

Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 7, 1986; Designation List 186
LP-1539

THE CENTURY BUILDING, 33 East 17th Street and 38-46 East 18th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1880-1881; architect William Schickel.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 846, Lot 30.

On May 14, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Century Building, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Two witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Century Building is a rare surviving Queen Anne style commercial building in New York City. Designed by William Schickel and built in 1880-81, it has been a major presence in Union Square for over a century.

Schickel, a German-born architect who practiced in New York, rose to prominence as a leading late-19th century designer of churches and institutional buildings in the United States. He designed the Century Building as a speculative venture for his major clients, the owners of the Arnold Constable department stores.

Schickel designed the Century Building in the Queen Anne style, an English import defined by a picturesque use of 17th- and 18th-century motifs. More usually associated in this country with residential architecture, the Queen Anne was also used in commercial buildings, but few of these survive in New York City. The Century is an unusually handsome example of the Queen Anne, notable particularly for its richly carved stonework, its two-story oriel window, its gambrel roof framed by massive chimney stacks, and its terra-cotta details including sunflowers, the trademark of the style.

For over three decades the building housed the Century Publishing Company, publishers of the Century and St. Nicholas magazines. The Century was considered by many critics to be one of the finest general periodicals in the world during the last two decades of the 19th century.

Today, the Century Building survives as one of the most picturesque structures in New York, and is a physical reminder of one of New York's 19th-century literary giants.

The Development of Union Square

At the beginning of the 19th century as New York entered a period of expansion that would lead to its emergence as the largest and richest city in the country, it was realized that some means was needed to control growth and clearly establish property boundaries so that titles could be transferred. Accordingly in 1807, the New York State Legislature appointed a commission to survey the city north of present-day Houston Street and to lay out streets, roads, and public squares.¹ Although the new streets were generally planned in a rectangular grid, certain established roads were allowed to retain their traditional orientation. John Randall, Jr., chief surveyor for the Commission, recalled that at the time of the survey, the Bowery met Broadway at 16th Street forming an acute angle "which when further intersected by the streets crossing it left so small an amount of ground for building purposes that the commissioners instructed me to lay out the ground, at the Union of those streets and roads, for a public square, which from that circumstance they named Union Place."²

Initially Union Place extended from 10th to 17th Streets. However, city officials soon objected to keeping so much potentially valuable real estate undeveloped and untaxed and in 1812 recommended that Union Place be "discountinued."³ The state legislature did not go so far, but did reduce the size of the area in 1814.⁴ Then, as the city expanded northward and land use intensified, the need for open spaces became apparent. In 1831, at the urging of local residents, Union Place was set aside as a public space. A year later, additional land was acquired to regularize the area into a "parallelogram something after the plan of the Rue de la Paix and the Place Vendome."⁵ Graded, paved, and fenced, Union Square Park opened to the public in July 1839. Three years later it received its first principal adornment, a fountain supplied by the waters of the newly opened Croton Aqueduct.⁶ Within ten years, the square was surrounded by fashionable residences including some of the most splendid mansions in the city.⁷ On 17th Street, north of the Square, in the block where the Century Building now stands, were the homes of Henry Parish, Henry Young, Daniel Miller and Dr. William Moffat. All of these were four-story Italianate houses, built between 1847 and 1851 on lots at least 28 feet wide that extended through the block to 18th Street.⁸ In 1853, the Everett House, an elegant hotel catering to a first-class clientele, was constructed on the northwest corner of 17th Street and Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South). Soon a number of hotels followed and these in turn brought shops and theaters. By the end of the Civil War, many of the mansions on the Square had been converted to first-class boarding houses or stores.⁹ It was during this transitional period, in spring 1867, that Aaron Arnold, founder of the Arnold Constable Department Store, acquired the two properties west of the Everett House which were to become the site of the Century Building.¹⁰

Arnold Constable & Company and Real Estate Development

When Aaron Arnold (1794-1876) purchased the Union Square properties in 1867, his company was one of the oldest and most prestigious drygoods firms in the city.¹¹ Born on the Isle of Wight in 1794, Arnold came to this country in 1823, landing in Philadelphia. After investigating the merits

of several cities, he decided that New York, with its Atlantic port and access to the West via the soon to be completed Erie Canal, offered the best opportunity for success in the retail trade. In 1825 he opened a drygoods store at 91 Pine Street. His business was a success from the start and the next year he moved to larger quarters at 156 Front Street. At this time commercial pressure was beginning to transform areas of lower Manhattan which had traditionally been residential neighborhoods or prime shopping areas into wholesale and warehouse districts. Many first-class shops were moving northward into residential areas and in 1827 when Arnold again felt the need to expand his operations he decided to move his store to 58 Canal Street on the edge of the Eighth Ward, then the fastest growing and most populous district in the City. He was to remain in the same area for over forty years, establishing his firm on Howard Street near Mercer. During that period he formed a number of partnerships. His wife's cousins James and George Hearn joined the firm in 1828, remaining until 1842 when they formed their own extremely successful drygoods business. After the Hearn's departure James Constable, Arnold's best salesman, bought an interest in the firm. Constable subsequently married Arnold's daughter, Henrietta, and became a full partner. Then in 1853 the firm was expanded once again to admit Arnold's son Richard. In 1856-57, Arnold Constable & Company, as the firm was now called, built an impressive new store at 305 Canal Street with entrances on Mercer and Howard Streets.¹² Known as the "Marble House" this Italianate palazzo was fitted up in the most elegant style with niceties such as horsehair-covered seats at all the counters. Offering lace parasol covers for \$500 and imported lace at \$1,000 a yard, the store attracted an elite clientele that included several Presidential wives and members of the Rhinelanders, Van Rensselaers, de Peysters, Princes and Kips families.¹³

