

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 24, 1981, Designation List 150
LP-1126

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW (originally St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church), 540 West End Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1895-97; architect R.H. Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1234, Lot 1.

On March 11, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The item was again heard on May 13, 1980 (Item No. 1). The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Sixteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were six speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

As the St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church and parish house at West End Avenue and West 86th Street neared completion, the New York Times of March 6, 1897 commented that the buildings comprised "one of the handsomest combinations of structures employed for such purposes by the Methodist Episcopal denomination in the United States."¹ From the time of its completion in 1897 until today, St. Paul's Methodist Church, renamed the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew in 1937 after its merger with the nearby St. Andrew's Methodist Episcopal Church, has been a major architectural monument on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The church and parish house were designed in 1895 by one of America's most prominent late nineteenth-century architects, R.H. Robertson. The church is a key work in the architect's career, reflecting a major shift from the picturesque Romanesque Revival style popular in the 1880s and early 1890s to the Classical- and Renaissance-inspired styles that dominated American architecture in the last years of the nineteenth century and opening decades of the twentieth. When it was completed, the bold octagonal campanile of St. Paul's towered over the surrounding rowhouse neighborhood. In the twentieth century, as tall apartment buildings began to replace the rowhouses, the church no longer dominated the skyline. That it remains a visual anchor in the area despite the change in relative scale is a tribute to the power of Robertson's conception.

The Upper West Side

Major residential development north of 59th Street had begun to the east of Central Park in the 1860s. By the 1880s much of the Upper East Side was lined with brownstone rowhouses, but the area to the west of the park did not experience a corresponding development during this period. Mass transit facilities were not as well developed on the west side, making the area relatively inaccessible. In addition, New Yorkers of means tended to prefer an East Side address.

In 1879 the Ninth Avenue elevated was extended northward along Columbus Avenue opening the Upper West Side to residential development. In the following decades the area experienced a massive transformation from open countryside to a prosperous upper middle-class residential neighborhood consisting primarily of rowhouses.² Early pockets of building centered near the elevated stations, but by 1890 the entire area had become the scene of a major building boom.

As prosperous residential neighborhoods developed in the nineteenth century, a need arose for buildings to meet the social, cultural, and religious needs of the population. In response to this, many clubs, schools, theaters and churches were erected. The church was the most important institution of the period, and as such, church buildings were frequently designed by prestigious architects and erected on prominent sites. As the rural areas of the city changed into residential neighborhoods, new congregations were founded and older organizations relocated uptown. Each denomination sought to build an imposing edifice, both to attract an affluent membership and to symbolize its importance and permanence in the community. Between 1880 and 1900 an unprecedented number of major ecclesiastical buildings were erected on the Upper West Side, some designed by New York City's finest architects, including William Potter, Charles Haight, J.C. Cady, Robert Gibson, Carrère & Hastings, and R.H. Robertson. Among these buildings the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew stands out as one of the finest and most unusual designs.

History of the Congregation

The history of the St. Paul's congregation parallels the northward migration of affluent New Yorkers during the nineteenth century. St. Paul's M.E. Church was founded as the Mulberry Street M.E. Church in 1834. The congregation remained on Mulberry Street near Bleecker Street until May 9, 1857, when a new marble church was dedicated on the northeast corner of Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South) and East 22nd Street in the fashionable Gramercy Park area. In 1893, by which time much of the Gramercy Park neighborhood had become a commercial center, the Fourth Avenue church was sold. The congregation temporarily held services in the chapel of the Methodist Book Concern on Fifth Avenue and 20th Street until their new West Side church was completed.

While the history of St. Paul's reflects the general pattern of residential development in Manhattan, the history of St. Andrew's M.E. Church is closely tied to the specific development of the Upper West Side. In 1875, when the area was still sparsely populated, a Methodist prayer meeting was organized on West 69th Street. As the population of the neighborhood increased, attendance rose and the meeting passed to the care of the New-York City Sunday School and Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1882 a small stone chapel was erected on West 71st Street, but the tremendous influx of people to the Upper West Side in the 1880s soon made the chapel inadequate. In 1889 the architectural firm of J.C. Cady & Co. was commissioned to design a large church on West 75th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues. The New York Tribune noted in 1890 that "the new church is one of the remarkable evidences of the rapid growth of the northwestern part of the city."³ Cady's church was a large Romanesque Revival style structure constructed of rock-faced limestone blocks. The most notable feature of the design was a massive dome, fifty-four feet in diameter, that was pierced by forty windows.

