



NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Robert B. Tierney
Chairman

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2011
No. 11-12

GRAND CONCOURSE HISTORIC DISTRICT AND FOUR INDIVIDUAL LANDMARKS PROTECTED

Section of Famed Bronx Boulevard Forms Part of One of the Great Repositories of Art Deco Buildings in the U.S.; Newest Landmarks Include Westbeth Artists' Housing and the Union League Club in Manhattan and Former Brooklyn Church and a Staten Island Cottage

The Landmarks Preservation Commission today unanimously approved the designations of the Grand Concourse Historic District in the Bronx and four standalone landmarks elsewhere in New York City, including a Far West Village residential complex for artists that originally housed Bell Telephone Laboratories, a private club in Murray Hill, a former church in Fort Greene that's now a theater and a mid-19th century cottage in Port Richmond.



The Grand Concourse Historic District, located along and off the Grand Concourse between 153rd to 167th streets, consists of 78 buildings, half of which are designed in the Art Deco and Moderne styles. The four new individual landmarks are: **Westbeth Artists' Housing**, which comprises 445-465 West Street, 137-169 Bank Street, 51-77 Bethune Street and 734-754 Washington Street; the **Union League Club** at 38 East 37th Street; **St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church** at 40 Greene Avenue, now the Paul Robeson Theater and **29 Cottage Place** in Port Richmond;

"All of the buildings that were designated today reflect nearly a century's worth of architectural, demographic and economic shifts throughout New York City, and fully merit the Commission's protection," said Commission Chairman Robert B. Tierney. "They also underscore our ongoing commitment to preserving more historic districts and properties in every borough of the City."

In other business, the Commission held public hearings on proposals to extend landmark protection to **3833 Amboy Road**, a c. 1840 vernacular Greek Revival style farmhouse in the Great Kills section of Staten Island; the **Captain John Stafford House**, a c. 1930 Craftsman style bungalow on City Island in the Bronx; and a second extension of the **Riverside-West End Historic District**, an area encompassing 338 buildings constructed between the late 1880s and 1920s that stretches from West 89th to West 109th streets between Broadway and Riverside Drive.

Descriptions of the historic district and landmarks follow below:

Grand Concourse Historic District

The district consists of 78 properties _ including 61 apartment houses, two parks (Joyce Killmer Park and Franz Sigel Park) and several institutional buildings _ that were constructed mostly in two phases between 1922 and 1945 along and off a one-mile stretch of the Grand Concourse between East 153rd and 167th streets. Its designation brings to 11 the total number of historic districts in the Bronx.

Completed in 1909, the five-mile roadway, originally known as the “Grand Boulevard and Concourse,” today extends from East 138th Street to Mosholu Parkway. It was conceived and designed by French immigrant and engineer Louis Risse, who originally envisioned a luxurious residential boulevard lined with elegant villas.

Development along the Grand Concourse took off in the early 1920s, triggered by the completion of the Jerome Avenue subway line in 1918 and the passage of state legislation that granted 10-year tax exemptions for apartments built between 1920 and 1924. A substantial number of the newcomers to the area were Jewish, many of whom relocated from the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn to spacious new apartments along the concourse, which quickly became a coveted address.

Half the apartment buildings in the district were built in the first wave of development between 1922 and 1931, in the Tudor, Renaissance and Colonial revival styles. Several of them were garden apartment complexes comprised of low-rise buildings on large lots surrounding interior and exterior courtyards. One example is the c. 1927, six-story Thomas Garden Apartments at **840 Grand Concourse**, which is designed in a simplified version of the Renaissance Revival style. The complex was originally a non-profit cooperative that was financed by John D. Rockefeller Jr.

Another noteworthy building from the earlier stage of the district’s development is the Concourse Plaza Hotel at **900 Grand Concourse** between East 161st and 162nd streets. Built in 1923, the same year as nearby Yankee Stadium, the 11-story Colonial Revival style hotel drew such distinguished guests and visitors as Yankees greats Babe Ruth, Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle and presidential candidates Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy.

The second wave of development, from 1935 to 1945, brought the construction of 27 Art Deco and Moderne apartment houses, and helped establish the Bronx as one of the great repositories of these styles in the United States.



