

NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE, 98 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan,
Built 1906-1907; architects Renwick, Aspinwall & Tucker.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 557, Lot 39 in part,
consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.
(Originally heard as Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 557, Lot 32 in part)

On March 22, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Neighborhood House, 98 Fourth Avenue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were twenty-five speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome building is one of the finest in the City. It is an integral part of a picturesque group of buildings, all designed in similar style, that form part of the Grace Church complex, and it is a part of the terminal vista obtained by looking west on 11th Street toward Fourth Avenue. In New York, few structures remain which provide such terminal features: Grand Central Station at the head of Park Avenue, the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue at the end of East 82nd Street, and the New York Public Library at the end of East 41st Street are some of the notable examples which come to mind.

The Grace Church complex is located on a portion of the old Brevoort Farm. The Brevoorts were an old Knickerbocker family, established in the City since 1673. The farm was bounded roughly by the area between 9th to 13th Streets and Fourth to Sixth Avenues. The existence today of a long block, running from 10th to 12th Streets, between Broadway and Fourth Avenue, is due entirely to the stubbornness of Henry Brevoort. When the City attempted to cut through 11th Street, in accordance with the Commissioners' Plan of 1807, he refused to vacate or remove his old farmhouse, which stood on the west side of Fourth Avenue in the line of 11th Street. Successive ordinances were passed -- to no avail -- and so the effort to cut through the property was finally abandoned. In the last analysis, we owe the closed vista where 11th Street meets Fourth Avenue to Henry Brevoort.

Grace Church and its Rectory on Broadway were designed in Gothic Revival style by architect James Renwick, Jr. Once New York's most fashionable church, it served a large congregation of well-to-do parishioners upon completion in 1846. By the 1870s and early eighties, however, the social and cultural needs of the parish and of the neighborhood had changed, and Dr. Henry C. Potter, who served as rector from 1868 to 1884, recognized the need for providing new facilities.

No. 98 Fourth Avenue, Neighborhood House, is one of a group of three buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96 and 98) belonging to Grace Church. Completed in 1907, it was the gift of banker George S. Bowdoin to Grace Church. The architects were the firm of Renwick, Aspinwall & Tucker, successors of James Renwick, Jr. Despite the date of this building, it accords well with the earlier Gothic style buildings, Grace Memorial House, No. 94-96, adjoining it to the south and Clergy House, No. 92. Neighborhood House served with Grace Memorial House (Huntington House) when it reopened in 1927 to house low-salaried young women and female students. It is a tribute to Grace Church that these three buildings, although constructed at different dates, harmonize so well with each other. These buildings bear testimony to the intelligent control exercised by Grace Church over architectural design for some sixty years, thus achieving a remarkably coherent group of buildings on Fourth Avenue which harmonize perfectly with the older ones on Broadway. As a notable part of the City's architectural heritage, this fine group of buildings lends great distinction to the area.

Architecturally No. 98 belongs most nearly to the Tudor tradition of late Gothic architecture; however, the ecclesiastical character of Grace Church and its Rectory is carried out in spirit in the masonry Neighborhood House. It has square-headed windows with stone mullions and transom bars and label moldings over the windows. The entrance door, enframed with its four-centered arch set above columns, is crowned by crenellations. Interestingly, the dormer

windows with their pointed arches and gables conform to the earlier Gothic style which characterizes the adjoining buildings to the south. The moldings used as horizontal bandcourses serve to unite the overall composition of this building with Nos. 92 and 94-96 with which it forms such an important part visually.

The story of how the Grace Church Houses were saved forms a vital part of their history.

In the late 1960s a fund raising drive was instituted for the enlargement of Grace Church School utilizing the Gothic style buildings on Fourth Avenue and Grace House behind them. They were to be ingeniously linked together by a connecting corridor with elevator and to have a much needed auditorium-gymnasium in "Tuttle Hall," a new building then proposed to be located north of Neighborhood House. All of this was set forth in a fund-raising brochure, Reach Out With Grace, showing the architectural firm of Oppenheimer & Brady's sketch drawings of the proposed facilities and the new facade of Tuttle Hall, premised on razing only the two small brick houses on Fourth Avenue; however, this special study proposal was never carried out because funds could not be raised at that time.

In November of 1973, Moore and Hutchins, the architects for Grace Church formally notified the Landmarks Preservation Commission that a contract had been signed to proceed with new plans for expanding the school. The proposed gymnasium, a structure of contemporary design, was to replace the Gothic style buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, and 98) on Fourth Avenue. This decision was reached because of lack of funds and the pressing needs of the school.

