

Former ELEVENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURTHOUSE (Eleventh District Municipal Court/Seventh District Magistrates' Court) (now American Theater of Actors/The Children's Museum of Manhattan), 314 West 54th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1894-96; architect John H. Duncan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1044, Lot 22.

On December 10, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse (Item No. 13). Two witnesses spoke in favor of the designation. The hearing was continued to March 11, 1986 (Item No. 10), and one witness spoke in favor of the designation. Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse, one of the few remaining nineteenth-century public buildings in the western portion of Midtown, and one of only three district courthouse buildings of that era extant in Manhattan, was designed by architect John H. Duncan and built in 1894-96 by the City of New York to house both the Eleventh District Municipal Court and the Seventh District Magistrates' Court. The courthouse, one of Duncan's few extant public buildings, was contemporaneous with his best-known commissions, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch and the General Grant National Memorial. The courthouse is a significant example of Duncan's institutional work during a period when his work achieved wide recognition and demonstrates his ability to skillfully employ the Renaissance Revival style in a small civic structure. The iconography of the terra-cotta detailing, incorporating symbols of justice and the City of New York, helps to identify the original function of the building. Authorized by legislation introduced by West Side Tammany "boss" George W. Plunkitt, the facility was popularly known as the "West Side Court"; the legal proceedings that occurred in the courthouse played an integral role in the social history of the heavily populated West Side of Manhattan.

The "West Side Court"¹

A series of judicial reforms in the 1880s expanded two lower courts of the City and led to the need for a new court building. In 1885 a second expansion of the District Court system, a lower

court of law, created the eleventh district. The Board of Police Justices, the inferior criminal court of the City which evolved into the Magistrates' Court, was enlarged in 1889 to fifteen justices. At that time the Board of Aldermen identified the location where a new court was needed: the area bounded by West 48th and West 59th Streets, Broadway and Ninth Avenue. In 1892 Senator George W. Plunkitt, a Tammany politician and recognized "boss" of the West Side, introduced a bill into the New York State Legislature authorizing the construction of a public building to house the Eleventh Judicial District Court (later the Eleventh District Municipal Court) and the Seventh District Police (later the Magistrates') Court and Prison. It appears that the Senator was instrumental in the choice of the site and architect of the new courthouse, a plum for strengthening his power base with his predominately Irish constituency. Plunkitt after 1868 served as state assemblyman, county supervisor, city alderman, and police magistrate, for a time simultaneously; he wielded considerable influence in the State Senate after his election in 1883 and played a significant role in the development of major public works and improvements in New York City.

A lot for the new courthouse was chosen on West 54th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues in the spring of 1892, recommended for its easy access and openness to light and ventilation. The Board of Estimate authorized the issuance of City bonds for \$54,549.17 in June 1893 for the purchase of this site and in August Senator Plunkitt presented plans and specifications for the building, prepared by architect John H. Duncan. The contract for construction of the courthouse was won by James D. Murphy and the Board of Estimate authorized the issuance of bonds for \$215,000 to finance construction. In May 1896 the courthouse was occupied by the Eleventh Judicial District Court; at some later date it was joined by the Seventh District Magistrates' Court. The facility became known as the "West Side Court."

The Municipal Court²

After moving to the West Side Court in 1896, the Eleventh Judicial District (Eleventh District Municipal) Court occupied the third story courtroom. Municipal Court had jurisdiction over civil actions and proceedings involving a minimal amount of compensation, such as the recovery of property and the breach of contract. Governor Charles Evans Hughes, who was soon to sit as a Supreme Court Justice, supported reform of the Municipal Courts during his term in Albany; he thought it "doubtful whether any court in the country affect[ed] the welfare of more persons."³

With the adoption of the Greater New York Charter in 1898, the district courts of the city were consolidated and reorganized as The Municipal Court of the City of New York. Tenth District Municipal Court was held at West 54th Street until 1907, when the

number of districts was again reduced, and the West Side Court became the home of the Third District. This district extended from West 14th to West 65th Streets and from Seventh and Eighth Avenues to the Hudson River (in contrast to the Tenth and Eleventh districts which had extended from West 86th to West 110th Streets, Sixth Avenue to the Hudson River).