In 1890 St. Andrew's was the only Methodist Episcopal Church on the Upper West Side and the new building was "admirably situated for the service it has to perform--that of accommodating all the Methodist worshippers to the west of the Park and within a mile and a quarter both north and south."⁴ Within the next few years two other large Methodist churches were erected on the Upper West Side--St. Paul's and Grace (designed by J.C. Cady's firm Cady, Berg & See), on West 104th Street, in 1896. It was soon evident that the denomination had been overly optimistic in its building plans and that the area could not support three major Methodist churches. The Methodists were not the only group to over build; other Protestant sects found that the population could not sustain all their churches and in the early twentieth century many congregations merged and church buildings were sold or demolished. In 1937, at the time of its merger with St. Paul's, St. Andrew's sold its property to the West Side Institutional Synagogue. Although it has been altered, the old St. Andrew's building is still extant.

R.H. Robertson

For its new church building the congregation of St. Paul's commissioned one of New York City's most respected architects, Robert Henderson Robertson (1849-1919), whose long and successful career spanned a period that experienced great stylistic ferment. Born in Philadelphia and a graduate of Rutgers College, Robertson's earliest architectural training was in the Philadelphia office of Henry Sims, a designer of country houses and Gothic churches. In about 1870 Robertson briefly worked in the New York office of George B. Post before opening his own office. From his earliest years in practice Robertson showed a great interest and proficiency in ecclesiastical design. His commissions--the Phillips Presbyterian Church (1871, demolished) on Madison Avenue and the rural church at Clifton

Springs, New York (1876), designed in association with William Potter, are notable examples of the High Victorian Gothic style popular in the 1870s. In 1874 or 1875 Robertson formed a partnership with William Potter, an architect with similar design sensibilities. The Potter & Robertson firm was active until 1880.

Working independently during the 1880s, Robertson's designs show the influence of the Romanesque Revival style popularized by Henry Hobson Richardson. Robertson's Romanesque Revival style buildings owe their inspiration to Richardson, but his works freely interpret the style, creating buildings of great individuality. Four major New York City churches date from this period; the Madison Avenue M.E. Church (1884, demolished) on Madison Avenue and East 60th Street; St. James' Episcopal Church (1887, altered) on Madison Avenue and East 71st Street; St. Luke's Episcopal Church (1892), which still stands on Convent Avenue and West 141st Street; and Rutgers Riverside Church (1893, demolished) on Broadway and West 73rd Street.

During the 1890s Robertson continued to follow popular stylistic trends, abandoning the picturesque Romanesque Revival in favor of designs with a more subdued Classical feeling. Many architects who had specialized in the Romanesque Revival, such as J.C. Cady and Frank Freeman, found it difficult to successfully alter their style, but Robertson was quite successful in making the transition and, as with his earlier works, his Classical- and Renaissance-inspired buildings are not merely imitative of historical precedents, but innovative designs. Robertson's buildings of the 1890s draw their inspiration from a myriad of historical sources, but these motifs are reinterpreted in an exciting and original manner. The Mendelssohn Glee Club (1892, demolished) at 113-119 West 40th Street and St. Paul's M.E. Church, clearly reflect Robertson's new concern for lighter, more classical forms. In these works the classical motifs are combined with a Romanesque vocabulary, but one that is more subdued, plainer, and more classically balanced than that popular during the 1880s. These buildings were followed by structures that exhibit a purer use of classical forms, such as the Park Row Building (1895-99).

Early in the twentieth century Robertson formed a partnership with Robert Burnside Potter, nephew of his former partner William Potter. During the closing years of his long career, Robertson kept abreast of changing fashions, designing a number of buildings in the popular neo-Georgian style.

The Design

St. Paul's M.E. Church is a brilliant exemplar of the eclecticism that spread through American architecture in the late nineteenth century. The final decades of the century witnessed the increasing popularity of a large number of styles, many of them based on the various modes of the European Renaissance. The best architects of this period did not design in slavish imitation of European buildings, but designed original and carefully planned works. Frequently motifs from two or more historical sources were combined

in a single new design. St. Paul's is a masterful example of this "scientific eclecticism"--"the assemblage of pieces from the past--usually the classic past--to create harmonious wholes."⁵ At St. Paul's Robertson merged a particularly unusual combination of forms inspired primarily by Early Christian, German Romanesque, and early Italian Renaissance architecture. His choice of prototypes other than the Classical and Renaissance is a reflection of his continuing attachment to the picturesque medieval styles, although he altered these forms to accord with the new taste for classical order.

