

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 14, 1978, Designation List 120
LP-1010

NO. 8 THOMAS STREET BUILDING, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1875-76; architect J. Morgan Slade.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 151, Lot 27.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the No. 8 Thomas Street Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Described by the prominent architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock as "one of the handsomest specimens of High Victorian Gothic architecture which survives in the city,"¹ the building at 8 Thomas Street was built in 1875-76 from the designs of a gifted young architect, Jarvis Morgan Slade (1852-1882). Slade was commissioned through the New York Real Estate Association to design a new store for the soap manufacturing firm of David S. Brown Company which had selected the site located on the new extension of Thomas Street. Characterized by a red brick facade with contrasting stone arcades adorned with banded voussoirs, the style of the building is clearly derived from the Venetian Gothic mode made popular by the English writer and critic John Ruskin (1819-1900). Although New York once boasted several brilliant examples of this style which was in use from about 1865 to 1875, few exist today. In addition, the building is an interesting reminder of the first large-scale commercial development of the area following the destruction of the grounds of the New York Hospital which had occupied the site between Broadway, Duane, Church, and Worth since 1773.

In 1771 Lord Dunmore granted a charter for the establishment of The Society of the Hospital in the City of New York, the first public hospital in the city. Five acres of land on the west side of Broadway, originally part of Anthony Rutgers' farm, were set aside and after delays from fire and the Revolutionary War, an imposing H-plan Georgian building "constructed of gray stone, with a slated roof"² and cupola was built on the site. Until the middle of the 19th century, the hospital complex with its tall elm trees and flower gardens was set apart from the developments along Broadway because of its location on a higher elevation, maintained by a retaining wall. In the late 1830s the growth of the city initiated the area's transformation from a residential to a commercial district. By 1850 one prominent New Yorker described the change as a "mania for converting Broadway into a street of shops."³ The growth in the area around the hospital was more particularly linked to a fire in 1835 which drove the textile merchants out of lower Pearl Street. These merchants began to relocate in the Worth Street area, and by 1861 it contained the highest concentration of mill-agency representatives in the country. Here the textile industry sold its cloth in the boom years leading to the Civil War.

During the years prior to the War, the financing of the hospital had become increasingly difficult, and an attempt was made to save the venerable institution by selling many valuable lots along Broadway. When this plan proved insufficient, several of the hospital buildings were leased. Finally in 1869 the main building was demolished when Thomas Street was extended through the grounds. The hospital had already decided to move to a new location between 14th and 15th Streets. The old site was divided into fifty parcels, and the ground lease was auctioned off. It was purchased by the New York Real Estate Association, an organization set up by textile merchants to secure the area for their interests. The property contributed revenue for the maintenance of New York Hospital until 1948 when the land titles were finally sold to the textile firms.

Many other merchants followed the textile agents into the newly developed area. The David S. Brown Company had been in business since 1808 when it began as a tallow chandlery. By the 1870's this well-established firm, which advertised "Brown's Barber Soap" and "David's Prize Soap," was among the most successful producers of laundry and toilet soaps. Two manufacturing facilities, one on Chrystie Street and one on First Avenue, produced the products which were displayed in a showroom at 299 Broadway. The business was managed through the company office at Peck Slip. The business, no doubt, was growing, and in 1875 twenty-two year old architect, J. Morgan Slade, produced his designs for a new store, one of his earliest commissions as an independent designer.

Trained in the office of architect Edward H. Kendall, a Beaux-Arts taught designer, Slade died in 1882 when he was only thirty years old. The Thomas Street store was an early example of the fine commercial architecture which soon made Slade's reputation. Slade is known to have designed about twenty buildings in the downtown New York commercial district; about twelve survive. Five of his commercial structures can be found in the SoHo - Cast Iron Historic District but these generally reflect French, rather than English, influence. Following Slade's death his parents gave his architectural library, which included many books on French architecture, as a memorial to the Apprentices Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York. The catalogue of this library survives, and although it reveals that the bulk of the books was collected after 1875, it demonstrates his areas of interest.

