

METROPOLITAN CLUB BUILDING, 1-11 East 60th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1892-94; architects McKim, Mead & White.

On November 14, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Metropolitan Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing was continued to January 9, 1979 (Item No. 2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the two hearings one witness spoke in favor of designation and several letters in support of designation were read into the record. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Metropolitan Club has expressed reservations about the designation. Hearings on this item had been held previously by the Commission in 1966 and 1967.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Described by the 19th-century architectural historian Montgomery Schuyler as "the largest, most imposing, and most luxurious of the club-houses of New York" the Metropolitan Club Building was designed by Stanford White, a partner in the firm of McKim, Mead & White, and was built between 1892 and 1894.² Executed on a grand scale in a restrained Italian Renaissance manner, the building incorporated the prestige and dignity of the Club's founding members.

Men's clubs were a well-established tradition in early New York. Some New York clubmen first congregated in taverns: the poets met at Old Tom's and the politicians at the Pewter Mug. Others, such as the members of the Hone Club, named after Mayor Philip Hone, gave dinners at the houses of the members. In 1836 "an association of gentlemen" formed the venerable Union Club, which to insure its privacy chose to refuse the protection of incorporation.² Until the 1870s the club was administered by a Board of Governors which held the authority to replace its own members. However, the change in the social fabric of the city towards the latter part of the 19th century, brought new pressures to bear on such well-established institutions as the Union Club and the Knickerbocker Club. At the Union Club, the younger members pushed for an annual election by the entire club membership of the Board of Governors. After much resistance this procedure was implemented, and it was claimed by many disgruntled Union Club members that the direction of the club was now being steered by a group of "popular" young men who had gradually infiltrated the ranks of the Board of Governors. The Club's older members claimed that the young Governors were abusing their powers of black-balling prospective members. Two cases of such activity became particularly significant. It was reported that indiscriminate voting had defeated the cause of Mr. John King, president of the Erie Road, who had been nominated by J.P. Morgan, a former president of the Union Club. Shortly after the defeat of King, the Vanderbilts proposed Dr. W. Seward Webb, who was president of the Wagner Palace Car Company and a Vanderbilt son-in-law. The defeat of Webb was also universally deplored.³

Shortly after the rejections of King and Webb, J.P. Morgan, the Vanderbilts, the Goellets and others met together on February 20, 1891, with the intention of founding a new club. Regular meetings of what was referred to by the press as the "Millionaires Club" were held in the parlors of the office of the Goellet estate at 9 West 17th Street, and Robert Watts Sherman presided over a founding committee of twenty-five men.⁴ They included such illustrious names as Cornelius Vanderbilt,

William C. Whitney, H.G. Marquand, James M. Waterbury, J.I. Cadwallader, Robert Goelet, Adrian Iselin, Jr., J. Newbold Morris, and Samuel D. Babcock. The committee drew up a list of prospective members, and a site committee including Messrs. Goelet, Iselin and Babcock secured an option on seven lots of land at Fifth Avenue and 60th Street which was part of the Louis Gordon Hamersley estate.

Located at the foot of what was becoming "Millionaires Row", the site was part of the newest and most fashionable districts in the city. Since the beginning of the 19th century, well-to-do New Yorkers had moved their residences progressively uptown in advance of the commercial development which was expanding northward from lower Manhattan. By the 1880s the elegant Vanderbilt chateaux characterized Fifth Avenue from 51st to 58th Streets. The general move uptown and the vast stretches of land fronting Central Park soon attracted the wealthy into the region beyond 59th Street. By the 1890s New York boasted a truly wealthy class. Two New Yorkers, presumably J.P. Morgan and John A. Astor, were worth over 100 million dollars, six had amassed over 50 million dollars, and thirty had accrued between 20 and 40 million dollars.⁵ Besides the three grand hotels which were being developed around the Grand Army Plaza, the new homes of such prestigious New Yorkers as John Jacob Astor, Mrs. M. Hartley Dodge and Hamilton Fish joined the new clubhouse on Fifth Avenue. By World War I nearly 70 mansions came to line the mile and a half along Fifth Avenue from 59th to 90th Streets.

