicting Saint Cecilia, that it makes a significant contribution to the quality of the streetscape, that it is a tangible reminder of the 19th-century development of East Harlem, and that it is a dignified ecclesiastic structure which enhances East Harlem.

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 Saint Cecilia's Church, 120 East 106th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1633, Lot 61, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.