J. Morgan Slade's store at 8 Thomas Street is a narrow five-story building, three bays wide, and ornamented with a variety of colors and patterns. The ground floor retains the original cast-iron store front with trabeated bays separated by slender iron colonnettes and flanked by coursed piers, the motif of which is carried into the brickwork of the remaining stories. Surmounted by a transom, the central entrance is flanked by a plate glass display window and a panelled delivery door. Above this base rise three series of diminishing arcades interspersed with brick laid alternately in horizontal and diagonal courses. The arcades with their banded voussoirs of light and dark stone are supported by freestanding columns with smooth shafts and stylized Ionic capitals. Ruskin called for arches to be "carried on true shafts with bases and capitals." 4 These insured the finest Gothic style. Following the best of the

English architectural tradition of the 1860s, the two principal floors exhibit round arches with pointed extrados. These three-bay units are surmounted by a smaller six-part arcade which supports consoles and a galvanized iron cornice. The building is crowned by a brick gable, pierced by an oculus with radiating stone surround. The gable partially conceals the mansard roof. Slade enthusiastically used the abstract patterns which Ruskin recommended for architectural expression. The zigzag which Ruskin saw as a stylized wave appears in various forms. The extrados at the third floor are not pointed arches but instead have an angular pattern, the motion of which is reinforced by the diagonally laid brickwork into which they are set. This theme is echoed in the stonework above the fourth story arcade and in the "mousetooth" brickwork in the cornice. Everywhere the motion of the angle is played against the circle--according to Ruskin, the sign of perfect rest. ⁵

Slade's use of the Venetian "palazzo" theme is within the tradition of both English and American architecture. Sir Charles Barry had first introduced the palazzo type into English urban architecture in the 1830s; however, many English Gothic Revival enthusiasts continued to try to fit their "morally superior" rural designs into the urban fabric. Around 1850 the time was ripe for a transformation of the ecclesiastically-derived Gothic Revival style. The needs of urban architecture gradually induced the acceptance of both the round arch and Continental motifs. The well-known Gothic Revival master G. E. Street lauded J. W. Wild's design of St. Martin's Northern Schools (1849) which was executed in brick and was derived from an Italian Gothic theme. Street commended the use of brick--which would increase following the lifting of the English brick tax in 1850--and noted that the Italian Gothic style would work well for commercial designs. At this time John Ruskin published his influential books, The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) and The Stones of Venice (1851, 1863) which praised the decorative mode of Venetian Gothic architecture. Two British architects, Thomas N. Deane and Benjamin Woodward, took the words of Ruskin to heart, and Slade undoubtedly drew ideas from their much-publicized designs. In particular Deane's five-story design for the Crown Life Office in London included round arched windows with banded stone voussoirs and pointed extrados. This Venetian Gothic design with its diminutive gallery was published in the Building News. ⁶ Slade was familiar with this periodical which he subscribed to in the 1870s.

Closer to home, Slade must certainly have been familiar with the work in New York of such architects as J. Wrey Mould, Frederick C. Withers, and E. B. Wight, all of whom worked in the pointed-arch, Venetian Gothic mode at one time or another. Wight's National Academy of Design was perhaps the best-known building in New York when it was completed in 1865, and, like so many other examples of this High Victorian Gothic style, was published in the New-York Sketchbook of Architecture. ⁷ Such decorative elements as patterned brickwork, banded stone voussoirs, round arches with pointed extrados, arcades, and gables pierced with a bull's eye appeared in the works of designers such as Cady, Eldlitz, Richardson, Robertson, and W. A. Potter. All were published in the New-York Sketchbook during the three years of its existence, and Slade owned all three volumes.

Today the building at 8 Thomas Street with its richly patterned facade remains as almost a singular reminder of the strong influence of John Ruskin's writings on the architecture of New York from about 1865 to 1875. In addition, this early work of architect J. Morgan Slade serves as an important embellishment to the busy district in which it is located. The ground floor and basement now house a restaurant while living lofts are located in the upper stories.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ellen W. Kramer to Morrison Heckscher, 3 January 1972, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.
2. I.N. Phelps Stokes, Iconography of Manhattan Island, V (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), p. 1672.
3. Ellen W. Kramer, "Contemporary Descriptions of New York City and its Public Architecture ca. 1850," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XXVII (December 1968), p. 269.
4. John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice (New York: Hill and Warg, 1966) p. 188.
5. Ruskin, p. 105.
6. The Building News, XIII (1866), pp. 184 - 185:
see also The Building News (July 1858), p. 728.
7. New York Sketch-Book of Architecture (Boston: Osgood, 1874 - 1876).