Purchased for the relatively reasonable price of \$420,000, the Metropolitan Club site with its spectacular 100-foot Fifth Avenue front overlooking Central Park, featured in the founders' plans from the very beginning. One design constraint imposed by the founders on the architects was the demand for a great lounging room from which the clubmen could enjoy both the vistas of the park and the processions of society along the avenue.⁶ An appropriate club name was also sought. Many favored the "Park Club" and others, influenced by a famous London club, preferred "The Spectators." On March 7, 1891, following an afternoon meeting at the Goelet offices, it was announced that the new "Metropolitan Club" members had selected officers and had adopted a constitution. Not surprisingly, J.P. Morgan was chosen as the club's first president. There was much speculation in the press on whether the new club, which would so closely resemble the Union Club, could survive. Even the founders admitted that they could not exactly duplicate the Union Club's elite membership but they argued that with an experienced group of officers, a core of members of A-1 social standing, and a more innovative program the new club would succeed.⁷ From the beginning the founders of the Metropolitan Club conceived of providing separate accommodations for ladies. Dining facilities for female relatives of club members had proved a successful addition to the Somerset Club in Boston and the Metropolitan Club followed this lead.

In May 1891 it was announced that the firm of McKim, Mead & White was selected as the architects of the clubhouse, and from the initial planning stage it was reported that the building would be of marble "in the simplest and severest style of Italian architecture."⁸ Since the success of their design for the Henry Villard Houses which were completed in 1886, the architectural firm had increasingly turned to the urban palazzo designs of Renaissance Italy for inspiration. Following the extreme diversity of mid-19th century architectural styles, the classical tenets of the Renaissance were seen to offer an

authoritative design solution which combined order, proportion, balance and urbanity.⁹ The English architects Sir Charles Barry and Decimus Burton had first recognized the particular suitability of the Renaissance mode for urban clubhouses in London during the 1830s and 1840s. After the use of the style at the Villard Houses, it was the scope and success of the architectural firm's design for the Boston Public Library (1887-95) which most clearly marked McKim, Mead & White's commitment to the Italian Renaissance mode. Shortly after the stunning success of McKim's library design, Stanford White transformed Edwin Booth's home on Gramercy Park with a Renaissance design for the Player's Club in 1888. However, the first clubhouse in New York to be completely constructed in the neo-Italian Renaissance manner from designs of the firm was the building for the Century Association (1889-91), a club of artists and authors at 7 West 43rd Street. White's facade for this clubhouse takes some of its inspiration from San Michele's Palazzo Canossa in Verona.¹⁰ The influence of the neo-Italian Renaissance as introduced to New York by the firm of McKim, Mead & White became so strong that following his visits to the city in 1935-36 the great modern architect Le Corbusier noted, "in New York, then, I learn to appreciate the Italian Renaissance. It is so well done that you could believe it to be genuine. It even has a strange new firmness which is not Italian but American."¹¹

Following the ground breaking on May 19, 1891, work on excavations for the Metropolitan Club progressed through the summer. The board of the Metropolitan Club set up temporary headquarters in the Madison Square Bank Building, and it was from there that they continued to select members, collect initiation fees, and sell bonds towards the payment of the proposed clubhouse. With most of the members of the board away enjoying Newport during the summer months very little progress was made to secure a finished plan and elevation of the building. By the end of September, a tentative interior arrangement had been worked out, but the design for the facade was left unresolved. White, who was known for his rapid sketching ability and William M. Kendall, his assistant, produced about fifty sketches for facade possibilities, and the pick of this opus was presented to the board.