After the war, Arnold recognized that fashionable New York was once again on the march uptown. Believing that it was best to be near his customers and that the retail trade would soon follow, he began looking for a suitable "uptown" site. According to Moses King, the Union Square houses were purchased with this end in view.¹⁴ That Arnold intended to build on the site is confirmed by an agreement made in 1867 with the owners of the Everett House that ensured the preservation of a light court at the rear of the hotel and granted Arnold the right to have shutters from any building he might erect project over the court.¹⁵ He soon seems to have changed his mind, however, for the Union Square houses remained standing and an alternative site at 19th Street and Broadway was purchased for the store in April 1868.¹⁶ Having decided on this property Arnold took immediate steps to build. Within two months Griffith Thomas, a prominent designer of hotels and commercial buildings, filed plans for a cast-iron palazzo that was to be even grander and more ostentatious than the Canal Street store.¹⁷

As soon as the foundations for the new building were laid, Aaron Arnold retired, leaving his business in the hands of his son-in-law James Constable and his son Richard.¹⁸ Constable turned out to have a flair for merchandising and gradually assumed control of the store which continued to flourish.¹⁹ Richard Arnold, on the other hand, "was an expert in real estate." Using the store's considerable profits,

he knew when and where to invest, and during the panicky years succeeding 1873 purchased a vast amount of Fifth Avenue property in the Eighties where he later erected a

block of houses. Lots in the rear of Broadway and all along Nineteenth Street were purchased and an extension added for the use of the wholesale department....the entire establishment now filling the entire block from Broadway to Fifth Avenue.²⁰

These purchases together with others Richard made throughout the city and the property Aaron Arnold had amassed prior to his death in 1877 were held in common by Henrietta Constable and Richard Arnold. Following their deaths (in 1884 and 1886 respectively), later generations of Arnolds and Constables continued the families' real estate activities. In 1897, the Arnold-Constable estate was ranked fifth in a list of New York City land owners compiled by the New York Herald.²¹

It was the policy of the family to hold property for long periods of time, improving the lots with buildings that would provide rental income. For many years Griffith Thomas acted as the Arnold-Constable family designer, planning not only the additions to their department store, but also their private homes at 83rd and Fifth and 84th and Madison and speculative brownstones on 81st Street near Fifth (these last are located within the Metropolitan Museum Historic District.)²²

When Thomas became ill in 1878, the family transferred its business to a young architect, William Schickel, who had offices in the same building as Thomas at 346 Broadway. In 1879, the Constables turned their attention to the Union Square site which they had not used for the store, and retained Schickel to design a speculative commercial building.

William Schickel

During the last quarter of the 19th century, William Schickel (1850-1907) was one of the most successful architects practicing in New York. Born and educated in Germany he came to this country at the age of 20 in the summer of 1870.²³ On the day after his arrival in New York, he was hired by Richard Morris Hunt, one of this country's most eminent and influential architects in the second half of the 19th century. Schickel worked for Hunt for about six months.²⁴ Schickel then went to work for Henry Fernbach, a German-born architect who practiced in New York between 1855 and 1883.²⁵

Schickel worked for Fernbach for about two and a half years, eventually becoming his foreman and establishing a close friendship which lasted until Fernbach's death in 1883.²⁶ In January 1873, Schickel set up his own practice in the New York Life Insurance Company Building at 346 Broadway where Fernbach and Griffith Thomas also had offices.²⁷ His first commissions were from fellow Germans for tenement houses on the Lower East Side. Despite a decline in the building trades following the financial panic of 1873, his practice expanded rapidly. Throughout the 1870s he designed a number of tenements and private houses. In addition he worked extensively for Catholic institutions in New York, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, planning such buildings as Our Lady of Sorrows School, Pitt and Stanton Streets (1874); St. Benedict's Church, Fulton Street, Brooklyn

(1874); and St. Catherine's Hospital, Bushwick Avenue, Brooklyn (1874-75). By 1875, he was well enough known as an ecclesiastical designer to secure a commission for a major church in Boston, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which was illustrated in the American Architect and Building News in July 1877.²⁸

Aside from religious institutions, Schickel's most important client during this period was undoubtedly Oswald Ottendorfer, publisher of the German language paper, the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung. Presumably the two had met in 1871-72 when Schickel as Fernbach's foreman would have been involved in his employer's project for the Staats-Zeitung's new office building at Chatham Street and Tryon Row.²⁹ In the 'seventies, Schickel designed several buildings for Ottendorfer and his wife Anna including stables, a greenhouse, and a pavilion at their suburban retreat on 136th Street, west of Broadway (1878-79), and the Bella Apartment House at Fourth Avenue and 26th Street (1877), the latter project based in large part on Richard Morris Hunt's Stuyvesant Apartments.³⁰ In the 'eighties Schickel served as architect for three institutions that were founded by Ottendorfer and his wife Anna: the German Dispensary (now Stuyvesant Polyclinic), the Freie Bibliothek und Lesehalle (now the Ottendorfer Branch of the New York Public Library, 1883-84) and the Isabella Heimath at Tenth Avenue and 190th Street (1887-89). The clinic and library constructed together on lower Second Avenue are today designated New York City Landmarks.³¹

