

HIGH SCHOOL OF THE PERFORMING ARTS, 120 West 46th Street, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1893-94; architect, C.B.J. Snyder.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 998, Lot 41.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the High School of the Performing Arts and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The High School of the Performing Arts, formerly Public School 67, is a handsome Romanesque Revival style building originally built to serve a large residential community on the west side of Manhattan. The school is the first known to have been designed by C.B.J. Snyder, Superintendent of School Buildings to the Board of Education for thirty years. Snyder's tenure coincided with a period of enormous population growth in New York, and he designed a multitude of new schools, many of which are major architectural monuments in their neighborhoods.

As the area around Times Square changed from residential to commercial, P.S. 67 fell into disuse. After World War II, however, it was revived and adapted for use by the new High School of the Performing Arts, an innovative high school which combined the usual academic curriculum with professional training in dance, theater, and music. Unique in the country at the time of its founding, the school became tremendously successful, and its graduates include many of the most famous performing artists in the country.

#### New York Public Schools and C.B.J. Snyder

From the beginning of massive immigration to the city in the 1880s until the end of the 1930s, New York experienced a population growth that eventually made it a metropolis of close to eight million people. That growth was matched by an unparalleled construction boom and during those decades much of the present city was built. Many of the city's new residents were children, and meeting their educational needs with new school buildings was a major task undertaken by the city government during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. According to a 1905 architectural periodical:

The magnitude of the undertaking and the reality of the need for these new school-houses is shown by the fact that, even after several years of active building, there are at this time seventy-seven school-houses in various stages of completion now in charge of the architect to the Department of Education, while contracts for twenty-four more will shortly be made.<sup>1</sup>

The Board of Education built all the new schools to the designs of the Superintendent of School Buildings. At first, the Board was responsible only for Manhattan and those parts of the Bronx which constituted the 19th century city; after the

consolidation of the five boroughs into the City of Greater New York in 1898, however, its authority was extended over the entire area. From 1884 to 1891, Superintendent George W. Debevoise designed handsome school buildings, many, such as Public School 11 in the Bronx (a designated New York City Landmark), in the then popular Romanesque Revival style. His output, however, was later overshadowed by the thirty years' worth of schools designed by his successor, C.B.J. Snyder.

The writer of 1905 quoted above wrote of Snyder:

Possibly it was not the best, probably it was not the most economical, certainly it was not the most expeditious way to have all the school-houses the city stood in such sore need of designed and built by the official architect to the Department of Education. But since that method had to be followed, it is a matter of wonderful good fortune that the official architect chanced to be such a man as is Mr. C.B.J. Snyder, who not only at the outset showed distinct capacity for his task, but has proved himself a man able to grow as his opportunities opened before him. Mr. Wheelwright in Boston, Mr. Ittner in St. Louis, Mr. Mundie in Chicago...have done excellent service to their respective cities in the way of building school-houses...but they have not had to do their work under the same sort of pressure that has been put upon Mr. Snyder, and they have not had to adopt their architectural treatment to as closely restricted sites.<sup>2</sup>

For Snyder, the basic problem in the design of New York public schools was the accommodation of the requirements of students and teachers to small sites which were necessitated by the high cost of land acquisition.<sup>3</sup> He was particularly concerned with making his schools as healthy as possible for the students, and focused much attention on the development of fire protection, ventilation, unilateral lighting, and reduced classroom size. Among his contributions to school planning was the H-plan for floor layouts which provided increased light and better ventilation, and also permitted adequate space for recreation areas.

Snyder's concerns also embraced architectural style, and unlike the designs of many New York schools built after his retirement, Snyder's work was inventive, solid, and handsome. His earliest work including P.S. 67, his first known commission, continued the Romanesque Revival style of his predecessor Debevoise. He later moved into Gothic idioms, and was credited with the introduction of the Collegiate Gothic style to New York Public school architecture. Among his finest Gothic style designs were Morris High School in the Bronx, Erasmus High School in Brooklyn and Curtis High School in Staten Island (a designated New York City Landmark). One of his most interesting school designs, DeWitt Clinton High School in Manhattan, incorporated elaborate Flemish gables at the roofline. According to the 1905 source previously cited:

When first the New York school-house made its appearance in Gothic attire, it seemed as if a very doubtful experiment were being tried, but little by little the designer discovered new confidence in himself, and some of the later buildings are markedly successful as pieces of consistent and satisfying architectural composition.<sup>4</sup>

Snyder's long tenure as Superintendent of School Buildings, and his fine sense of architectural style, resulted in the creation of a large body of distinguished

New York public school buildings. Snyder's schools form architectural centerpieces for many of the neighborhoods in which they were built, and, as a group, those surviving constitute a series of monuments to the civic culture of the city, and to New York's tradition of public education.