Beginning in 1940 the Fifth District Municipal Court, which served the area between West 65th and West 110th Streets, was held at the West Side Court, joining the Third District Court; in 1946 the Fourth District Court also relocated here, serving the East Side from 14th to 59th Streets, east of Lexington Avenue. Municipal Court sessions were gradually moved after 1960 to 111 Centre Street, which became the location of the centralized Civil Court of the City of New York, created by a 1962 amendment to the New York State Constitution.

The Magistrates' Court⁴

The Magistrates' Court occupied the second story of the West Side Court and made use of the prison wing originally at the rear. The Magistrates' Court system had evolved from the former Police Justice Courts during the 1880s as need arose for additional inferior criminal courts. The Seventh District, planned for in the 1892 courthouse legislation, extended from West 27th to West 110th Streets and from Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues on the east to the Hudson River; in 1912 the northern boundary was changed to West 42nd Street.

In a Magistrates' Court the magistrate presided over cases involving misdemeanors or violations of ordinances or laws, or forwarded them to the Court of Special Sessions. In felony cases the magistrate determined if evidence warranted grand jury consideration. In 1930 a New York Times reporter presented a description of the "endless drama" in the West Side Magistrates' Court:

It is a knowing old building. Downstairs a policeman lounges against the wall detailed to keep bail bond runners from soliciting clients. Telephone booths line the hall, on one side a door opens to a waiting room, on the other to a mausoleum... An elevator more suggestive of Paris than New York will take the frail or the lazy to the second floor... To the bar come the common woes of common people. ...day after day, week after week, [there is] the demand for decision, patience, and wisdom.⁵

The West Side Court was one of the busiest Magistrates' Courts. The 18,372 arraignments in 1906 prompted discussion of creating an additional court district to relieve the West Side and Jefferson Market Courts; the first special Magistrates' Court,

Night Court for Men, was established in 1907 instead. This step also began the centralization of court functions and was followed by the creation of additional special courts. In 1924 Night Court for Men was moved to the West Side Court, occupying the same courtroom where Seventh District Court convened during the day. In 1942 the "West Side Magistrates' Court" was closed during a reorganization. Twenty years later an amendment to the New York State Constitution created the New York City Criminal Court to replace the Magistrates' Courts and Court of Special Sessions and operations were moved to 100 Centre Street.

Midtown West⁶

The West Side Court over the years served, mainly, the large and diverse portion of the densely populated West Side of Manhattan which included the residential neighborhoods of Chelsea, Hell's Kitchen, San Juan Hill, the Tenderloin, and the Upper West Side, as well as the theater district, Times Square, and the waterfront. The Hell's Kitchen neighborhood was considered at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be the most dangerous and crime-ridden area in America. The extension of the Ninth Avenue Elevated north of 30th Street in 1878 had facilitated development of the western portion of Midtown as an industrial zone with tenements housing the factory workers. At the turn of the century a majority of the residents were immigrant families; nearly three-quarters of the households were Irish and German, although no one nationality dominated the area. Black residents comprised a small proportion of the total, though the West Side was, historically, Manhattan's major black neighborhood, prior to the migration to Harlem in the first years of the twentieth century. An altercation between a resident and a policeman in August 1900 escalated into a series of street riots involving the neighborhood's black and white residents; many of those involved were arraigned at the West Side Court. This riot, and subsequent investigation of the conduct of the police, which did not resolve the concerns of the black population, together with dislocation caused by the construction of Pennsylvania Station, have been cited as major events that contributed to the exodus of blacks from the West Side.

The courthouse was sited in the midst of several non-residential buildings on the south side of West 54th Street; the choice of a side-street location was typical for a secondary civic building. To the west the Ninth Avenue Railroad depot building at 354 West 54th Street (still standing), built in 1884-91, covered nearly two-thirds of the block. The 18th Police Precinct House at 306-312 West 54th Street, was built in 1936 as a WPA project on the site of the Amity Church (1905) and Hall. Across the street from the courthouse, the rowhouses were occupied by bail bond establishments announced in large gold letters.

John H. Duncan⁷

John Hemingway (Hemenway) Duncan (1855-1929), architect of the courthouse, was a founding member of the Architectural League of New York in 1881 and established a practice in New York around that time. After studying architecture with Isaac G. Perry, who had relocated his architectural office from New York to Binghamton in 1872 and later supervised the completion of the New York State Capitol building in Albany during the 1890s, Duncan continued his education with study in New York and travel in Europe.

