

CHURCH MISSIONS HOUSE/now PROTESTANT WELFARE AGENCIES BUILDING, 281 Park Avenue South, Borough of Manhattan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 877, Lot 89.

On May 8, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Church Missions House/now Protestant Welfare Agencies Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing was continued to July 12, 1979 (Item No. 2). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The Community Board gave their support in favor of designation. The building's owner spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

An elegant reminder of the distinctive neighborhood which developed along Park Avenue South between 21st and 23rd Streets during the 1890s, the Church Missions House was the joint product of architects Robert Williams Gibson and Edward J. Neville Stent. Gibson, who was one of the state's leading church architects, combined his talents with those of Stent, who specialized in church decoration, to produce this outstanding design which was executed in 1892-1894. Characterized by its rectilinear framework which is outlined by clustered columns, patterned by masterfully executed low relief carving and crowned by a tall picturesque hipped roof, the design of the building combines the frank expression of contemporary steel-frame construction with a sophisticated adaptation of motifs from Northern European secular architecture of the 15th and 16th centuries.

The beginnings of the Church Missions House go back to 1821. In that year a special General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the United States was held in Philadelphia and the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society was founded to coordinate the church's growing missionary activities.¹ Following the Revolution the newly-established Episcopal Church had encountered great difficulty in trying to serve the small and scattered congregations beyond the Alleghenies. Until the establishment of the national missionary effort in 1821, all domestic missionary efforts were carried out by the individual states. Pennsylvania, being the center of the Church's activity, led the efforts to minister to the Western states. New York, on account of its unusual size and largely unsettled state, gave itself over "to the approbation of the Church generally."² During the early 19th century a renewal of religious activity in New England caused the various Protestant church groups to enlarge their commitment to the missionary field. Africa and later China drew the attention of the Episcopal Church and as early as 1810 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had been established as a separate effort from the domestic work. The foundation of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society successfully combined both aspects of the missionary work and strengthened the church's commitment to its development.

In 1835 the Society moved its headquarters from Philadelphia to New York where the Domestic Committee rented offices at 115 Franklin Street and the Foreign Committee found space in the City Dispensary at the corner of White and Center Streets.³ One year later an effort was begun to secure a permanent home for the entire organization, but by 1840 progress was only made in combining the two agencies in one space rented at 281 Broadway.

The Society formed its first committee to investigate the possibility of constructing a church missions house in 1864, but it was not until October of 1888 that the real effort began. At this time a special committee consisting of one Bishop, two Presbyters and six laymen was organized to receive subscriptions and secure a site. Included on the committee were three of New York's most prominent businessmen: Cornelius Vanderbilt, W. Bayard Cutting, and William G. Low. In May of 1889 a site with a 60 foot frontage on the east side of Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South) between Calvary Church and the building of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals on 22nd Street had been secured.⁴ The Committee had considered many different sites but several factors recommended the location on Fourth Avenue: the site was on one of the city's main avenues, it was near Madison Square, it was 250 feet from the 23rd Street car service and it was adjacent to one of the city's largest Episcopal churches.⁵ Interestingly, these advantages and the site's proximity to fashionable Gramercy Park were drawing several other like-minded institutions into the area. Dating from this same period were located to the north of the Church Missions Site the buildings of two other charitable organizations: the United Charities and the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Across Fourth Avenue at 22nd Street was planned an impressive new building for the city's oldest savings institution, The New York Bank for Savings (1894). The New York Times speculated in 1893 that when all the building was completed "this neighborhood will have one of the finest groups of structures in a compact area to be found in the city."⁶

During a meeting of the Board of Managers of the Missionary Society in September of 1889 the Special Committee presented four designs for a seven story fire-proof building to be built for \$200,000 including the land.⁷ It had been the intention of the Society from the beginning to not only provide for its own needs but to also incorporate rent-producing space into the design. These four designs were then sent to the notable church architect Robert W. Gibson who was asked to select the best solution.⁸ Gibson presumably chose the entry of "Edward J.N. Stent, architect" which was published in December of 1889.⁹ Conceived in brick this Romanesque Revival design was considerably narrower than the final design but both the basic lay out of the facade and the plan were remarkably similar to the building as executed.