Schickel's first commission from the Arnold-Constable families came on November of 1878 and was for two brownstones on the west side of Madison Avenue near 83rd Street. The following year he received another commission for seven houses on 72nd Street west of Park Avenue. He may also have begun planning the Century Building late in that year since the tax records of 1879 indicate that the houses on the site had recently been torn down.³² Plans for the Century Building were filed at the beginning of February 1880.³³ This was Schickel's first commercial building and appears to be his only extant commercial work in the Queen Anne style. Interestingly, the Century Building has a secondary facade on 18th Street where Queen Anne elements are combined with neo-Grec motifs. In Schickel's second commercial project, for a pair of store and loft buildings at 27-33 West 23rd Street, also built for the Arnold-Constable family in 1880-81, he created an entirely neo-Grec design. He then began working with a mixture of historic styles, producing designs that became increasingly simpler and more articulative of structure. These culminated in the giant arched warehouse at 93-99 Prince Street of 1887-88,³⁴ where the building's internal structure is expressed on the facade by piers of varying width -- widest at the corners where there are bearing walls, narrower at the center where there is a party wall, and narrowest in the intermediate bays where the piers align with rows of cast-iron columns. Then in 1889 and 1892 Schickel designed two richly ornamented cast-iron front department stores, Ehrich Brothers, at 363-371 Sixth Avenue, and Stern Brothers, at 32-46 West 23rd Street, the latter a massive addition to and reworking of Fernbach's 1878 design. Later Schickel commercial buildings tend to be less exuberant, but within the classicizing tradition of the period. Notable examples include the powerful Lexington Cable Company Building of 1894-96 and the handsome neo-Renaissance Constable Building of 1894-95 at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 18th Street adjoining the Arnold Constable Department Store. Here, Schickel moved his offices in 1895, symbolizing his close ties with the Arnold-Constable families for whom he would continue to act as architect until 1904, designing stores, office

buildings, stables, summer homes and even Frederick A. Constable's vault at Woodlawn Cemetery.

Although Schickel made significant contributions to the field of commercial architecture, it is for his religious and institutional buildings that he is best known. In the 'eighties and 'nineties his firm was responsible for such major projects as the Convent of Sacred Heart in Manhattanville and St. Joseph's Seminary for the Archdiocese of New York in Yonkers, both done in severe Romanesque Style. Also dating from this period are a number of impressive churches, including several in Brooklyn and the neo-Renaissance style St. Ignatius Loyola, (1895-1900) on Park Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark.³⁵

Schickel seems also to have been a recognized authority in the field of hospital design. He was responsible for many of the buildings at the German Hospital (now Lenox Hill) and at St. Vincent's Hospital. In addition he did considerable work at Bellevue; St. Francis Hospital; St. Joseph's Hospital; the New York Foundling Hospital; Seton Hospital; St. John's Hospital, Long Island City; St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Dayton, Ohio; and East End Hospital, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. According to Schickel's son Norbert, he also acted as consulting architect to Mount Sinai Hospital at Fifth Avenue and 100th Street.³⁶

The Century Building and the Queen Anne Style

In 1879 when Richard Arnold and Henrietta Constable decided to improve the property they had inherited on Union Square, there was every reason for optimism. The period of stagnation following the Panic of 1873 had ended and according to A History of Real Estate Building and Architecture in New York City, "Prices were still low and money cheap and abundant, population had greatly increased and was pressing somewhat upon the domiciliary and mercantile accommodations of the city."³⁷ The Real Estate Record and Guide reported that in response to these favorable conditions, "Fourteenth Street, Union Square and Twenty-third Street are being crowded by the retail establishment of heavy firms and everywhere firms like Arnold Constable & Co., A. T. Stewart & Co., McCreery and the like, continue to build more palatial warehouses either for their accommodation or for investment."³⁸

Apparently the Arnold Constable Union Square building, constructed between April 1880 and March 1881 at a cost of almost \$300,000, was a purely speculative investment made without a prime tenant in view. As it turned out, the owners were able to lease the building on a floor-by-floor basis to a remarkably stable and in some cases prestigious group of tenants. One of the first tenants, the Century Company, publishers of the Century and St. Nicholas magazines, who moved to the building's fifth floor in September 1881, were attracted by "the advantages of a central location...united with the verdure and sunshine of a beautiful park," by the spaciousness of the offices which on one floor offered "an area...equal to an eight-story building covering an ordinary city lot," and by the excellence of the building's design which they considered "architecturally speaking...the finest on Union Square."³⁹ Other tenants included Johnson & Faulkner, upholsterers, who moved to the building's ground floor in 1883 and were to remain for over forty-five years, and the noted architect

George Browne Post, who was a tenant from 1890 to 1905/06, during which time he designed the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building at the Chicago Exposition (1893), the Saint Paul Building (1897-99), the College of the City of New York (1897-1908) and the New York Stock Exchange (1904-07).⁴⁰ By November 1882, the Century Company's sign was prominently located just below the attic, a factor which probably led to the building's becoming popularly known as the Century Building.⁴¹

Undoubtedly a significant factor in the success of this business building was William Schickel's Queen Anne design. Popular in this country in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the Queen Anne style came to the United States from England where it had begun to develop in the early 1860s.⁴² In its first stages Queen Anne can be seen both as a rejection of the "massiveness" and "muscularity" of High Victorian Gothic and as an outgrowth of that style. Instead of employing Gothic details Queen Anne

architects used elements derived mainly from seventeenth-and-eighteenth century domestic architecture in a way that showed their Gothic Revival training. They abandoned symmetry whenever it was convenient to do so, and concentrated on features in which, as Morris later put it, 'some of the Gothic feeling was left'.⁴³

Their buildings were generally brick with stone trim and had high-pitched roofs often broken by such picturesque features as shaped-gables, dormers, or ribbed chimney stacks. The windows were frequently composed of small panes either leaded or held in place by wooden glazing muntins. Favorite decorative motifs included ribbed and gauged brickwork, keystones, swags, grotesques, rondels, classical moldings, and inset frieze panels inspired by 17th-century pargetting. Sunflowers, adopted from Pre-Raphaelite painting, became an emblem of the style.