In its general massing, St. Paul's is reminiscent of the austere brick churches of the Early Christian era, particularly the sixth-century churches of Ravenna.⁶ The basilican form of St. Paul's with its raised, peak-roofed nave and high clerestory flanked by flat-roofed side aisles, plus the lower entrance porch and prominent campanile are similar in proportion and massing to such major monuments as St. Apollinare-in-Classe (c. 530-48), one of the finest of Ravenna's churches. Robertson's choice of Early Christian forms was quite innovative, for it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that ecclesiastical buildings designed to resemble the basilican churches of the Early Christian era became popular, and then predominantly for Roman Catholic congregations.⁷

It is, however, only in the basic massing and in the choice of a few forms that St. Paul's resembles an Early Christian Church. A number of elements in the design derive from German Romanesque churches of the 11th through 13th centuries. The Abbey Church at the Monastery of Maria Laach, although far more complex, resembles St. Paul's in such details as the octagonal tower, ocular windows, and shallow transept (which serves at St. Paul's as the entrance to the parish house). St. Paul's octagonal corner tower exemplifies the difficulty of assigning a specific historical precedent to individual elements in a late nineteenth-century eclectic design. The tower is visually distant from the body of the church, as in Early Christian prototypes, yet no octagonal towers are known from this period. Octagonal towers do, however, appear on German Romanesque churches, frequently on buildings that also exhibit roundel windows with heavy enframements as seen on St. Paul's, but these towers are generally far more integrated with the main mass of the building. Thus, the St. Paul's tower can be seen as a successful amalgam of forms borrowed from two different architectural traditions.

To this Early Christian and German Romanesque fusion Robertson grafted an applique of Italian Renaissance detailing. The source for much of the ornamental detail and for the disposition of certain features of the facade reveal Robertson's familiarity with Alberti's early Renaissance masterpiece S. Andrea, Mantua (c. 1470), one of the most influential buildings of the Italian Renaissance. The facade of Alberti's church is raised on a stepped podium and is dominated by a triumphal arch resting on Corinthian pilasters flanked by pairs of monumental Corinthian pilasters that support a pedimented entablature. The coffered portal leads to the entrance of S. Andrea above which is an entablature and a roundel window.

The fenestration pattern between each pair of giant orders is arranged in a tripartite division with each rectangular entrance door surmounted by a niche and a round-arched window. The simple entablature is ornamented with a row of cherubs in the frieze and a blind tondo in the pediment.

The feature of S. Andrea to which Robertson is most clearly indebted is the triumphal arch with its barrel-vaulted entrance portal. The entrance to the parish house on West 86th Street is undoubtedly derived from this motif. The projecting parish house entrance has an arched portal supported by Corinthian columns and pilasters that are flanked by larger Corinthian pilasters as at S. Andrea. In addition, the portal is in the form of a coffered barrel vault and leads to an entrance that is surmounted by a modest entablature and a roundel window. This entrance motif also appears in a reduced version at the front facade where the three rectangular doors are set within round arches that are flanked by monumental Corinthian pilasters and are surmounted by roundel windows.

Alberti's prominent Corinthian pilasters flanking a tripartite grouping of forms appears on the 86th Street arcade of St. Paul's. At St. Paul's, Alberti's rectangular entrances have been transformed into windows and the decorative niches have become ornamental plaques, but the basic rhythm of the tripartite bays separated by Corinthian pilasters remains the same. The idea of round-arched openings separated by pilasters was not invented by Alberti and this motif appears on the German Romanesque churches that Robertson also used as sources for his designs. On S. Andrea, however, this motif has become highly refined and Robertson's usage is much closer to that of the Italian Renaissance than to the German Romanesque. Other Albertian details on St. Paul's include the cherubs located at the top of the corner tower and the front steps that raise the building on a platform above street level.

In addition to the Early Christian, German Romanesque, and Italian Renaissance motifs, Robertson employs a vocabulary of forms that does not seem to have direct historic references. These include most notably the roof and round-arched flying buttresses clad in red Spanish tile. This tilework may account for the contemporary descriptions of St. Paul's as being "an outgrowth of a study in the Spanish Renaissance,"⁸ and "of the Spanish type of architecture."⁹ In reality, the church bears no close resemblance to Spanish Renaissance prototypes. A particularly impressive design feature is the group of terra-cotta angels flanking the roundels of the entrance facade. These angels, clad in elegant flowing garments and carrying scrolls or palm branches, closely resembles the female figures painted by such popular artists of the period as Edwin Blashfield, Thomas Dewing, and Abbott Thayer.