Some concern over the dimensions of the first design must have been expressed during the ensuing years of 1890-1891 when no effort was made to execute Stent's scheme. Finally in the spring of 1892, it was reported that J. Pierpont Morgan had purchased the property of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals on the southeast corner of Fourth Avenue and 22nd Street.¹⁰ Morgan then presented the property to the Missions Society and plans for a larger building with an 80-foot front were prepared by Edward J.N. Stent and R.W. Gibson who became associated on this project at the request of the building committee.¹¹

The final design for the Church Missions House, which is closer in spirit to a Flemish or Belgian townhall or guild hall than to the Romanesque Revival of the first design, has been credited to two architects: Robert William Gibson (1851-1927) and Edward J. Neville Stent. How much each man contributed to the final design is difficult to say. By 1892 Gibson had clearly established his reputation in New York State as an Episcopal Church architect. Born in Essex, England in 1851, Gibson studied architecture at the Royal Academy of Arts where upon graduation he was presented with the prestigious Soane Medallion.¹²

Following his studies he spent a year travelling through Europe before he set sail for the United States in 1880. Upon arrival Gibson established an architectural practice in Albany, New York, where he soon entered the celebrated competition for the design of the Episcopal Cathedral. Gibson's Gothic design was eventually selected over the Romanesque entry by the acknowledged master of that style Henry Hobson Richardson. Although Gibson also worked on many residential and commercial buildings during his years in the state's capital, religious structures seemed to remain a particular specialty. Over the years he was responsible for the designs of Episcopal churches in Rochester, Olean, Ossining, Gloversville, Corning, and Mechanicsville, New York. In 1888 Gibson moved to New York City where he established a practice at 38 Park Row and a residence in fashionable Murray Hill. In the four years previous to his design of the Church Missions House Gibson was awarded about ten important commissions in the city including St. Michael's Church on Amsterdam Avenue and the West End Collegiate Church and School. By 1892 when he worked on the design of the Church Missions House Gibson had moved his practice to 18 Wall Street and his new bride out to the less urbanized region of St. Nicholas Avenue. Gibson was enthusiastically accepted into New York social circles. He was a member of the Seawanhaka-Corinthian Yacht Club and the Century Association. In addition he was a director of the American Institute of Architects and acted as President of the Architectural League for two terms.

Edward J.N. Stent first appears in New York City directories listed as an artist working at 119 Broadway. From 1873-1883 he changed his professional listing to that of an architect but later established the firm of E.J.N. Stent & Co., decorators. In 1889 when Stent executed the first design for the Church Missions House, he was still listed in the directories as a decorator but by 1892 he appears once again as an architect, who advertised "the interior decorations of churches [as] a specialty."¹³ With these facts in mind it would seem that although one church publication cited Stent as the principal architect and Gibson, the associate, the more sophisticated Northern European-derived exterior design of the Church Missions House owes much of its success to Gibson.¹⁴ In fact Gibson was one of the few American architects during the 1890s to take his inspiration from Northern European prototypes. Described in the contemporary press as a "structure of the Flemish style,"¹⁵ the Church Missions House was, in 1893, joined by the West End Collegiate Church and School which Gibson described as having been "inspired generally by market buildings in Haarlem and Amsterdam."¹⁶ In addition, the correspondence of the building committee reveals that while Stent was responsible for some preliminary drawings, Gibson signed most of the correspondence with the major contractors and Gibson's office address is given on the architects' joint letterhead. When the time came to oversee the finishing of the elaborate interior, Stent's name more often appears in the correspondence. It is interesting to note that Gibson is listed as the sole architect in A History of Real Estate Building and Architecture in New York (1898).¹⁷

On October 3, 1892, a procession led by the Bishop of Albany and including twenty bishops, the architects, theological students in cap and gown, and the choir of Calvary Church formed in the church and proceeded to the building site where a large number of spectators had gathered to observe the laying of the foundation stone of the Church Missions House. Following this ceremony several months elapsed before the building firm of Robinson & Wallace began their work in

earnest. Building department records reveal that indeed the building was not begun until the beginning of December 1892. The formal dedication of the Church Missions House was held appropriately on January 25, 1894, the Festival of the Conversion of St. Paul.