Duncan designed several public monuments, including the Washington Monument in Newburgh, New York (1886), the Gettysburg Irish Brigade Monument (1888), and the Trenton Battle Monument in Trenton, New Jersey (1891). His reputation in this field was enhanced in the early 1890s by his competition-winning designs for two imposing neo-classical New York City monuments: the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn (1889-92) and the General Grant National Memorial (1891-97), both designated New York City Landmarks.

Duncan enjoyed a clientele of affluent New Yorkers who commissioned city and country residences. Examples of his town houses, built from the mid-1880s through the 1910s, are located within the Upper East Side, Metropolitan Museum, Central Park West-West 73rd-74th Street, and Central Park West-West 76th Street Historic Districts. Duncan worked in a variety of contemporary revival styles, though predominantly in a neo-classical vein, in which an original and unexpected use of form or material often occurred.

Duncan's non-residential buildings are a lesser-known aspect of his work. Institutional commissions included the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society's Orphan Asylum at 150th Street and Broadway (1892; no longer extant), the former Eleventh Judicial District Court (1894-96), and a club, now used as a school, at 353 West 17th Street (1902). Commercial buildings appear to have constituted a larger proportion of his practice after 1900. Duncan's Knox Building (1901-02) is considered one of the finest Beaux-Arts style commercial buildings in New York City and has been designated a New York City Landmark. His later work included the two commercial/office buildings at 655 and 659-663 Fifth Avenue (1912) and a new facade for the former Lord and Taylor store at 895-899 Broadway (1914) in the Ladies' Mile Historic District. The latter project was executed for the Goelet Estate, for which Duncan handled architectural matters during the 1910s and 1920s.

The Design of the Courthouse⁸

The West Side Court was one of a diverse group of nineteenth-century district courthouses that were built or acquired by the city as needed. Several Municipal District Courts, for which detention cells were not needed, were housed in rented space; the Municipal Courthouse at 128 Prince Street was a quite modest building, almost residential in scale. Some courthouses had been built for other purposes, including the Municipal Courthouse at 154 Clinton Street which appears to have been built as a fire house and the Second District Court House at 264-266 Madison Street which was the former school of the Church of St. Mary. Other mid-nineteenth-century court buildings, including the City Magistrates' Court at 151-153 East 57th Street, the Third District Magistrates' (Essex Market) Court (1856) at 69 Essex Street, and the Children's Court at 66 Third Avenue presented a strong civic presence with neo-classical features. The more impressive typical courthouse elements, the classical portico, colonnade and dome, were usually reserved for the larger municipal, state, and federal court buildings. The Jefferson Market Courthouse (1874-77, Frederick Clarke Withers & Calvert Vaux) within the Greenwich Village Historic District, and the Harlem Municipal Building and Courthouse (1891-92, Thom & Wilson), a designated New York City Landmark, were built in picturesque Victorian styles with prominent towers which were highly visible due to their corner sites.

The design John Duncan presented in 1894 for the West Side court maintained the traditions of both the classically-detailed and tower-crowned courthouses. By the mid-1890s the Renaissance Revival style had become quite popular due to the influence of the principles of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Popularized by the firm of McKim, Mead & White, the use of Italian Renaissance prototypes, especially the palazzo, provided forms with a sense of authority, order, and urbanity. Duncan's three-bay Renaissance Revival style courthouse achieved a sense of formality and civic presence, as well as originality, through the use of classical features. A rusticated stone palazzo-inspired base supports the two brick upper stories where the central "frontispiece," composed of tripartite window groups, enframed by Corinthian order terra-cotta pilasters and columns, denotes the location of the two courtrooms. Originally, a small central tower with an open belfry on a copper-sheathed battered base extended from the copper-clad mansard roof and was screened by a pedimented dormer inserted between a broken-scroll pediment.

The facility, as originally built, included the courthouse and an adjoining five-story prison which faced West 53rd Street (no longer standing). The unusual interior plan of the courthouse insulated the judges' and jurors' chambers from the courtrooms by placing them in a six-story administrative wing separated by a

circular stairwell surrounding an elevator. Janitor's quarters were located in a separate four-story wing along the east lot line. A major rehabilitation of the West Side Court was undertaken in 1928. To provide space for an additional Municipal Court room, the tower and mansard roof were removed, and a flat-roofed attic story, set back from the facade, was constructed. Two circular windows on the third story were replaced with rectangular windows in molded surrounds.

