

OCT 6 1989

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 25, 1967, Number 3
LP-0470

CHURCH OF THE TRANSFIGURATION (The Little Church around the Corner), 1 East
29th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1849; 2nd story (now Guild Hall)
added 1852, Lich-gate added 1896, Lady Chapel added 1906, Mortuary Chapel
added 1908.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 859, Lot 6.

On December 13, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Church of the Transfiguration and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 16). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation, and in a letter to the Commission the Rector of the Church, The Rev. Orin A. Griesmyer, D.D., favored the proposed designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Few architectural works in this City tell more eloquently the story of the changing face of New York during the past one hundred years, than does this charming enclave known as The Little Church Around the Corner. Located in the shadow of the Empire State Building, and almost hidden to view by the surrounding tall buildings, this modest Gothic Revival church stands serenely in its quiet garden, fenced off from the busy street. Built of warm red brick and brownstone trim, its picturesque character and human scale, reminiscent of an English village church, make it look like a stage set standing in the heart of Manhattan. Nothing could be more fitting as it has been known for many years as the actors' church.

To reach the Church, one passes through the lich-gate, a small almost square structure carried on stone Gothic arches supporting the pyramidal-shaped, nubby, green copper roof. A semicircular path leads through the garden to the main entrance, set in the Church tower. The tower is reinforced at the corners by diagonally placed, stepped buttresses. Above the doorway, resting on horizontal band course are three lancet windows and over each a dripstone (head mold), repeated again above the single-arched window of the third tier. The tower is crowned by a small, slightly concave, peaked roof edged with free-standing Gothic ornament of metal. The four sides of the little roof each contain a small louvered dormer, and the roof curves gracefully upward to a point, surmounted by a cross. At the base of the tower and to the left are the three arched windows of the Lady Chapel.

From the long line of the roof, to the right of the tower, it is evident that this is the main body of the Church. The low wall of this section is divided by squat buttresses into four sections of unequal size and contains a varied arrangement of windows. The roof slopes gently over the side aisles and then rises at a steeper angle to the ridge above the nave. Small dormers serve as clerestory windows above the nave. The transept extends south from the nave ending in a small apse, and in the west wall two tall stained glass windows cut through the eaves. In the southwest corner of the transept a gabled projection with handsomely carved double doors forms a second entrance to the Church. The angle where the nave and transept meet has been extended outward to incorporate an octagonal tower, containing St. Joseph's Mortuary Chapel. This tower has on its wide face two tiers of windows, the upper ones have louvers, the lower tier stained glass. The largest window on the wide face of the tower serves as a reredos for the chapel altar. The eight sided gray slate roof of the tower rises to a ridge topped by a handsome iron grill and a cross.

History of the Church

The original one story building of the Church was completed in 1849. The name of the architect is unknown as are those for the subsequent additions and alterations, which began in 1852, giving the Church the rambling picturesque appearance that it has today. In 1854 the main tower, the gift of a parishioner was erected and the transept was built, being further extended in 1861. The handsome cast iron fence was a gift of the congregation in 1856. The Lady Chapel was constructed in 1906, and St. Joseph's Mortuary Chapel in 1908.

In 1896 Mrs. Franklin Hughes Delano (whose grandnephew was Franklin Delano Roosevelt) presented the lich-gate. Designed by the architect Frederick C. Withers, it is one of the most distinguished architectural features of the church. The original function of a lich-gate, more common in England than in the United States, was to provide a covered resting place at the entrance of the churchyard where the pallbearers could rest the coffin while awaiting the arrival of the priest. Lich is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning body or corpse. In 1920 the lich-gate with the church in the background served as a backdrop for the finale of Ziegfeld's musical comedy hit "Sally".

Since 1870 the Church of the Transfiguration has been widely known as The Little Church Around the Corner. Joseph Jefferson, the well-known American actor, had called at another church to arrange for the funeral of an actor friend. The minister said he would be unable to conduct the funeral service for the actor. Jefferson asked to be directed to another church, and the minister replied, "There is a little church around the corner where it might be done". Under this name the Church has become famous in verse, song, pictures and plays, and the bond between the church and the arts continued to grow. Dion Boucicault, O. Henry and Edwin Booth were buried from here. Sir Henry Irving, Dame Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt attended services. There are memorial windows to some of America's most distinguished actors: Richard Mansfield, Joseph Jefferson, John Drew and Edwin Booth whose window was designed by the painter John LaFarge. A bronze plaque by the sculptor Paulanship honors Otis Skinner. Another memorial tablet is a tribute to three generations of the Benet family, distinguished in arts and letters. The Church's deep shadowed interior has rightly been described as "a storehouse of assorted belongings".

In 1923 the Episcopal Actor's Guild (a non-denominational membership group despite its name) set up headquarters in the second floor room with the large dormer windows to the left of the tower. This was the first addition to the original church in 1852, thus continuing to the present day the association between Church and stage which Joseph Jefferson first established nearly one hundred years ago.

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 Church of the Transfiguration 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 Church of the Transfiguration is a charming example of the Gothic Revival style, that historically it is one of the best known churches in New York, that it has been linked to the culture of the country and the City for over one hundred and eighteen years and that, through its history and its tradition, it has become inseparably associated with the theatre and the arts.

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 Church of the Transfiguration (The Little Church Around the Corner), 1 East 29th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 859, Lot 6, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.