Prominently occupying the site at the southeast corner of Park Avenue South and 22nd Street, the Church Missions House extends 80 feet on the avenue and 70 feet on the street. Rising six stories to a picturesque, steeply pitched hipped roof, the Church Missions House takes its form from the great Medieval and Renaissance town halls and guild halls of Belguin and Holland. Framed in steel, with terra cotta and brick fire-proofing, the building is sheathed on the ground floor by rock-faced granite and in the stories above by finely-textured Indiana limestone. Although unexposed the rectilinear framework plays an important role in the overall composition of the structure. The cube-like mass, which is bound at each corner by a decorative tourelle, is regularly divided by clustered columns which emphasize the strong vertical members joined together horizontally by panelled spandrels below the windows. The use of steel-framed construction as early as 1892 in New York City is of particular interest. The history of modern American architecture has long involved itself with the development of the skyscraper. Like many popular terms "skyscraper" has many definitions but most historians agree that the term makes reference to a building of unusual height which was made possible by certain technological inventions. Three inventions have been singled out; the elevator, the self supporting metal frame and fire-proofing.¹⁸ New York led the country in the 1870's with its array of unusually tall buildings serviced by elevators but Chicago took the lead in the development of the internal skeleton and the curtain wall. It was the change from iron to steel framed construction which led to the spectacular structural feats of the 20th century. Because of the high cost of steel, cast and wrought iron served as the early framing materials but the drop in price of steel during the 1890's encouraged its general use. Steel had been used in Chicago as early as 1884 but it did not establish itself in New York until 1894 when Bruce Price used it for his 20 story American Surety Building.¹⁹

The path of development of the skyscraper was not, however, so simple and direct as might be expected. In their struggle towards the final product architects experimented with one or all of the new inventions. Two years before Price's American Surety Building, the Church Missions House, although only six stories high, exhibited all the technological components of the newly developing style; steel cage construction, curtain walls, terra cotta fireproofing and an elevator. In addition, the Church Missions House pointed the way to a newly developing aesthetic.

While the stark skeletal frame of the skyscraper has become a much admired design feature of the 20th century, it was regarded with far less enthusiasm by the 19th century public. In fact around 1890 when young American architects were completing their training at the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts and when increased numbers of American businessmen were returning from pleasurable holidays in Europe, there developed a greater demand for an architecture which was not only functional but which reflected the rich ornamental design tradition of the Continent. At this time the russet tones of the Romanesque style which prevailed in America during the 1880's gave way to the "chalky coloration of Paris" soon to be promoted at the Chicago Columbian Exhibition of 1893.²⁰ Irrespective of its modest scale the Church Missions House is an important and early indicator of the subsequent

direction of modern architecture.²¹ Not only did the Church Missions House exhibit the most up to date technological inventions but it also was a very early example of the use of the "pale Gothic wrap" which came to be popularized in such academically-conceived skyscrapers of the 20th century as the famed Woolworth Building (1911-13).²²

The rich design program of the building's facades appropriately compliments the structural frame. The main entrance on Park Avenue South is emphasized by a central porch in the form of a pedimented archway. The tympanum of the porch is set with a bas-relief adapted from Hofmann's "Christus Consolator", which depicts Christ blessing the sick, and the spandrels of the entrance arch are filled with foliate carving reminiscent of 16th-century prototypes. Above the large rectilinear store-front windows on the ground floor rests a broad arcade which originally called attention to the main offices and rooms of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. Here too the spandrels are filled with foliate carving. Two stories of small-scaled rectilinear windows support a round arched sequence of openings reminiscent of a medieval triforium below the eaves. A broadly gabled central dormer ornamented with foliate carving and surmounted by a stone cross is flanked by two smaller dormers. Eyebrow windows and conventional skylights pierce the tile-covered roof which is capped with copper cresting. The 22nd Street front although asymmetrically weighted on the east is handled in similar manner.