One of the features that placed St. Paul's in the forefront of design in the 1890s was the use of light-colored masonry for the exterior. McKim, Mead & White had pioneered in the use of lighter brick and stone at Madison Square Garden (1887-91) and the Boston Public Library (1888-92). In 1888 Stanford White designed the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square

North in a style based on Italian Renaissance prototypes. With this building he introduced the lighter tonalities of classical design to ecclesiastical architecture and influenced other church architects in their choice of both style and coloration. The influence of the Judson Memorial Church was being felt just at the time when the Upper West Side was undergoing intensive development, and consequently a number of churches in the area reflect the new Renaissance styling and light color spectrum. Of particular note is Henry Kilburne's Renaissance-inspired West End Presbyterian Church (1891) on Amsterdam Avenue and West 103rd Street. Even churches designed in the conservative Romanesque Revival style, with heavy rock-faced stone blocks began to be constructed of white limestone. Two notable West Side examples of this phenomenon are J.C. Cady & Co.'s St. Andrew's M.E. Church (1889-91) and Robert Gibson's magnificent St. Michael's Episcopal Church (1890).

Robertson's choice of pale yellow brick and buff terra-cotta at St. Paul's shows his awareness of contemporary trends. Robertson designed St. Paul's two years after the Rutgers Riverside Church on Broadway and West 71st Street, a much more traditional brownstone Romanesque Revival style building. Tremendous changes occurred in America during this two year period, symbolized in the "White City" at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, and Robertson's design for St. Paul's reflects the rapid ascendance of this "Second Renaissance."

Although the design elements chosen as prototypes by Robertson range over approximately a 900 year span, they have been modified to create a unified work, quintessentially reflective of the eclecticism of the late nineteenth century. The wide ranging architectural prototypes have been forged into a new style at St. Paul's, placing it in the vanguard of contemporary design. St. Paul's is among Robertson's finest buildings and one of the most powerful and original statements of its period.

Description

Situated at the juncture of two of the Upper West Side's widest streets, the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew is constructed of pale yellow Roman brick with buff-colored terra-cotta trim. The original coloration of some of the ornamental details has been altered by the application of a synthetic coating.

The front facade, facing onto West End Avenue, is raised above the street by a short flight of marble stairs. This facade is composed of a projecting entrance porch set in front of a high nave. Towers of uneven height mark the ends of the elevation. The wide entrance porch is the finest feature of the St. Paul and St. Andrew's design. The porch facade is divided into three bays by monumental Corinthian pilasters of terra cotta. Within each bay is a round-arched entrance enframement with paired rectangular doors and an arched transom filled with intricate grillework. Each archway is flanked by Corinthian pilasters that support a full entablature. Set between the small entrance entablatures and the main entablature of the porch are ornate ocular windows flanked by terra-cotta reliefs of Classically-draped angels, each standing on a console. The angel to the right of each of

of the windows carries a scroll, while that to the left bears a palm branch. A balustrade, upon which Robertson seems to have originally planned to place four statues, runs along the roofline of the porch.¹⁰

The austere pedimented nave facade rises behind the porch. This elevation is articulated by three round-arched windows in the manner of the front facade of St. Apollinare-in-Classe. A single roundel is set in the pediment. At the north end of the front facade is a low square tower set at an angle to the street. This tower is articulated by small round-arched windows, a larger arched window with a terra-cotta enframingent, and an open belfry constructed of terra-cotta blocks that is capped by a hipped roof once clad with Spanish tiles. At the opposite corner of the facade is the tall octagonal tower that firmly anchors the church to its corner site. An entrance to the church is located on the 86th Street side of the tower. This entry is marked by a projecting portico topped by a heavy segmental pediment. Small round-arched windows, a larger round-arched opening, a niche that was planned to carry a statue, and a row of eight heavy ocular windows enliven the severe geometry of the tower. The tower is surmounted by an open belfry with eight narrow, arched openings separated by Corinthian pilasters. Four of these openings are set above projecting Renaissance-inspired balconies. The spandrels of the arches are enlivened by small cherubs, a particularly whimsical element. The sloping roof of the tower has lost its tilework.