On November 20, 1891, following a board meeting at the club office, the members of the Building Committee, taking separate cabs to avoid publicity, met at the McKim, Mead & White offices located on West 12th Street. Here the firm and the Building Committee amiably discussed the question of the facade over drinks. The time spent over the decision on the final design of the facade is significant because it proves that these well-travelled gentlemen had a decided interest in and opinion about the resulting architecture. The press gave some degree of credit for the change from a proposed entrance on Fifth Avenue to one on 60th Street to J.P. Morgan.¹² One of the early sketches which had been given serious consideration included "a large and beautiful stoop" leading to doors and vestibule on Fifth Avenue.¹³ An entrance on Fifth Avenue necessarily limited the possibilities of having a great lounging room overlooking Central Park. Inspired by European precedents, Morgan suggested the introduction of a courtyard to be entered through a screen on 60th Street. As late as January 1892, the board members were still offering their design suggestions to White. From Europe, William K. Vanderbilt was proceeding along lines of his own. He sent White plans based on a French house with a central courtyard. White could hardly take the plans lightly with Vanderbilt's confession that "I have worked hard on them for the past week and you can imagine they have taken some time for a novice to make."¹⁴ Nor did Vanderbilt quickly relinquish his idea:

"I prefer individually these plans to any I have yet seen they do not embrace some of the grand features that yours do but for practicability I think they will answer every purpose."¹⁵ But early in February 1892, White's elevation with the asymmetrically placed courtyard was released to the press.

When the Metropolitan Club design appeared, Stanford White offered his own personal explanation of the scheme: "The club house will stand unrivaled in its size, and although the style will be in the severest and simplest character of Italian Renaissance and the feeling of severity and solidity will be carried through the interior, the scale of the building and the nature of its materials will give it an appearance unlike that of any building in New York."¹⁶ Marked by its seven-bay central facade, the Metropolitan Club is four-stories high and is asymmetrically balanced on the east by a three-bay two-story wing fronted by a courtyard enclosed by a one-story columnar screen. In his solution for the design of the Metropolitan Club, White seemed to draw at least some of his inspiration from the design of the Villard Houses. Although no definite association can be made between these buildings, there is a similarity in their interpretation of the Italian mode. Both buildings include a strong rusticated base which supports three stories. The planar wall surfaces are handled with great restraint. A modest program of ornamentation is achieved by a combination of balconies, quoins, overhanging cornices and a square-shaped attic windows. Both designs incorporate a particularly European urban feature: the courtyard. While the courtyard is centrally located in the Villard Houses, it is asymmetrically located to the east of the Metropolitan Club. The general scheme of a sparsely ornamented palazzo set off by an asymmetrically located courtyard was used in Raphael's Palazzo Paldofini in Florence and was the theme chosen by Sir Charles Barry in his early London clubhouse, the Traveller's Club. While the firm of McKim, Mead & White drew inspiration from Italian models of the 15th-17th centuries, they selected for use specific details from the earlier work which would fit comfortably into a new American type. Their neo-Italian Renaissance design was characterized by an emphasis on regularization, ground-hugging horizontals, and a simplification of detail; all trends which have historically influenced America's interpretation of European architecture.¹⁷

Raised up on a rusticated base encircled by a bold molding, the tightly jointed walls of the main block of the Metropolitan Club are pierced by rectilinear windows, chastely surrounded by an egg and dart molding and sheltered by a hood molding. Because of the importance of both the Fifth Avenue and 60th Street facades, they are handled in a similar restrained manner. Quoins strengthen the buildings corners and a band of small, square attic windows is set below the cornice. The most prominent feature of the general design is the elaborately modelled marble and copper cornice which projects six feet beyond the plane of the facade. The cornice which is built up of a series of classical moldings including dentils, egg and dart and modillions provides a dramatic shading of an otherwise unrelieved surface. The Jackson Architectural Iron Works were responsible for the two upper sections of the cornice which were rendered in copper. The overriding emphasis of the horizontal elements is moderately balanced by a series of balconies which gives a central emphasis normally provided by an entrance. The 60th Street facade is further adorned by a series of club plaques.