#### P.S. 67 and the Romanesque Revival

C.B.J. Snyder designed elementary school P.S. 67 in 1891, his first year as Superintendent of School Buildings for the Board of Education.<sup>5</sup> Its site, on West 46th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, was then in a densely populated residential area of brownstone rowhouses and tenements, and the school served a large neighborhood population. The design called for thirty-six classrooms to accommodate 2016 students.

In this design, Snyder continued in the Romanesque Revival style used by his predecessor Debevoise. As described in a contract for the school:

The building will have a frontage of 150 feet and a depth nearly as great. The main entrance will be in the centre of the ground floor, with two entrances on either side for male and female pupils. There will be four full stories and a fifth story under a mansard roof. The style of the architecture will be in Romanesque designs, with rounded and arched windows. Stone and iron will be the materials, with the exception of the floors, window sills, and doorways. The stairs for the pupils will be fire-proof. The ventilation and sanitary arrangements will be of the latest and most complete designs. The heating apparatus will be so arranged as to aid in the ventilation, and there will be no draughts to endanger the health of the pupils.<sup>6</sup>

The version of the Romanesque Revival current in New York in the 1890s was based on the style created by Henry Hobson Richardson in his Trinity Church, Boston (1873-77), and refined in his later designs for Crane Library, Quincy, Mass. (1880-83); Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail, Pittsburgh, Pa. (1884-88); and Glessner House, Chicago, Ill. (1885-86). The Richardsonian Romanesque soon spread throughout the country to become the most widespread architectural style of the 1880s. The Romanesque Revival was used by Superintendent Debevoise for schools in Manhattan and the Bronx, including P.S. 11 (formerly P.S. 91, 1899) at 1257 Ogden Avenue in the Bronx, a designated New York City Landmark; and by James W. Naughton, Debevoise's counterpart in what was then the City of Brooklyn, at P.S. 65K, 158 Richmond Street (1889); Boys High School, 832 Marcy Avenue (1891); P.S. 108, 200 Linwood Street (1895); and P.S. 9 Annex, 251 Sterling Place (1895), all designated New York City Landmarks. All the schools in the style are characterized by contrasting brick and stonework, round-arched openings, intricate carved details, and dramatic massing with an emphasis on projecting pavilions and towers, all creating an imposing effect. P.S. 67 shares these characteristics: it is one of the very few Romanesque Revival schools known to have been designed by C.B.J. Snyder, and one of the few in the style surviving in Manhattan.;

#### High School of the Performing Arts

The High School of the Performing Arts, today a division of the High School of Music and Art, a special school in the New York City public school system, grew out of a ten-year-old arts program that had been operated at the Metropolitan Vocational High School under the direction of its principal, Dr. Franklin J. Keller. Keller

believed that the performing arts deserved their own vocational program, and that combining vocational arts training with a traditional curriculum would encourage otherwise disinterested students to stay in school: "Why not use honest preparation in these professional areas as the medium of exchange for a decent tolerance for academic studies?"<sup>7</sup>

The original program was established at the main building of the Metropolitan Vocational High School on Catherine Street on the Lower East Side. According to Dr. Keller,

It was difficult to get to, a rather poor neighborhood, and far removed from the feeling of Broadway and Times Square. It was difficult to get people to come down to the Lower East Side for music and drama classes.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Keller and his associates, therefore

...decided that a Times Square location was essential for a school specializing in these professional activities.<sup>9</sup>

Times Square in the 1940s, as now, was the undisputed center of New York's theatrical life. From the mid-1890s, when Oscar Hammerstein, Sr. first started building theaters in the area, until 1929, when the Depression halted building activity, approximately eighty theaters were built in or near Broadway at Times Square, with the motion picture industry moving into the district in the 1910s and 1920s. Dr. Keller