Professor James Marston Fitch of Columbia University, noted in the field of preservation, was called upon by a group of preservationists to make a counter-proposal and to prepare a scheme which would save the Gothic style buildings while at the same time satisfying the functional requirements of the school. On January 24, 1974, Dr. Benjamin Minifie, rector of Grace Church informed the Landmarks Preservation Commission that, having received no satisfactory solution from Professor Fitch, and having received professional advice that a new building incorporating the existing facades would cost several hundred thousand dollars more than the building already designed by the architects, the Vestry of Grace Church had voted on January 22 to proceed with the new plan of Moore and Hutchins which involved the demolition of the buildings on Fourth Avenue. At this point Community Board No. 2 (Greenwich Village) asked the Buildings Department of the Housing and Development Administration to rescind the demolition permit which had been obtained for the work. In February, students from Columbia University and Cooper Union picketed the site.

On February 28 the Joint Emergency Committee to Save the Grace Church Houses was formally organized by concerned citizens and called on the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the Gothic style buildings. Selma Rattner, an architectural historian, coordinated their work and carried out the necessary historical research regarding the affected buildings.

On March 4, 1974, a suit was brought in the Supreme Court, State of New York, to prevent demolition of the buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, and 98) on Fourth Avenue, Fitch et al v. Minifie et al, and the judge granted a temporary restraining order. On April 2, a preliminary injunction was entered restraining the defendants from seeking a permit for demolition until the controversy could be brought to trial. Shortly afterwards, before the matter could be heard by the Appellate Court, the legal action was discontinued by stipulation of the parties.

In the meantime, on March 22, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a Public Hearing on the Fourth Avenue buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, 98) which was attended by a great number of people. Among those who spoke in favor of designation were Selma Rattner, James Marston Fitch, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, noted architectural historian, Frederick L. Rath, Jr., Deputy Commissioner for Preservation, New York State, Councilman Henry Stern, and Councilwoman Carol Greitzer. Many of those who spoke in favor of designation also urged that the new school facilities be built in such a way that would permit retention of the Gothic style buildings on Fourth Avenue. Stewart Wetmore, Suffragan Bishop of New York, Dr. Benjamin Minifie, and Robert Hutchins, among others, spoke against designation.

An estimate by E. W. Howell Co., contractors for the Moore and Hutchins

scheme, made it clear that, over and above the estimated cost of the new facilities, some \$400,000 in additional funds would be required to save the Fourth Avenue houses. By April of 1974 the vestry had decided that if the money could be raised and a functional plan to reuse the buildings could be worked out, they would go along with such a scheme. Fund raising was initiated by the promise of a grant of \$25,000 from the Kaplan Fund and substantial grants by others. Probably the turning point in the fund raising effort came when Thaddeus Seymour, President of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, obtained a grant of \$100,000 from a trustee of Wabash, Mr. Eli Lilly, and the Lilly Endowment. By June 1975 the New York Times reported that the Fourth Avenue buildings had been saved. Ultimately some \$425,000 was raised, enough to finance the revised construction plan. Much of the credit for the fund raising must go to the efforts of Vestryman Whitney North Seymour, Sr., his co-workers, and the School.

In accordance with the revised designs by the architects for Grace Church, Hutchins, Evans & Lefferts, successors to Moore and Hutchins, the new gymnasium has now been built on an interior lot north of Grace House. The preservation of the facades of this row of Gothic style buildings is a fine example of public interest in retaining the architectural character of an historic area of New York City. Grace Church, cooperating with preservationists and with vestrymen, parishioners, school parents, state authorities, and others-- who all worked diligently together--was able to raise the necessary funds. The church then proceeded with the plan for saving this handsome frontage while meeting its functional requirements and those of the school. In a New York Times editorial, written at a time when the Fourth Avenue buildings were considered effectively lost, it was pointed out that were they to be saved this would be an "opportunity to demonstrate the right way to rebuild a city." Today these buildings stand as a testimonial to the achievement of this worthy goal.

In recognition of their significance, the Grace Church Houses were placed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 28, 1974.

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 Neighborhood House, 98 Fourth Avenue, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Neighborhood House is one of the finest Gothic style buildings in New York City, that it was designed by the firm of Renwick, Aspinwall & Tucker, successors of James Renwick, Jr., that it was the gift of banker George S. Bowdoin, that it accords well with the earlier Gothic Revival Grace Memorial House and with Clergy House, that it is distinguished by fine Gothic detail, that it forms a part of the terminal vista one obtains looking west on 11th Street toward Fourth Avenue and that this building bears testimony to the intelligent control exercised by Grace Church over architectural design for some sixty years, that it is an integral part of a remarkably coherent group of buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, 98) on Fourth Avenue which harmonize perfectly with the Church and its rectory on Broadway, that it is a notable part of the City's architectural heritage, that it was saved from demolition through the action of preservationists who submitted an alternative plan and helped raise the necessary funds to implement it--an outstanding example of the adaptive reuse of landmark quality buildings, and that this building lends great distinction to the neighborhood.

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, Neighborhood House, 98 Fourth Avenue, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 557, Lot 39 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.