In April of 1892 McKim, Mead & White signed on David H. King, Jr., as the general contractor of the Metropolitan Club. King was one of the most prominent contractors of his day and, as with most of their commissions, the

architectural firm sought the finest workmanship rather than necessarily the lowest bidder. McKim, Mead & White had previously worked very successfully with King and their most notable project to date had been the construction of the old Madison Square Garden. After much deliberation the Building Committee and architects abandoned their original scheme of constructing the club of white brick with marble trim.¹⁸ The final scheme was rendered in Vermont marble highlighted by fine-grained Tuckahoe marble which was used on the base, the window trim, the balconies and the cornice.

The entrance court is located to the east of the 60th Street facade. The bold molding at the piano nobile extends to form the straight cornice of the columnar screen which is carried on a series of paired columns linked by elaborate wrought-iron gates reminiscent of French work of the 18th century. The gates were designed by the architect and executed by the well-known firm of John Williams of 556 West 27th Street. Williams began his career as an employee of Tiffany & Company in their brass and bronze department. In 1872 he established his own firm and, his fame coincided with the increased use of architectural bronze in public and private buildings during the 1880s. It was in 1887 that Williams established a department to handle the demands for artistic wrought ironwork. The wrought ironwork came to rival that of the bronze. Besides the gates of the Metropolitan Club, the firm produced the entrance gates to Harvard University and the Mapes Memorial Gates at Columbia University.¹⁹ The two-story wing at the rear of the courtyard is marked by a shallow niche which was intended to serve the needs of turning carriages. On the first floor of this wing was housed the innovative ladies' restaurant with the men's library above.

While the exterior of the Metropolitan Club was purposefully restrained, dispelling any charges of ostentation, great time and money were lavished on the interior. A vaulted vestibule, made possible through the thin masonry construction techniques of the Spanish-born builder Rafael Guastavino provides access to the splendid interior of the clubhouse. The main focus of the interior is a monumental entrance hall sheathed in a variety of expensive marbles and suggestive of a similar feature used by McKim, Mead & White in the New York Building at the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893.²⁰ Both European and American craftsmen were called upon to decorate the sumptuous interiors of the new club. A private contract for the decoration of the major rooms was let to the firm of Gilbert Cuel, a Parisian interior decorator. Cuel produced French baroque interiors highlighted by ceiling paintings and relief panels executed in Paris by a French artist named Perili, a follower of Boucher. The prominent American mural painter Edward E. Simmons (1852-1931) was responsible for the library ceiling. Simmons who had studied at the Academie Julian under Gustave C.R. Boulanger and Jules Joseph Lefebvre, and who had painted for many years in Europe, returned to New York in 1891 and quickly gained an important American reputation. In 1893 Simmons created a highly acclaimed series of murals for the dome of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and became a popular choice for the decoration of many public interiors including those of the Appellate Division Courthouse on Madison Avenue. Many of New York's finest building firms also contributed to the success of the Metropolitan Club's interiors. In particular, the high quality of the interior woodwork can be credited to V.J. Hedden & Sons who had worked on the Century Club and the residence of William K. Vanderbilt on Fifth Avenue. In addition to Cuel, three New York decorating firms worked on the club interiors: F. Beck and Co., Herter Bros. and C.R. Yandell & Co.

In 1912 the fashionable architect and interior designer Odgen Codman, Jr. transformed a vacant five-story residence adjacent to the club on 60th Street into a six-story club addition containing bachelor apartments. Following an early practice in Boston, Codman moved to New York in 1893, and that same year he was commissioned by Edith Wharton to renovate her Newport summerhouse "Lands End." Out of this early association came their joint authorship of Decoration of Houses (1897), a seminal work on interior design. Over the years Codman has been credited with the design of over twenty houses but his decorating commissions for the interiors of the Vanderbilts' Newport mansion, "The Breakers" and the Rockefellers' Tarrytown home, "Kykuit" have perhaps gained more attention. Codman's work on the addition to the Metropolitan Club included the removal of the early stoop and doorway, the alteration of the fenestration and the transformation of the facade in keeping with the neo-Italian Renaissance spirit of the main building.

