

Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 14, 1976, Number 4
LP-0934

SAINT CECILIA'S CONVENT, 112 East 106th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed
1907; architects Neville & Bagge.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1633, Lot 66.

On July 13, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Saint Cecilia's Convent and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Saint Cecilia's Convent is in the heart of that section of East Harlem known as "El Barrio." The convent building was altered to its present appearance by Neville & Bagge in 1907. The Convent of Saint Cecilia and the church, both in the Romanesque Revival style, gracefully complement each other and the surrounding area.

Harlem as a community traces its origins back to the first Dutch settlers of 1658 who named it "New Haarlem". From the mid to late 19th century the character of Harlem changed from rural to suburban. By the 1890s the Interboro Rapid Transit Railroad extended its lines to connect Harlem with New York City which gave impetus to the urban expansion and to the development of this area. In the early 1900s Harlem became available to black residents, but East Harlem, containing the largest Italian and Russian Jewish communities in New York City as well as an Irish community, regarded itself as a separate district. East Harlem, from 96th Street to 125th Street and east of Madison Avenue, remained a stable area well into the 1920s when there was an influx of Hispanic nationals from Latin America. These nationals settled around the older Puerto Rican community between Fifth and Lexington Avenues from 100th to 120th Streets known as "El Barrio", "The District", or "The Neighborhood". "El Barrio" consequently spread northward to Black Harlem and southward to Yorkville, replacing all but a few of the old Italian communities which had earlier characterized East Harlem.

The Very Reverend Hugh Flattery became the first pastor of Saint Cecilia's Church in 1873. Shortly thereafter he converted the Old Red House at 105th Street, formerly a resort hotel, into a parochial residence for the use of the church. In 1879 Reverend Flattery died and was succeeded by the Very Reverend Monsignor William P. Flannelly. Father Flannelly purchased property on 106th Street for construction of the parish church in 1881 from Addison and Mary Brown. The "Regina Angelorum" was later built on a portion of the property. Reverend Michael J. Phelan known throughout the diocese as "The Builder of Churches" was named pastor of Saint Cecilia's parish in 1884 after the untimely death of Father Flannelly. Father Phelan remained pastor for the next thirty-eight years until 1922. Under his guidance and perseverance with a "constitution to which hard work is the only exercise," he supervised the construction of Saint Cecilia's Church, completed in 1887, and of Saint Cecilia's School, completed in 1896.

Originally Saint Cecilia's Convent was two separate buildings. No. 112-114 East 106th Street was built in 1883-84 as a four-family tenement house which was sold in June, 1903, by William P. and Janet A. O'Connor to the Institution of Mercy. No. 116-118 East 106th Street was built as a two-story school house for Father Phelan of Saint Cecilia's in 1885-86 and expanded to four stories in 1887. It was not until 1906 that the Institution of Mercy hired the architectural firm of Neville & Bagge to join the two buildings behind a unified facade which was later called the "Regina Angelorum." At that time the building had one central entrance which led internally to two separate sections. The 116-118 East 106th Street section became the home for working girls which could house 125 young women and was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy. The 112-114 East 106th Street section became the convent of the Sisters of Mercy, who not only supervised the home for working girls but also taught at the parish school. The building continued to serve two functions until the late 1930s when the home for working girls ceased operation, leaving only the Sisters of Mercy in the building. In November, 1956, the Sisters of Atonement moved into 118 East 106th Street and are

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presently operating a day care center on the first floor which includes a day nursery and kindergarten, while the rest of the building is used as living quarters for the Sisters.

The architectural firm of Neville & Bagge designed the convent building in a simplified version of the Romanesque Revival style in order to harmonize it with Saint Cecilia's Church. The firm designed numerous commercial and residential structures throughout Manhattan, ranging in style from a neo-Italian Renaissance building at No. 72 Hamilton Terrace to the exuberant Beaux-Arts row-houses on West 141st Street in the Hamilton Heights Historic District.

The convent, as designed by Neville & Bagge, is four stories high above a basement and its almost symmetrical facade successfully unites two separate buildings visually. This apparent symmetry is only altered by the minor fact that there are six windows to the right of the central tier of windows and seven to the left, plus the existence of a diagonal slice of wall at the eastern end which contains a single tier of windows.

The main entrance at 112 East 106th Street consists of a three-centered arched doorway flanked by fluted Ionic pilasters which support a simple entablature. The front steps have handsome iron handrailings with vertical spindles and newel posts capped by balls. The central tier of windows above this entrance is the widest in the front facade, permitting them all to have sidelights. A bandcourse of light brown stone extends across the buildings at stoop level, setting off the first floor from the basement. The basement windows with smooth-faced lintels are protected by an elegant iron fence of Gothic design with fleur-de-lis ornament at the areaway.

Beneath each of the arched windows of the first floor is a brick panel with square terra-cotta insert containing an intertwined motif surrounding a stylized flower. Above these panels a horizontal cyma recta molding extends across the building, slightly projected at each window to form a sill. The window arches are trimmed with radial brick and terra-cotta drip-moldings while the spandrels above them are studded with molded-brick pellets. A pair of pellet moldings at the height of the entranceway entablature form a bandcourse extending across the front. The second floor windows, although square headed, repeat the sill treatment of the first floor and are capped by a continuous bandcourse of smooth brownstone which serves also as lintels. Several of these windows are of stained glass. Above the continuous lintel of the second floor two pellet moldings again form a bandcourse. The window sills at the third floor, similar to those below, serve windows with radial brick arches trimmed with brick drip-moldings. At the fourth floor arched windows have simple stone sills and are set above a continuous pellet molding. Here the arches, similar to those at the third floor, spring from deep corbel blocks of brick set on ones of terra cotta. The brick wall above the arches is studded with pellets in molded brick like that of the first floor.

A low brick parapet is set on a shallow corbel and is crowned by a deeper corbel supporting the coping. Above the central tier of wide windows three pilasters are set on brick corbels and are linked by a low pediment and flanked by curvilinear shoulders. A simple religious cross crowns the center pilaster.

Saint Cecilia's Convent has served the needs of the East Harlem community since it was completed in 1907. A handsome Romanesque Revival structure, it enhances the streetscape and the surrounding area.

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 Saint Cecilia's Convent 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, Saint Cecilia's Convent is a handsome Romanesque Revival building, that molded brick and terra cotta are skillfully used to create ornamental detail, that it makes a significant contribution to the quality of the streetscape, and that it was built to serve the needs of the East Harlem community and continues to do so.

SAINT CECILIA'S CONVENT, 112 East 106th Street, Borough of Manhattan.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 Saint Cecilia's Convent, 112 East 106th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1633, Lot 66, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.