Description⁹

The former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse occupies a mid-block site on the south side of West 54th Street that extends to West 53rd Street. The steel-frame structure, faced with tan brick laid in running bond above a rusticated granite base on the front facade, is U-shaped with wings extending to the rear. The front block has three double-height stories, with a recessed tan brick single-height top story (added in 1928) while the red brick rear wings have four and six single-height stories. A granite wall along West 53rd Street encloses the original prison yard.

The granite-sheathed base is pierced by three large round-arched openings with vousoirs which are flanked by two smaller rectangular service doors; foliated cartouches in T-shaped panels fill the spandrels and support a panel (now blank) just below a projecting band course. Terra-cotta ornamentation enriches a prominent projecting Corinthian order "frontispiece" on the second and third stories, composed of tripartite window groups, the upper one of which suggests a Palladian window. Decorative detailing includes banded and fluted engaged columns, pilasters of fasces and bellflower design, a panel with the inscription "XI Judicial Dist. Court," and various motifs symbolic of justice and the City of New York. The second and third stories have single windows on either side of the frontispiece. Those on the second story have broken pediments supported by scroll brackets and are ornamented by cartouches with beavers. The third-story side windows (installed in 1928) are set within simple molded surrounds with corbeled sills. The cornice of the building, above a frieze with a sword-of-justice motif, is embellished by dentils and modillions. A projecting central section of the parapet wall has three panels with foliated cartouches separated by posts with console brackets, and is flanked by balustrades.

Subsequent History¹⁰

After the centralization of the Magistrates' and Municipal courts, several of the city-owned courthouses were demolished. However, there has continued to be a demand for the use of space in the West Side Court building. The area vacated by the Magistrates' Court was leased from 1944-1961 by the General Services Administration for the use of the Navy Shore Patrol and, later, the Armed Services Police Department, who valued the site

for the detention cells and location adjacent to the Police Precinct House. Within six months after the West Side Court was relinquished by the Municipal Court in 1962, the West Side YMCA Clinton Youth Center occupied the building. Upon the negotiation of a long-term lease in 1968, the rear prison wing was demolished in conjunction with a rehabilitation of the facility.

In 1979 the 42nd Street Local Development Corporation obtained a ten-year lease on the building and subleased it to two cultural institutions. The "Court House Cultural Center" has been used since that time by the American Theater of Actors, a non-profit theater company dedicated to the work of new American playwrights and actors, which has converted the two large former courtrooms into theaters. The Children's Museum of New York, another non-profit institution, has used both the ground story as an exhibition area, and the sixth floor of the administrative wing of the building.

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NOTES

1. The New York City courts often referred to as the "City" or "Municipal" courts constituted the First District of the New York State county court system. The First and Second Divisions of the Magistrates' Court system were based on New York and Kings counties. Since the Manhattan courts were historically perceived and referred to as Municipal Courts, they will be referred to as such in this document. This section was based on the following sources concerning the development of the municipal court system: Laws of the State of New York Passed at the 107th Session of the Legislature, Jan. 1 - May 16, 1884 (Albany, 1884); Laws of the State of New York passed by the 112th Session of the Legislature, Jan. 1 - May 16, 1889 (Albany, 1889).

Plunkitt introduced the bills that provided for outlying parks of New York City, the Harlem River Speedway, the Washington Bridge, the 155th Street Viaduct, the grading of Eighth Avenue north of 57th Street, the Harlem Courthouse, and additions to the Museum of Natural History. Plunkitt was known for coining the phrase "honest graft," which he defined as seeing opportunities and taking them, such as

purchasing land in advance of public improvements and reselling it to the city at an increased value. Biographical sources on Plunkitt include Riordan and NYT articles at the time of his death in 1924.

Information on the authorization and construction of the courthouse was found in: Laws of the State of New York passed by the 115th Session of the Legislature, Jan. 5-April 21, 1892 (Albany, 1892), Chapter 43, p. 65-69; New York City, Commission of the Sinking Fund, Proceedings, March 31, 1892, p. 394; New York City, Board of Estimate and Apportionment, Proceedings, June 19, 1893, p. 276; August 22, 1893, p. 344; Jan. 18, 1894, p. 2; New York City, Department of Public Works, Quarterly Report (Mar. 31, 1895), p. 3, 9; and 1896 Annual Report, p. 18. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1044, Lot 22. NB 718-94.