...asked the Board of Education what buildings were available in the area and was told of several. One of them was the building located at 120 West 46th Street. Just then, at the end of the war, it was still being used by the U.S. Maritime Commission (Merchant Maritime)...it was very small, but it was in the Times Square area, and had originally been built as an elementary school. This a suitable location appeared to frame the concept that was growing stonger and stronger.<sup>10</sup>

The proposal for the School of Performing Arts (now the High School of the Performing Arts), "believed by educational authorities to be the first of its kind in the United States," was announced in the New York Times in June of 1946:

Because it will be in the heart of the Broadway commercial center, the school is planning to draw upon the city's leading artists, musicians and theatre personnel for cooperation and support<sup>11</sup>

An advisory commission was set up to plan the curriculum; chaired by Mrs. Samuel A. Lewisohn of the Public Education Association, the commission included

...such authorities in their fields as Helen Hayes, Brock Pemberton, Margaret Webster, Olin Downes, Walter Damrosch and Martha Graham.<sup>12</sup>

The commission set up programs for the school's three specialties: Music, Drama, and Dance; Radio was also originally intended to be included in the studies. The curriculum was then cleared by the Board of Education: half the day was to be spent on academic subjects, the other half on studio classes. The enrollment of the school

was set at about 620. Faculty were selected, auditions were held for students, and the School for Performing Arts opened in September, 1948.

From the beginning, the school has produced famous performers in all its fields. Among its graduates are actors Richard Benjamin, Dom De Luise, Rita Moreno, Liza Minelli, Al Pacino, Suzanne Pleshette, and Ben Vereen; conductor Gerard Schwarz; dancers Louis Falco, Eliot Feld, Arthur Mitchell, and Edward Villela; and singers Vinette Carroll and Priscilla Lopez.<sup>13</sup>

### Description

The High School of the Performing Arts is a five-story stone and brick structure, symmetrically massed, with a projecting central three-bay pavilion taking the form of a tower rising one story above the roofline, and a smaller projecting pavilion at either end. In its form and massing it is following a tradition of New York public school design, i.e., the use of a central tower and projecting pavilions, which had been prevalent since the 1860s, despite variations in detail occasioned by changing architectural styles. The form emphasizes the presence of the building in the streetscape, an important factor in this densely built up area. Typical of Romanesque Revival buildings, the structure incorporates a variety of facade materials: the ground floor is faced with rock-faced stone and the upper floors are brick with masonry trim.

The central projecting pavilion incorporating the main entrance contains a large Romanesque arch, flanked by two columns rising to support a balustrade above it. Within each spandrel of the arch is a roundel with a high relief portrait bust. The architrave frieze displays a curving floral motif, characteristic of the style. The entrance arch is flanked by single four-over-four double-hung windows. The second and third stories of the central pavilion consist of three double-story bays of paired double-hung six-over-six windows, square-headed at the second story and round-arched at the third. Recessed spandrels between the stories separate the windows. Round-arched drip moldings above the third story windows rest on carved corbels, again a typical Romanesque motif. A string-course sets off the fourth story, comprised of three pairs of round-arched windows with carved stone corbels and a continuous round-arched drip molding. From the stringcourse at both edges of the central pavilion rise large columns supported, beneath the string course, by carved brownstone grotesque figures. The fifth story of the central pavilion consists of five square-headed windows separated by small paired columns with Romanesque capitals; the story is topped by a shallow dentilled cornice, which wraps around the tops of the large columns extended from the fourth story; these columns terminate in carved brownstone tops. The pavilion is crowned with a mansard roof with a central dormer; the dormer contains a nine-paned bulls-eye window under a round arch supported on pilasters, which is topped by a pediment with a Romanesque-style frieze.