One of the more prominent buildings in the Art Deco style, which is characterized by streamlined geometry, brickwork arranged in vertical and horizontal patterns and steel-and-glass casement windows, is **888 Grand Concourse** and 161st Street. The six-story, beige brick building was designed by Emery Roth, one of the city’s most renowned apartment house architects. It has a concave main entrance that’s flanked by black granite panels and lined with bands of gold and beige mosaic tile.

Another example is the six-story, c. 1937 “fish building” at **1150 Grand Concourse**, near McClellan Street. It was designed by Horace Ginsbern & Marvin Fine and takes its nickname from a mural at the entrance of tropical fish and water plants in tinted concrete and mosaic tiles.

The Bronx, along with the rest of the city, entered a difficult period beginning in the late 1950s, as factories closed citywide, credit tightened, the working-and middle classes left for the suburbs. Buildings throughout the borough, including those along the Grand



Concourse, fell into disrepair.

Economic conditions in the Bronx began to improve in the 1980s, and by the end of the 20th century, a new wave of building activity had come to the Grand Concourse, now home to a vibrant mix of working- and middle-class residents and immigrants.

“The buildings in the district were so solidly built that they emerged from a period of neglect largely unscathed, and still retain many of the fine architectural details that first attracted residents to the Grand Concourse in the 1920s and 1930s,” said Chairman Tierney. “This is a great day for the Bronx.”

Bell Telephone Laboratories Complex, now Westbeth Artists' Housing



The complex, which occupies an entire city block and includes 383 residential units and gallery, performance and commercial spaces, is comprised of five buildings of varying ages and architectural styles. It was the site of Bell Telephone Laboratories, the research division of the telecommunications giant from 1899 until the company vacated the property in 1966.

Roger L. Stevens, the first chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, conceived the plan to use it as privately and publicly subsidized housing for artists, with substantial support from the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

Architect Richard Meier developed the design for Westbeth, which was his first major work. The complex opened in 1970, and is named for the intersection where it stands, at West and Bethune streets.

“The transformation of Bell Labs into a housing complex for artists was one of the first large-scale adaptive reuse projects of an industrial property in the world, and inspired similar conversions around the United States,” said Chairman Tierney. “We are grateful to the Westbeth Corporation and its executive director, Steven Neil, for enthusiastically supporting the designation of this remarkable site as a landmark.”

Below are descriptions of the buildings within the complex, which runs along 445-465 West Street, 137-169 Bank Street, 51-77 Bethune Street and 734-754 Washington Street:

445-453 West Street: a four-story, Italianate style red-brick structure originally built as a speculative steam-powered factory and completed in 1860.

455-465 West Street at Bethune Street: a 10-story, rectangular neo-Classical style tower completed in 1899 and designed for the Western Electric Co., Bell’s manufacturing unit, by Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz, architect of the City Bar Association clubhouse at 42 West 44th St., the American Society of Civil Engineers at 220 West 57th St., both New York City landmarks. The building housed Western Electric’s telephone equipment and parts manufacturing operation and the research arm that developed technology that made possible long-distance and international telephone transmission. As many as 8,000 employees worked in the building by 1914, when the operation moved.

744-754 Washington Street: an 11-story, L-shaped neo-Classical building completed in 1926 to accommodate Bell’s expansion and designed by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, also responsible for other buildings related to the telephone sector, such as 140 West Street and the Brooklyn Municipal Building, both New York City landmarks.

Portions of the third and fourth stories on the Washington Street side of the building were demolished in 1931 to carve out an opening for New York Central Railroad’s elevated freight railway (the High Line). It was removed in 1991.

151-153 Bank Street: a four-story Moderne-style building featuring orange-colored brick cladding that was completed in 1929 and designed for Bell Labs by one of its engineers, Warren B. Sanford, to house the company's experimental unit that developed sound for motion pictures.