An important element of the vanguard of development along Central Park's eastern boundary, the Metropolitan Club Building helped to set the style and high standard of design for the surrounding area. While the club was born out of the changing social pattern of the 1890s, the building fits comfortably into a tradition of club design which began in England in the 1830s. Although the building's design was a solution to the very specific requirements of the Metropolitan Club, it was also a significant advancement in the evolution of the neo-Italian Renaissance style as interpreted by the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White. Standing today amid some of the city's most sophisticated architecture, the Metropolitan Club Building continues to contribute to the architectural excellence of the district and provides a vital link in the growth of this well-known neighborhood.

Report Prepared By
Ruth Selden-Sturgill
Research Department

FOOTNOTES

1. Montgomery Schuyler, "The Metropolitan Club," Harper's Weekly, 37 (March 1894), p. 226.
2. New York Times, May 31, 1891, p. 19.
3. Ibid.
4. New York Times, February 28, 1891, p. 5.
5. Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 322.
6. New York Mercury, November 20, 1891, McKim, Mead & White Scrapbooks, 1889-1901, New - York Historical Society, New York, p. 284.
7. New York Times, May 31, 1891, p. 19.
8. Critic, May 16, 1891, McKim, Mead & White Scrapbooks, p.283.
9. A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1973), p. 40.
10. Leland M. Roth, The Urban Architecture of McKim, Mead & White: 1870-1910 (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1973), p. 293.
11. Ibid., p. 46.
12. New York Mercury, November 20, 1891, McKim, Mead & White Scrapbooks, p. 284.
13. Ibid.
14. W.K. Vanderbilt to Stanford White, January 31, 1892, McKim, Mead & White Papers, Box 79 Folder 3, New - York Historical Society, New York.
15. Ibid.
16. New York Times, February 12, 1892, p. 8 c.4.
17. Monograph, p. 40.
18. Description of the Metropolitan Club by William M. Kendall, October 27, 1936, McKim, Mead & White Papers, Box 80 Folder 1.
19. List of subcontractors of the Metropolitan Club, April 13, 1894, McKim, Mead & White Papers, Box 82 Folder 1; A History of Real Estate Building and Architecture in New York City (New York: The Real Estate Record Assc., 1898; reprinted New York: Arno Press Inc., 1967), p. 508.
20. New York Times, February 27, 1894, p.3. c.3.

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 Metropolitan Club Building 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 Metropolitan Club Building is a magnificent example of neo-Italian Renaissance architecture designed by the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead & White; that when built in 1892-94 it was the largest and most imposing New York clubhouse of its day; that the design is a remarkable reflection of both the architects' training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the founding members' knowledge of European architecture; that with its restrained elegance the Metropolitan Club Building is characteristic of an especially American interpretation of European architecture; that among its notable features are the refined stonework and ornamental detail, the imposing cornice, and the graceful colonnade screening the courtyard; that the design of the building was seen as an appropriate symbol of the newly founded Metropolitan Club; that the clubhouse led the vanguard of development north of 59th Street; that it set the style and high standard of design for the surrounding area; that the annex of 1912 was designed by architect Ogden Codman, Jr. to harmonize with the main building; and that it continues to make a strong contribution to the architectural excellence of the neighborhood.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Metropolitan Club Building, 1-11 East 60th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1375, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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March 10, 1891 (5-3); March 15, 1891 (11-6); May 29, 1891 (2-3);
May 20, 1891 (9-5); May 31, 1891 (19-6); August 2, 1891 (14-1);
August 9, 1891 (14-2); September 20, 1891 (10-4); February 12, 1892 (8-4);
February 24, 1894 (8-6); February 25, 1894 (17-5); February 27, 1894 (3-3);
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Photo Credit:
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The Metropolitan Club
Built 1891-94

Architects:
McKim, Mead & White