Initially, Queen Anne was used exclusively for domestic architecture, primarily country and suburban houses. In 1871, however, Norman Shaw's design for the New Zealand Chambers Building in London demonstrated that the style could be applied with equal success for a business building. The four-story New Zealand Chambers had a three-bay wide brick facade distinguished by a pedimented doorway, small-paned shopfronts, two-story oriels set between massive piers, and a pitched roof broken by gabled dormers. Two aspects of this facade are especially worthy of note -- the pedimented oriel incorporating a Palladian motif (a device apparently borrowed from the 17th-century Sparrowe's House, Ipswich) and the interjection of an irregular element, the off-center entrance, into an otherwise symmetrical design. Both motifs were to become hallmarks of urban Queen Anne, made famous in large part by the New Zealand Chambers, perhaps the most prestigious and widely published of all Queen Anne buildings.

Shaw's designs began being published in this country in several periodicals, notably The American Architect and Building News which made something of a specialty of the style. Through its pages one can trace the dissemination of the style, first, as in England, in country and suburban house design, then starting about 1879 in urban design as well. However, even when Queen Anne was at the height of its popularity, it was used chiefly for domestic architecture. In New York, moreover, many of the most

prominent commercial buildings in the style such as George Harney's office building at 14-18 Wall Street (1879) and Edward Kendall's Washington Building at Broadway and Battery Place (1882) have since been replaced by larger buildings.⁴⁴ Among the few important examples left in New York are William Schickel's Century Building; N. G. Starkweather's Potter Building, 38 Park Row (1883); Edward Kendall's Gorham Building, 889-891 Broadway (1883-84); Henry Hardenbergh's Western Union Building, 186 Fifth Avenue (1884); and Silliman and Farnsworth's Temple Court Building, 125 Nassau Street (1889-90).⁴⁵ Of these, Schickel's Century Building stands out as a particularly distinguished design and as a rare example of the three-bay store and office building type that Norman Shaw had introduced in his New Zealand Chambers Building.

Specific features of the Century that relate to Shaw's design include the two-story oriel window, the asymmetrically placed entranceway, and the giant brick pilasters with floriated relief panel capitals. Other notable features of the facade include the richly carved stonework, featuring 17th- and 18th-century motifs including garlands, shells, grotesques, and an overdoor panel depicting feeding birds set amid tendril forms; the delicate ironwork cast by J. B. Cornell and Sons, and the handsome relief panels and moldings in terra cotta, a material that had only just come into use for large-scale commercial and public buildings. Equally impressive is the fishscale-shingled gambrel roof framed by massive chimney stacks and punctuated by dormers, a brick and terra-cotta balustrade, and a cresting of terra-cotta sunflowers. Initially the dormers were crowned by pedimented tablets, a favorite Queen Anne motif; however, in 1913 S. Edison Gage added a second tier of dormers repeating the basic articulation of the original dormers, but substituting terra cotta for brick.⁴⁶ Aside from this change, the Union Square facade has remained largely intact and is something of a rarity in that it has retained its original cast-iron and plate-glass storefront. Unfortunately, many of the building's small-paned leaded-glass windows, so characteristic of the Queen Anne style, have been lost in recent years. However, there are still leaded-glass transoms in the side bays of the oriel and in all but the westernmost window bay on the fifth floor and leaded-glass upper sashes in the eastern and western sixth floor dormers.

For the secondary facade on 18th Street, which also served as an entrance to the ground floor store, Schickel designed a simpler, more utilitarian version of his 17th Street facade incorporating some Queen Anne motifs, notable the terra-cotta sunflower panels, taken directly from the 17th Street front, into a neo-Grec design.⁴⁷ Specific features of this design which may be considered neo-Grec include the treatment of the ground floor iron pilasters with their stylized cabled flutings and capitals in the form of consoles and the incised decorations on both the capitals of the lower set of giant pilasters and the attic piers. In addition, the overall flatness of the facade and the gridlike treatment of the piers and the lintels are characteristic of the style. This concern with expressing the underlying structure was to become increasingly important for Schickel.

The Century Magazine and Richard Watson Gilder

The Century was considered by many critics to be "the best general periodical in the world" during the last two decades of the 19th century.⁴⁸ First published as the Century in 1881, the magazine was in fact a continuation of Scribner's Illustrated Monthly, a general interest magazine founded in 1868 by a book publisher Charles Scribner, author/editor Josiah Holland, and businessman Roswell Smith.⁴⁹ During the late 1870s, the Scribner Company, a separate entity from Scribner Books, experienced tremendous growth due to the success of both Scribner's Magazine and its juvenile counterpart, Saint Nicholas Magazine, which had been established in 1873. Seeking to take advantage of the company's reputation in religious and juvenile literature, Holland and Smith planned to introduce a line of books. This brought them into conflict with Charles Scribner II, who had inherited control of his father's forty percent interest in the Scribner (Magazine) Company as well as the presidency of the Scribner Book Company. By no means enamored with the prospect of competing with himself, Scribner attempted to block the book-publishing venture. Failing to do so, he agreed to sell the family interest in the magazine company with the proviso that the Scribner name cease to be used for the company and its publications. It was assistant editor Richard Watson Gilder who proposed that the magazine take the name of the Century Club, then the foremost club in the city for artists and men-of-letters.⁵⁰ As the magazine's office had been located on the third floor of the Scribner Bookstore Building at 743 Broadway, new headquarters were also necessary, hence the move to Arnold Constable's new building on Union Square. Just as the first issue was off the press, editor Holland died, and Gilder, who had been gradually assuming greater control of the magazine took over as editor of the new Century.⁵¹ Thus, in many ways, the magazine entered a new era with its move to Union Square.