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 No. 8 Thomas Street 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 Number 8 Thomas Street Building is a rare and exceptionally handsome example of High Victorian Gothic architecture to survive in the city, that it was designed by the talented young architect Jarvis Morgan Slade in accordance with the principles espoused by the influential English critic John Ruskin, that the design features a delicate cast-iron storefront and a red brick facade with contrasting stone detail following Victorian Gothic prototypes, that it was built as a store for David S. Brown Company, a soap manufacturing firm, and as such is a reminder of the first large-scale commercial development in the area following the Civil War, and that it remains an important embellishment in the Civic Center area.

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 No. 8 Thomas Street Building, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 151, Lot 27, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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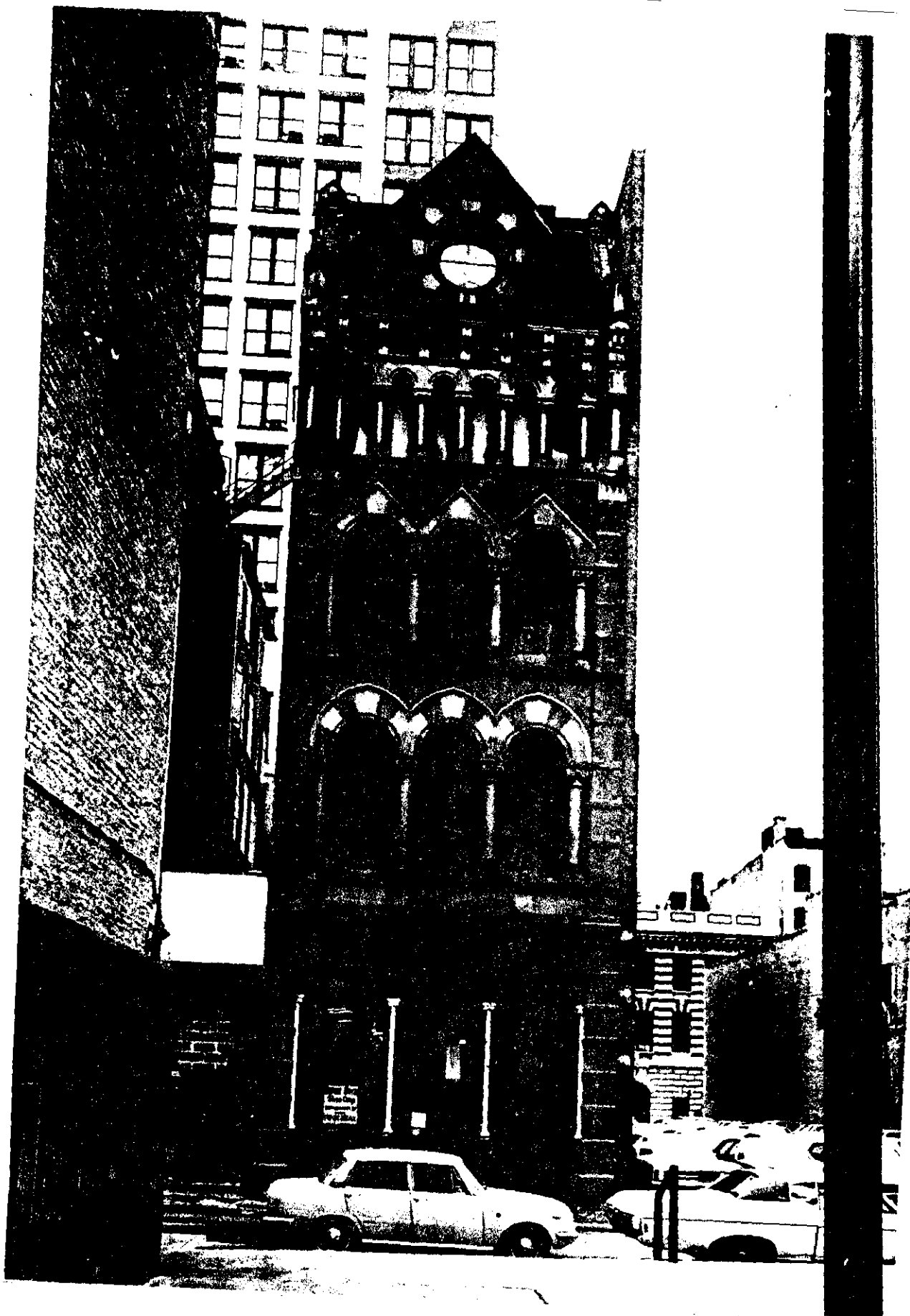
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8 THOMAS STREET
J.M. Slade

MANHATTAN
Built 1875-76

Credit: Landmarks Preservation Commission