The Church Missions House with its steel-framed construction and picturesque medieval sheathing serves as a reminder of both the 19th century's commitment to technology and its appreciation for historical association. Standing today amid the tall lofts and busy commercial establishments which line the lower end of Park Avenue South, this elegant, low-scaled building continues to offer a remarkable contrast to the modern construction of the surrounding neighborhood and continues to contribute to the architectural heritage of New York City.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Julia C. Emery, A Century of Endeavor: 1821-1921 A Record of the First Hundred Years of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (New York: The Department of Missions, 1921), p. 351.
2. Ibid; p. 26.
3. Ibid., p. 72.
4. Ibid., p. 372.
5. Spirit of Missions, vol. 54 (1889), p. 254.
6. New York Times, July 10, 1893, p. 9.
7. Spirit of Missions, Vol. 54, p. 376.
8. William S. Langford to Robt. W. Gibson, September 16, 1889, Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church Papers, Historical Society of the Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas.
9. Spirit of Missions, vol. 54, frontispiece.
10. The Churchman, September 24, 1892, p. 370.
11. Edward J.N. Stent to Rev. William S. Langford, April 5, 1892, Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society Papers.
12. Cornelia Brooke Gilder, ed., Albany Architects: The Present Looks at the Past (Albany, N.Y.: Historic Albany Foundation, 1978), p. 10.
13. The Churchman, October 8, 1892, p. 436.
14. The Churchman, September 24, 1892, p. 370.
15. The Churchman, September 24, 1892, p. 369.
16. Jean Parker Waterbury, A History of Collegiate School, 1638-1963 (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1963), p. 116.
17. 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. 658.
18. William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects: Progressive Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1972). p. 2.

19. Carl W. Condit, American Building (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 119.
20. Jordy, p. 57.
21. Alan Burnham, ed., New York Landmarks (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p. 174.
22. Jordy, p. 57.

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 Church Missions House/now Protestant Welfare Agencies 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 Church Missions House/now Protestant Welfare Agencies Building is an elegant reminder of the distinctive neighborhood which developed along Park Avenue South between 21st and 23rd Streets during the 1890s; that it was built in 1892-1894 by Robert W. Gibson, one of the state's leading church architects, in association with Edward J.N. Stent, a specialist in ecclesiastical decoration; that the building was in advance of its time in the employment of many important technological inventions and aesthetic considerations; that in spite of its height the building exhibited all the necessary technological components of the early skyscrapers; that the structures' application of steel framed construction preceded 1894, the popularly established date of the materials first use in a New York skyscraper; that by its use of rich ornamentation and pale colored stone sheathing, the structure aesthetically foreshadowed the academically conceived commercial buildings and skyscrapers of the early 20th century; that the Church Missions House is a rare and especially successful example in New York of architecture inspired by the Northern European secular architecture of the 15th and 16th centuries; that among its notable features are its clustered columns, gabled entrance porches and tall picturesque hipped roof and that the Church Missions House continues to offer a refreshing contrast to the more modern construction of the surrounding area and remains an important element in the rich architectural heritage of New York City.

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 as a Landmark the Church Missions House/now Protestant Welfare Agencies Building Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 877, Lot 89, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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- The Spirit of Missions, 54 (1889), p.p. 453, 458; 57 (1892), p. 416; 58 (1893), p. 297; 59 (1894), p. 1.
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Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Church Missions House
Built 1892-1894
Architects: Robert W. Gibson and
Edward J. Neville Stent