Under Gilder's leadership, the Century "reached a pinnacle of prestige and influence unprecedented in American magazine history".⁵² A talented poet himself, Gilder was considered one of the most perceptive literary editors of his age. It is indicative of his standing in the literary community that three of the most prominent American writers of the 19th century -- Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James -- contributed major works to the Century. In fact, one memorable issue in February 1885 carried sections of Howell's The Rise of Silas Lapham, Twain's Huckleberry Finn, and James' The Bostonians, making it, in the words of literary historian Herbert Smith "probably the greatest twenty-five cents worth of original American literature in the history of American periodicals."⁵³ In poetry, the Century featured the works of Walt Whitman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Herman Melville. It was largely due to Gilder that Scribner's became the first important American magazine to publish a serious appraisal of Whitman's work. Later, the Century was to carry Whitman's recollections of his years as a volunteer nurse for the Union Army and a number of poems.⁵⁴

While the Century is today best known for its contribution to American literature, the magazine was also an important forum for disseminating new ideas on the arts, public affairs, history, and society. Undoubtedly the most prestigious of its achievements was the monumental "War Series". This unbiased and thorough account of the Civil War, told through the recollections of former participants, was perhaps the most widely-read

magazine series in America during the 19th century. Other notable series included "Abraham Lincoln: A History" by his former secretaries John Hay and John G. Nicolay, and John Kennan's "Siberia and the Exile System", an expose of tsarist prison administration. Most articles were profusely illustrated with engravings by such artists as Joseph Pennell, Frederick Remington, Howard Pyle, and Charles Dana Gibson.⁵⁵

In addition, the Century published regular features on the arts by the foremost critics of the day including William Coffin on John Singer Sargent and Winslow Homer, Charles De Kay on Alfred Pinkham Ryder, and Royal Cortissoz on the muralists John La Farge and Edwin Austin Abbey. Coffin also wrote appreciations of the sculptors Daniel Chester French and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Architecture was the province of Marianna Van Rensselaer, who wrote a monthly column for over two decades acquainting the Century's readers with "Recent Architecture in America" and the "Cathedral Churches of England and France."⁵⁶

For all its emphasis on the arts, the Century was also deeply committed to social and political reform. A vocal critic of corruption in government, Gilder used the editorial pages of the magazine to press continually for the establishment of a strong civil service system. An advocate of housing reform, Gilder published articles on conditions of the Lower East Side by Jacob Riis and personally exposed the Trinity Church Corporation as the owner of some of the city's worst tenements having become aware of their involvement while serving as chairman of the New York State Tenement House Committee in 1894. The evils of the Jim Crow System were brought out in a series of stories by George Washington Cable, and the horrors of the pogroms were described by Emma Lazarus, who used the Century as a vehicle to propose the creation of a national Jewish state.⁵⁷ Thus, in 1890, The Journalist remarked that to the man or woman who moves among cultured people "the reading of the Century has practically become compulsory. Its articles form the subject of conversation, it is a reflex of the literary and social life of the world."⁵⁸

Description

The Century Building is constructed of red brick with Wyoming bluestone and terra-cotta trim. An L-shaped building it has a frontage of 71 feet 6 inches on 17th Street and 120 feet 7 inches on 18th Street. Although it occupies a midblock site, it is flanked to the west by a two-story building that leaves part of the western wall exposed. The two street fronts have similar composition and share a number of decorative elements, but the Queen Anne style 17th Street elevation which faces out onto Union Square is considerably more ornate than the handsome but austere 18th Street facade.

On 17th Street the facade is divided into three bays and is articulated in three horizontal sections: a one-story commercial base, a four-story midsection, and a one and one half-story roof broken by a double tier of dormers. The ground story is faced with stone which has been painted white. The piers are treated as pilasters with high pedestals and impost blocks -- the thicker corner piers are rusticated, the narrower

inner piers decorated with grotesques. In the westernmost corner of the facade is an arched entrance which leads to the upper stories. This portal is framed by pilasters and surmounted by a richly carved pedimented overdoor. The rest of the ground floor is given over to a plate-glass and cast-iron shopfront which survives intact except for a modern door and transom and metal covers over the grates beneath the show windows in the recessed central entranceway. The shopwindows are supported by iron bars. Beneath these are iron grates which once lit now sealed basement windows. Thin iron colonettes with foliated shafts frame the central entrance and subdivide the eastern bay into three sections. Above the show windows are transoms which originally tilted open. Surmounting the ground floor is a composite entablature which breaks forward over the outer piers. These projecting sections are decorated with swags and are capped by gable-shaped ornaments that provide a terminus for the ground floor cornice.

Above the ground floor the facade is faced in red brick with stone and terra-cotta trim (the stone has been painted white). Narrow piers have been introduced to subdivide the bays. These are treated as one-story pilasters with responds attached to the sides of the major supportive piers. These piers are slightly projected and are articulated as superimposed giant pilasters with stone bases and stylized capitals in which terra-cotta panels with floral reliefs are substituted for conventional foliage and volutes. The lower set of pilasters are partially rusticated and have central terra-cotta panels decorated with sunflowers. These may be perceived as interruptions, but not as full breaks in the giant order. The upper pilasters are channeled and have terra-cotta panel capitals which have been painted white. Above the windows the brick wall surfaces are articulated by stone string courses and sills which are underlined by terra-cotta moldings. In general these horizontal accents are contained within the bays; however, the courses continue across the piers above the third and fifth floors reinforcing the double-story articulation established by the giant orders.

A lively interplay is created between this double-story composition and the fenestration pattern which sets up a one-two-one story grouping while placing a marked emphasis on the center bay. On the second floor the windows are framed by pilasters with painted stone bases and capitals that support stone lintels with small impostes. In the outer bays the lintel soffits are decorated with an egg and dart moldings. In the center bay the same molding is used to profile blind segmental arches cut into the face of the lintel. The pilaster which bisects the center bay is much wider than in the other bays and is distinguished by a richly carved stone Corinthian capital and by a terra-cotta panel depicting a potted sunflower in an arched surround. This pilaster serves as a base for the facade's most imposing feature, a two-story elliptical stone oriel which occupies the center bay on the third and fourth floors.