Union League Club, 38 East 37th Street at Park Avenue



The nine-story, brick-faced clubhouse, located at the southwest corner of 37th Street and Park Avenue, was completed in 1931 and combines elements of the 18th century Federal and Georgian styles of architecture. It was designed by (Benjamin Wistar) Morris & (Robert Barnard) O'Connor. Prior to establishing the firm, Morris received a number of significant commissions, including the annex to the Morgan Library, the Cunard Building and the Bank of New York & Trust Company building at 48 Wall St.

Originally located in a former residence on the north side of Union Square in Manhattan, the Union League Club was founded in 1863 to support the United States and the Republican Party. During the Civil War, the club organized the first black regiment in New York State and its members later played a significant role in establishing the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It also was one of the first social clubs in New York City to welcome women.

The club's current site was assembled by prominent Murray Hill families who wanted to maintain neighborhood's residential character, and sold the property with restrictions dictating the size of buildings could be constructed there.

The 37th Street façade of the club incorporates a curved, double height entrance pavilion and oversized Palladian style windows, and a central pediment that frames a cartouche with club's initials. A lintel decorated with four female faces surmounts the wood doors of a second entrance on Park Avenue. Women gained full membership privileges in 1988, and Democrats were permitted to join in 1937.

"After 80 years, the Union League Club remains a stately gem on a tranquil corner of Murray Hill," said Chairman Tierney.

St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church, now the Paul Robeson Theater, 40 Greene Ave.



The brownstone building, originally named Church of the Redeemer, was constructed in 1864 by the Fourth Universalist Society at 40 Greene Ave. in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Its Rundbogenstil design, which derives from the Romanesque Revival style, is attributed to Rembrandt Lockwood, an artist who became an architect.

Temple Israel, one of Brooklyn's first Reform congregations, bought the building in 1870 and converted it into a synagogue. Twenty years later, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn purchased the sanctuary for the new home of St. Casimir's, a growing Polish parish founded in 1875, and changed it back into a church, adding a steeple and an apse.

The centerpiece of the façade is a large arch holding a rose window and three smaller arched windows that's flanked by two smaller arches framing stained-glass windows. The metal-clad steeple consists of a square tower, pinnacles, and octagonal spire and features round-arched openings with louvers, corbelling, rosettes, and crosses.

After a drop in attendance, the church merged in 1980 with Our Lady of Czestochowa in South Brooklyn and put the building up for sale. The building was purchased that year by Dr. Josephine English, the first African-American woman licensed as an obstetrician/gynecologist in New York

state and a community leader. She converted the building into a theater, naming it for the legendary African-American actor Paul Robeson, and staging performances for and by African-Americans.

“It’s an architecturally outstanding building that reflects a great deal of Brooklyn’s religious and cultural history,” said Chairman Tierney.

29 Cottage Place, Port Richmond, Staten Island



Located near the intersection of Vreeland Street, the two-story vernacular structure is a rare example of a saltbox house on the North Shore, and combines elements of the Greek Revival and Craftsman styles. It was built c. 1848 for Abraham L. Merrell, and leased until 1918 to various tenants, among them a blacksmith, a boatman, a plaster mill worker, a shipbuilder, and a carver.

The modest frame house has an asymmetrical gabled roof with a short pitch in front and a longer slope at the rear, also known as a saltbox roof in New England and a catslide roof in the South. The front roof slope is slightly curved, a likely remnant of a flared projecting spring eave, which was a common feature of vernacular residences that were common in the first half of the 19th century on Staten Island. The entrance is surrounded by the original transom and sidelights. The residence was purchased in 1918 by the Schmidt family, who added the Craftsman style porch and windows. It was bought by its current owner in 1986.

“This rare, surviving mid-19th century cottage is significant for its associations with Staten Island’s 19th century trades and vernacular architectural traditions,” said Chairman Tierney.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is the mayoral agency responsible for protecting and preserving New York City’s architecturally, historically and culturally significant buildings and sites. Since its creation in 1965, LPC has granted landmark status to more than 29,000 buildings and sites, including 1,296 individual landmarks, 113 interior landmarks, 10 scenic landmarks, 106 historic districts and 16 historic district extensions in all five boroughs. Under the City’s landmarks law, considered among the most powerful in the nation, the Commission must be comprised of at least three architects, a historian, a realtor, a planner or landscape architect, as well as a representative of each borough.

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