2. For a general history of the Municipal Court system, see: the Langbein Brothers, Lauer, and Chester. The Municipal Court also heard cases involving personal injury or damage to property, action for a fine or penalty, action on a bond or surety bond, action on a bastardy or abandonment bond, and fraud or deceit in a sale or exchange of property. The maximum amount of recovery in Municipal Court was \$500 until 1915, when the amount was raised to \$1,000. The boundaries of the Municipal Court districts were originally based on ward divisions and can be found in the references noted above. Information on the location of the district Municipal Courts can be found in Division of Real Property files, Annual Reports for the Municipal Court of the City of New York, and The City of New York Official Directory.
3. Lauer, 50.
4. Sources for the history and district boundaries of the Magistrates' Courts include: Moley, Chester, Cobb, Annual Reports for the Board of City Magistrates, and NYT articles concerning the closing and consolidation of the courts. The magistrate also had the power to administer oaths, celebrate marriages, revoke or suspend motor vehicle licenses, and issue summonses and warrants.
5. Mildred Adams, "Endless Drama of Magistrates' Court," NYT, Feb. 2, 1930, Section V, p. 6.
6. See Cartwright for a detailed characterization of the West Side. The black neighborhood in Midtown and the disturbance in August 1900 are described in Anderson. The NYT reported daily in August 1900 on the riot and aftermath and Aug. 17, 1900, p. 2, documents the role of the West Side Court; Feb. 2, 1930 describes the bail bond offices.

7. This section was based on information in several LPC Designation Reports, A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City, 677-678; John H. Duncan obituaries in New International Yearbook for the Year 1929 and the NYT; "John Hemingway Duncan," in Binghamton and Broome County, New York, A History, 267; and the John H. Duncan Diary from Oct. 6, 1885 to October 6, 1886. For additional information on Duncan's residential work see LPC designation reports.
8. See the designation reports for information on the Jefferson Market Courthouse and the Harlem Courthouse. Original elevation and first floor plan drawings for the Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse remain on file in the Department of Buildings, Block 1044, Lot 22, NB 718-94. A photograph in Real Estate Owned by the City of New York under the Jurisdiction of the Presidents of the Boroughs documents that the tower was built; many of the Municipal and Magistrates' Courts are also pictured in this volume. At the time of a well-publicized leak in the roof, the Chief Magistrate announced that major changes were planned for the West Side court; see NYT, Oct. 19, 1927, and ALT 1804-27 in the Department of Buildings records.
9. See LPC file for a more detailed description of building conditions at the time of designation.
10. The Children's Court at 66 Third Avenue was demolished in 1916, the City Magistrates' Court at 151-153 East 57th Street was demolished in 1955, and during the 1960s the Municipal Court Houses at 128 Prince Street and 154 Clinton Street were razed. The La Guardia Houses occupy the former site of the Second District Court House at 264-266 Madison Street. Information on the recent use of the West Side Court facility can be found in the files of the Division of Real Property.

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 former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse 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, that the former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse, popularly known as the West Side Court, was built in 1894-96 to house the Eleventh District Municipal Court and the Seventh District Magistrates' Court and continued to function as a courthouse until 1960; that it was designed by John H. Duncan, a New York City architect prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for his residences and public structures, including the General Grant National Monument and the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch; that this courthouse is a significant example of Duncan's institutional work during a period when his work achieved wide recognition and demonstrates his ability to skillfully employ the Renaissance Revival style in a small civic structure located on a mid-block site; that the iconography of the terra-cotta detailing incorporating symbols of justice and the City of New York helps to identify the original function of the building; that the building is one of only three remaining nineteenth-century district courthouses built by the City of New York in Manhattan for that purpose; that the courthouse, authorized by legislation introduced by Tammany "boss" George W. Plunkitt, played an integral role in the social and legal history of the heavily populated West Side of Manhattan when it served the neighborhoods of Times Square, Chelsea, the Tenderloin, Hell's Kitchen, San Juan Hill and the Upper West Side; and that the courthouse is one of the few nineteenth-century civic buildings remaining in the western section of Midtown Manhattan and has continued to serve the community as the site of service and cultural institutions.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the city of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the former Eleventh Judicial District Courthouse, 314 West 54th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1044, Lot 22, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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