Richly ornamented with classical motifs, the oriel is divided into three bays by pilaster-faced piers and is crowned by a triangular pediment over the slightly projected center bay. The plate-glass one-over-one sash windows and leaded glass transoms in the narrow end bays curve to follow the line of the oriel. The window treatment in the center bay on the third floor conforms to the pattern used for most windows on the upper stories of this facade: there are a pair of one-over-one sash windows separated with a thin iron mullion, the iron crossbar supports a transom originally filled

with small leaded lights which have since been lost. On the fourth floor, however, there are three windows in the central bay -- a wide center window flanked by two narrow lights. These were originally surmounted by a transom with an arched muntin creating a Palladian motif similar to Shaw's Ipswich windows. The transom is now boarded over.

In the outer bays both the third and fourth floor windows have segmental-arched enframements decorated with stone keystones and skewbacks. On the fourth floor stone bases are also employed relating the articulation of the minor orders to that of the giant pilasters.

On the fifth floor the center bay has three segmental-arched window openings decorated with stone keystones and imposts. Each contains a single one-over-one sash window topped by a small paned leaded-glass transom. In the outer bays there are two flat-arched window openings per bay again decorated with stone keystones and imposts. Here the leaded-glass transoms have survived in all but the westernmost window bay.

Terminating this section of the facade is a Doric entablature. This is composed of a stone architrave, brick and terra-cotta frieze and stone and terra-cotta cornice. The entablature projects over the major elements. On the frieze the projecting areas are undecorated while the recessed sections contain molded brick triglyphs and terra-cotta relief panel metopes. In the outer bays these are decorated with sunbursts, in the center bay with wreaths and swags.

Crowning the building on 17th Street is a one-and-one-half story attic which reads as a gambrel roof from Union Square. This is lit by a double tier of dormers. The lower dormers are brick with stone and terra-cotta trim. The center dormer has two equally-spaced openings, the lower wider outer dormers have three openings consisting of a regularly spaced central light and two narrower sidelights. The eastern dormer still retains its original clear leaded glass upper sash. The stained glass window in the western dormer probably dates from 1888 when there was a fire on this floor. Framing the windows are brick pilasters with plain Tuscan stone capitals. These carry a Doric entablature with a stone architrave and cornice and frieze composed of brick triglyphs and terra-cotta metopes. In the outer bays the metopes are articulated with simple recessed panels; in the center bays they are enriched with swags and rosettes.

The second tier of terra-cotta-faced dormers dating from 1913 are considerably simpler in design. Divided by piers into a wide central light and narrower sidelights they are articulated with corner pilasters and entablatures.

Set between the dormers along the roofline is a brick balustrade with raised terra-cotta panels and a stone coping. This projects over the major supportive piers to form pedestals which carry terra-cotta orbs. Stylized volutes join the balustrade to the center dormer. The roof is also ornamented with a stone coping which runs along the ends of the gambrel and has stone ornaments (skew corbels) which project at the foot of the upper slope. Joining the two pitches is a molded metal frieze which is enriched with an egg and dart molding. At the ridge are terra-cotta coping tiles ornamented with leaves and terra-cotta finials in the form of sunflowers. Molded brick chimney stacks rise from the ridge of gable walls.

Aside from the addition of the second set of dormers, the only major alteration to the 17th Street attic was the construction of a sheet-metal-sided elevator shed next to the western gable chimney in 1905. It should be noted that while the upper slope of the gambrel has been covered with asphalt shingles, the lower slope retains its original fish-scale slate shingles.

On 18th Street, the facade is divided into five bays, each three windows wide. As on the 17th Street facade, there are three horizontal divisions: a one-story commercial base, a four-story midsection and an attic. Here, however, the attic is only one story high and has a flat roof.

On the ground floor the bays are separated by banded brick and stone piers. These have stone bases and stone Tuscan capitals which are enriched by egg and dart echinus moldings. Iron piers divide each bay into three openings. Like the colonnettes on 17th Street these are articulated with superimposed orders, in this case stylized pilasters with capitals in the form of consoles topped by small columns with their own bases and impost blocks. Set between the piers are cast-iron and glass shop fronts with door and window surrounds of wood. Like the storefronts on 17th Street these are divided into an iron base, large plate glass window, and transom. The bases are faced with wrought-iron grilles that conceal large basement windows, the weight of the windows above being carried by iron sills that form the top of the bases.

In the eastern corner of the facade there are a pair of folding paneled metal doors which are surmounted by a large rectangular wooden window frame (glass presently missing) and by a transom. Since there is a record of an alteration to this entrance facade in 1912, it is difficult to determine whether the doors are original, however it is likely that there was always a door in this location which fronts a stairhall.⁵⁹

Two other entrances into the ground floor store are no longer in use. The entrance in the center of bay two (reading east to west) seems to have been closed off for some time since there is a wooden dado which aligns with the bases of adjoining storefronts. In bay three there is a pair of wooden doors, which may be original, with long rectangular lights and raised panel decorations. Both these entrances are surmounted by square windows and transoms.

The western section of bay three and bays four and five have undergone considerable alteration. A metal gate extends across the entire width of bay four, and bay five has extensive brick infill and a new metal doorway and freight elevators. Crowning the ground floor is a simple iron entablature with a dentilled cornice.

On the upper stories, the composition of the 17th Street facade is also repeated though in a much simplified form. Once again the major piers are articulated by superimposed giant pilasters. Here the lower set of pilasters have stone bases and channeled brick capitals with stone abacus and echinus moldings. On the upper orders the capitals are articulated by a slight projection of the bricks and by stone echinus moldings. On both orders there are central terra-cotta sunflower panels identical to those on

the 17th Street facade. Stone sills underlined by molded brick courses and projections in the surface of the brick create a series of horizontal accents on the wall surface above the windows comparable to those on 17th Street. As on the 17th Street facade, the courses are continued onto the piers only when they mark a break between the stories, the division between the third and fourth floors being established by a brick block modillion cornice.

