

THE HARLEM COURTHOUSE, 170 East 121st Street, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1891, completed 1893; architects Thom & Wilson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1769, Lot 45.

On June 14, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Harlem Courthouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 29). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Of the many historic buildings erected in Harlem around the turn of the Century and still extant, the Harlem Courthouse is one of the most significant and impressive. Begun in 1891 and completed in 1893, it is handsomely picturesque. Essentially Romanesque Revival in style with romantic Victorian Gothic overtones, the building achieves much of its beauty by a judicious use of colored brick, stone and terra-cotta, producing a play of architectural shapes and forms of striking effect.

The north and west elevations are almost symmetrical and lead up to an imposing corner tower at the intersection of East 121st Street and Sylvan Place. This round tower is surmounted by a most interesting octagonal belfry rising considerably above the main mass of the four-storied structure. Each side of the octagonal section is crowned by a steep gable, consisting of a semi-circular arch enclosing a decorated panel enframed with moldings and flanked by slender engaged columns. Two of the arches enframe clocks; the others are circular windows. The columns consisting of engaged shafts with capitals and bases rest on the ledge of the cornice which is enriched by small curved projections above massive corbels. Perched on each side of the eight capitals, in the form of a gargoyle, is a handsomely carved animal's head. Rising above this unusual octagonal architectural composition and unifying these elements is a low copper covered spire.

Of particular interest in the north elevation is the main entrance set in a rusticated all granite base. The double doors are set within a graceful archway supported by free standing columns flanked by wide, banded pilasters. The spandrels of the arch are decorated with carved figures of cherubs holding scrolls. The frieze of the entablature displays foliate ornament, and its classic cornice is surmounted by a low balustrade.

The dominant feature of both the north and west facades is a five story gabled section which projects slightly forward from the rest of the elevation. Centered in each of these sections at ground floor level is a truck entrance with handsome panelled doors. These doorways are framed symmetrically by large rectangular windows with metal grilles. Above them on the second floor and resting on a wide band course are four arched windows set in deep reveals and separated by banded pilasters with engaged column shafts. The third floor or courtroom level above them is emphasized by large two-story arched windows flanked by narrow-arched windows. All of these windows are separated by handsome pilasters and column shafts, and the three arches are crowned by handsomely enriched moldings. These window units rest on a wide horizontal band course containing a row of fluted brackets. Steep gables, topped with bold finials, crown these forward-projected sections and rise above the steep roof with attic dormers.

Throughout the building the red brick with its water struck finish contrasts pleasingly with the bluestone band courses accenting the principal story heights. The drip moldings over the arches of the other windows, the decorative terra-cotta panels set in the walls, and the copper roof all lend contrast to the building and contribute to its impressive quality.

The Harlem Courthouse housed one of the many Municipal and Police Magistrates Courts that once existed in our City. Its function as a courthouse was terminated in 1961, under the court merger program of 1962. Once known as the Fifth District Prison, in the City organization, it had temporary detention facilities to hold prisoners while in transit to other jails and for the retention of material witnesses who were held while a trial was in session. This building is now occupied by units of the Department of Air Pollution Control, the Sanitation Department and the Parole Board. Its history covers an interesting sequence of uses changing from one City agency to another.

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 Harlem 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, The Harlem Courthouse is an excellent example of Romanesque Revival architecture, that it is both picturesque and striking in appearance, and that it makes a significant contribution to the architectural beauty of the community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 Harlem Courthouse, 170 East 121st Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1769, Lot 45, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.