The recessed sections flanking the central pavilion contain secondary entrances flanked by square-headed windows with iron grilles at the ground-floor level; this level continues the rustication of the base of the central pavilion. The door and double-hung, six-over-six windows in each section are enframed with brownstone piers. The second and third stories contain six double-hung six-over-six square-headed windows in each section, three on each story, grouped as a double-story within a brownstone rectangular surround. The windows are separated by Corinthian pilasters; the spandrel separating the two stories is formed by a long rectangular panel with a brownstone floral frieze and a carved head in the center. At the fourth floor of each section are three square-headed double-hung six-over-six windows separated by Corinthian columns and set within a brownstone surround. At the roofline are dormers similar to that above the central pavilion, but with square-headed double-hung four-

over-four windows.

The ground floor elevations of the end pavilions are similar to those of the recessed sections, but with secondary entrances twice as wide. Above, in each pavilion are two pairs of square-headed double-hung six-over-six windows at the second story, and two pairs of round-arched double-hung six-over-six windows set within single arches at the third story. The arches are outlined by drip moldings with Romanesque-style brownstone corbels. The spandrels above the paired round-arched windows are adorned with a leafy frieze. At the fourth story of each pavilion are four narrow round-arched windows set beneath a drip molding with corbels. Roof dormers are similar to those of the recessed sections, but wider, with paired square-headed double-hung four-over-four windows.

### Conclusion

P.S. 67, now the High School of the Performing Arts, survives as a rare late-19th century Romanesque Revival style school building in Manhattan. It is the first school known to have been designed by C.B.J. Snyder, who, in thirty years as architect to the Board of Education, created a series of architectural monuments to public education across the city. The building's richly textured Romanesque Revival style facade stands out as a major architectural feature of the Times Square area. As the High School of the Performing Arts, the West 46th Street building has been a major cultural force, supplying many of the top professionals in the Times Square theater district that it still serves. Although current plans call for a merger with the High School of Music and Art, to create a new LaGuardia High School at Lincoln Center, the present building of the High School of the Performing Arts will remain an important cultural monument to the Times Square theater district, and to the performing arts in New York City, their nationally recognized home.

Report researched by  
William Stargard, Student Intern

Report prepared by  
Anthony W. Robins  
Senior Preservation Specialist

Report typed by  
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. "Summary," American Architect and Building News, 88 (No. 1544, 1905), 33.
2. Ibid.
3. C.B.J. Snyder, "Public School Buildings in the City of New York," in American Architect and Building News, Part I, Jan. 25, 1908.
4. For Snyder's description of the problems of New York school construction, see his four-part series, "Public School Buildings in the City of New York," in American Architect and Building News, 93 (Nos. 1674, 1675, 1680, and 1681; 1908).
5. "Summary...", 33.
6. The Board's Building Committee approved the design in October 1891; Snyder made application to the Buildings Department in 1892; construction commenced in November 1893, and was completed in July 1894. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Docket Books, NB 685-1892.
7. New York Times, October 1, 1982, p. 9.
8. P. Modelski, "How the School of Performing Arts Came to Be (An Interview With Dr. Franklin J. Keller, The Founder of the School)," unpublished typescript in the Library of the School of Performing Arts, p. 1.
9. Modelski, 4-5.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. New York Times, June 7, 1946, 21:5.
13. Ibid.
14. From a list of famous graduates kept by the school in its Library.

## 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 High School of the Performing Arts 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 High School of the Performing Arts is a rare surviving late-19th century New York school building in the Romanesque Revival style; that its richly textured Romanesque Revival facade stands out as a major architectural feature in the Times Square area; that it was the first known school designed by C.B.J. Snyder, who in thirty years as architect to the Board of Education was responsible for many of the city's most outstanding school designs; that as the High School for the Performing Arts it has been a major force in the cultural life of New York City, training many of the most famous professional performers in the entertainment industry; and that it remains an important cultural and architectural monument in the Times Square theater district and for the performing arts in 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 Landmark the High School of the Performing Arts, 120 West 46th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 998, Lot 41, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. New Building Docket Books.

New York Times, October 1, 1892, 9; June 7, 1946, 21.

Snyder, C.B.J. "Public School Buildings in New York City." American Architect and Building News, 93 (January-March 1908), 27-30, 34-41, 75-76, 83-85.

"Summary." American Architect and Building News, 88 (No. 1544, 1905), 33.





Architect: C.B.J. Snyder  
Built: 1893-94

High School of the Performing Arts  
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