The fenestration pattern of the 17th Street facade is also repeated on the 18th Street facade. Three are trabeated windows with stone lintels on the second floor, segmental-arched window openings with keystones on the third and fourth floors, flat-arched windows on the fifth floor. Only the small piers separating the windows on the second floor are distinguished by banding. Capping this section of the building is a brick and stone entablature ornamented with paired stone console brackets above the major supportive piers.

On the attic story the major piers are channeled and have stone bases and capitals. The brick piers between the windows have brick and stone capitals. These carry stone lintels with small imposts. Crowning the building is a brick frieze and cast-iron cornice ornamented by iron brackets at the corners of the roof.

The major alterations to this facade above the ground floor have been the installation of an exterior fire escape over bay four and the construction of a brick elevator housing over the north-west corner of the building.

Conclusion

The Century Company moved to new quarters on Fourth Avenue in 1914/15 after almost thirty-five years in the Century Building.⁶⁰ Soon after, Baker and Taylor, publishers, also left the building. The long term tenants who remained into the 'twenties included Johnson and Faulkner, upholsterers, and Earl and Wilson, shirts and collarmakers, businesses that better accorded with the character of the neighborhood which was becoming increasingly a center for manufacturers and wholesalers. Photographs show that by the later 'thirties the building was being used by such businesses as Ferguson Brothers Manufacturing Company and William Shaland Toys and Novelties.⁶¹ The most recent ground floor tenant was the American Drapery and Carpet Company.

Although currently vacant, the Century Building survives as one of the finest commercial buildings in the Queen Anne style in New York. Its handsome details, including its two-story oriel window and its dramatic gambrel roof, make the building one of the most picturesque in the city. As home to the prestigious 19th-century Century Magazine, the Century Building also has a special place in the cultural history of New York.

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Report edited by Anthony Robins, Deputy Director, Research Dept.

NOTES

1. I.N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909 (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), vol. 5, s.v. 1807 Apr. 3.
2. Quoted in Stokes, vol. 5, s.v. 1808.
3. Stokes, vol. 5, s.v. 1812 Feb. 17.
4. Ibid, s.v. 1815 Apr. 11.
5. David Thomas Valentine, Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York, (New York, 1857), p. 480.
6. Stokes, vol. 5, s.v. 1833 Apr 4, 1833 Apr 20, 1833 Nov 12, 1834 Jan 14, 1834 May 30, 1835 May 14, 1836 Ag 3, 1839 Jl 19, 1842 Oct 11,13.
7. For the development of this area see Charles Lockwood, Bricks and Brownstones: The New York Row House 1783-1924: An Architectural and Social History (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972, pp. 132, 135-136; idem., Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), pp. 165-171; Christine Boyer, Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style 1850-1900 (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) pp. 44-48.
8. Valentine's Manual, p. 480-481. See also Eighteenth Ward tax assessment records, 1853, including The Map of the Eighteenth Ward of the City of New York, Surveyed A.D. 1853, in the Municipal Archives and Records Center, Surrogate Court House, New York.
9. Boyer, pp. 45-48, 55-56; Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown, pp. 290-292.
10. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, Liber 1016, p. 112; Liber 1017, p. 577.
11. This account of the Arnold Constable Company is based on The Arnolds and Constables: Some History and Biography of the Arnolds and Constables and An Account of Their Business and Principal Properties in Real Estate. (New York: privately printed, 1911); Arnold Constable & Co., N.Y., Through the Years 1825-1950: One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Anniversary (New York: Arnold Constable Corp., 1950); Maxwell F. Marcuse, This was New York! (New York: L I M Press, 1969), pp. 215-221; Moses King, King's Handbook of New York City 2nd ed. (New York: Moses King, 1893), pp. 843-845. Addresses are taken from Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory (New York: Thomas Longworth, 1825/26-1829/30).
12. For this building see the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Designation Report (LP-0768) (New York: City of New York, 1973), pp. 9-10, 67, 117;
13. Through the Years, pp. 6-7; Marcuse, pp. 219-220.
14. King, p. 844.

15. Liber Deeds, Liber 1011, p. 211
16. Ibid, Liber 1058, pp. 54-58.
17. New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Permit 443-1868, filed May 29, 1868. See also Boyer, pp. 96,97, 100, 108.
18. The Arnolds and Constables, p. 10.
19. Marcuse, pp. 219-20; Through the Years, p. 9.
20. The Arnolds and Constables, p. 16.
21. Ibid., p. 85; Liber Deeds, Section 3 Liber 36, p. 169.
22. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Metropolitan Museum Historic District Designation Report (LP-0955) (New York: City of New York, 1977), pp. 52-53, 61-62, 116-117.
23. This biographical account is based on the entries for William Schickel in John W. Leonard, ed., Who's Who in New York City and State: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporaries, 4th ed. (New York: L.R. Hammersly, 1898); Leslie's History of Greater New York (New York: Arkell Publishing Co., 1898), vol. 3, p. 594; and William Schickel's obituaries in the American Institute of Architects Quarterly Bulletin, 8 (July, 1907), 105; New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung, June 15, 1907, p. 1; American Art Annual, 6 (1907-08), 115.
24. Obit., AIA Quarterly, p. 105. For Hunt see Paul R. Baker, Richard Morris Hunt (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980); Susan R. Stein, ed., The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
25. Obit., AIA Quarterly, p. 105; for Fernbach see Joy Kestenbaum, "Henry Fernbach," Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects (New York: The Free Press, 1982), vol. 2, p. 52.
26. Leslie's History, vol. 3, p. 594.
27. Dennis S. Francis, Architects in Practice New York City, 1840-1900 (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), pp. 30, 67, 74.
28. American Architect and Building News, 2 (July 28, 1877), 83.
29. For the Staats Zeitung Building see "The New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung Building," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 2, 1873, p. 337.
30. The now demolished Bella Apartments is illustrated in Marc Eidlitz and Son, 1854-1904 (New York: privately printed, 1904), n.p.
31. Stuyvesant Polyclinic Hospital was designated November 9, 1976 (LP-0924); Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, was designated September 20, 1977 (LP-0969); Ottendorfer Branch Interior was designated August 11, 1981 (LP-1168). The Isabella Heimath is

- illustrated in King, p. 445.
32. Eighteenth Ward Tax Assessment Records, 1879, p. 115.
 33. New Building Permit 110-1880.
 34. No. 99 Prince Street is within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District. For this building see also Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Reconsidered: Arcaded Buildings of the New York School, c. 1870-1890," in In Search of Modern Architecture: A Tribute to Henry Russell Hitchcock, ed. Helen Searing (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1982), pp. 155-156; Winston Weisman, "The Chicago School of Architecture: A Symposium -- Part I," The Chicago School Issue, Prairie School Review, 9, No. 1 (1972), 23.
 35. St. Ignatius was designated March 4, 1969 (LP-0431). With the growth of his practice in the late 1880s Schickel felt the need to enlarge his office, forming a partnership, known as William Schickel & Company, in 1887 with the architects Isaac E. Ditmars and Hugo Kafka. Kafka soon left the firm to practice on his own, but Ditmars remained to become a full partner in 1896.
 36. Norbert Schickel, "William Schickel, Architect," outline for a proposed biography of William Schickel, n.d., n.p. I am indebted to Norbert Schickel II for having made a copy available to me.
 37. A History of Real Estate Building and Architecture in New York City (1898; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1967), pp. 76-77.
 38. "The Situation of the Real Estate Market," Real Estate Record and Guide 26 (October 9, 1880), 869.
 39. "The Century Co's New Home," Century Magazine, 25 (Nov., 1882), advertising sect., p. 25.
 40. Dates from Fred Wasserman, "Historical Analysis" Beyer Blinder Belle -- Century Building report, 1985, p. 8. Checked against Trow's New York City Directories (New York: Trow City Directory Company, 1890-1905/6, 1913-16); Post offices in the Century Building were illustrated in "Where Our Architects Work," Architectural Record 10 (July, 1900), 77-83. For Post see Winston Weisman, "George Browne Post," Macmillan Encyclopedia, vol. 3, pp. 460-462.
 41. See illustration, "Century's New Home," p. 23.
 42. On Queen Anne see Mark Girouard, Sweetness and Light: the Queen Anne Movement, 1860-1900 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Andrew Saint, Richard Norman Shaw (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.)
 43. Girouard, p. 18
 44. For Harney's building, see American Architect and Building News, 7 (May 1, 1880), No. 227; for Kendall's building, see King, p. 767.

45. The Gorham Building is a designated New York City Landmark, June 19, 1984 (LP-1227).
46. New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Alteration Permit 777-1913.
47. The term neo-Grec had been coined in France in the 1850s to describe a new kind of architecture in which architectural mass was reduced to a functionally expressive skeleton, and ornament was confined to a few abstract forms emphasizing points of structural stress or design emphasis. Many scholars credit Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to study architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, with having brought the style to the United States. In the 'seventies Hunt began fusing neo-Grec with Gothic Revival, evolving a style that was to prove immensely popular. Schickel's designs for religious and residential architecture from the late 'seventies, notably the Bella Apartments, often incorporate neo-Grec motifs, and it is not surprising that he would turn to a simpler, more structurally articulative style for a secondary facade.
48. Arthur John, The Best Years of the Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. ix.
49. For the early history of the Century Company see John, pp. 7-16; Herbert F. Smith, Richard Watson Gilder (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), pp. 14-19.
50. John, pp. 102-108.
51. Ibid., pp. 112, 122.
52. Ibid., p. 137.
53. Smith, p. 153.
54. Ibid., 44-52; John, 52-53.
55. John, 125-132, 182-185.
56. Ibid., 185-188.
57. Ibid., 198-209, 213; "Richard Watson Gilder", Dictionary of American Biography vol. 4, p. 275.
58. Quoted in John, p. 138.
59. Alteration permit 2102-1912; see also the plan in the "Century Co.'s New Home," p. 24.
60. The last listing for the Century Company at 33 E. 17th Street appears in the 1914/15 edition of Trow's Directory.
61. Wasserman, p. 8.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Century 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 Century Building is one of the rare extant Queen Anne style commercial buildings in New York City; that it is a particularly handsome example of the style distinguished by richly carved stonework, two-story oriel windows, a gambrel roof punctuated by dormers, and terra-cotta details including sunflowers, the emblem of the style; that it was designed by the prominent New York architect William Schickel and is one of his major early works; that it was commissioned as a speculative venture by the owners of the Arnold Constable department stores, prominent landowners in the city, and is representative of their contribution to the development of New York; that for over thirty-five years the building was the headquarters of the Century Magazine, considered by many critics to be one of the finest general periodicals in the world during the last two decades of the 19th century; and that the Century Building has been a picturesque adornment for Union Square and New York City for over one hundred years.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Century Building, 33 East 17th Street and 38-46 East 18th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 846, Lot 30, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



BROADWAY.

JACKSON BUILDING. "CENTURY" BUILDING.

EVERETT HOUSE.

FOURTH AVENUE.

UNION SQUARE, NORTH SIDE, AND THE EVERETT HOUSE.

VIEW OF EAST 17TH STREET FROM FOURTH AVENUE TO BROADWAY.



THE CENTURY BUILDING
33 East 17th Street
Manhattan
Built 1880-1881

Architect:
William Schickel

Photo:
Gale Harris



Architect:
William Schickel

THE CENTURY BUILDING
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THE CENTURY BUILDING
38-46 East 18th Street
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