The arcade of the 86th Street facade is extremely regular in the rhythm of its six bays. Each bay is composed of a rectangular window and a round-arched window separated by a terra-cotta plaque of foliate design. Each window ensemble is flanked by monumental Corinthian pilasters. Set back from the arcade is the tall clerestory with its round-arched openings and unusual round-arched flying buttresses. The tops of the buttresses are on the same plane as the roof and both buttresses and roof are clad with Spanish tile.

St. Paul's parish house, which is visually integrated with the church, is set to the rear of the 86th Street arcade. The entrance to the parish house, which has been previously described, is located below what seems to be the shingled polygonal apse of the church, but is in fact the Sunday school room. The main section of the parish house is located to the right of the entrance and is divided into three stories: A ground floor level with two large windows that are divided by heavy transom and mullion bars in a manner typical of the Romanesque Revival style; a second level with a row of five rectangular openings separated by Corinthian pilasters; and a five-bayed third story with small round-arched windows set above terra-cotta plaques and flanked by Doric pilasters. Hipped roofs clad with Spanish tile cover both the main section of the parish house and its entrance pavilion.

The rectory on West End Avenue, also designed by Robertson but not a part of this designation, is separated from the church by a sixteen-foot courtyard originally used as a garden. A two-story passage connects the church and rectory. The presence of this courtyard makes a portion of the north elevation of the church visible from the street.

Although the Upper West Side has changed dramatically since St. Paul's M.E. Church was completed, the church complex remains a major feature of the area. St. Paul's is one of only three surviving churches in New York City designed by R.H. Robertson¹¹ and is a major architectural monument. The complex, in conjunction with the neighboring St. Ignatius Episcopal Church, provides visual relief from the generally high-rise character of West End Avenue. The design of the church buildings is unusual and brings together motifs borrowed from several historical periods to create a new integrated style. At its dedication on October 3, 1897, Bishop Foster, the senior living ex-pastor of the church, "pronounced it without a peer among the church edifices of Methodism."¹² The Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew remains one of the great ecclesiastical monuments of Methodism and one of New York City's major religious structures.

FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, March 6, 1897, p. 5.
2. For detailed analysis of the rowhouse development of the Upper West Side see Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Row Houses of New York's West Side," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 34 (March 1975), 19-36.
3. New York Tribune, June 9, 1890, p. 7.
4. New York Times, September 15, 1889, p. 8.
5. Richard Guy Wilson, "Architecture, Landscape, and City Planning," in The American Renaissance 1876-1917, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1979), p. 75.
6. We would like to thank Herbert R. Broderick for his discussion of the sources for the St. Paul's design in his unpublished report "United Methodist Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew," 1980.
7. The finest example of this type of church in New York City is probably St. Gregory's Roman Catholic Church on St. John's Place and Brooklyn Avenue in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, designed in 1915 by Frank HeImle.
8. New York Times, June 28, 1895, p. 8.
9. World Wide Missions, 10 (November, 1897), 1.
10. These statues, as well as one in the niche on the octagonal tower and others on the tower balconies, are visible in drawings of the church printed in Montgomery Schuyler's article on Robertson and on the cover of the program for the laying of the cornerstone. They do not, however, appear on Robertson's original elevation drawing. It is, therefore, unclear whether or not Robertson intended to have these statues installed.
11. The other extant churches are St. Luke's Episcopal Church (1892) on Convent Avenue and West 141st Street and the Bedford Park Presbyterian Church (1900) on Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx.
12. World Wide Missions, 10 (November, 1897), 1.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart
Research Department

Report edited by
Nancy Goeschel
Research Department

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New York Tribune. June 9, 1890, p. 7; March 6, 1897, p. 7; October 3, 1897, p. 2.

Schuyler, Montgomery. "The Works of R.H. Robertson." Architectural Record, 6 (December, 1896), 184-219.

World Wide Missions, 10 (November, 1897), 1-2.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 St. Paul and St. Andrew 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 their important qualities, the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew and parish house form one of the most distinguished ecclesiastical complexes in New York City; that the church is a key work in the career of the prominent nineteenth-century architect R.H. Robertson, marking a stylistic transition in his work from the picturesque Romanesque Revival of the 1880s and early 1890s, to a style dominated by Classical- and Renaissance-inspired forms and is one of only three church designs by Robertson to survive in New York City; that it was built to serve a rapidly expanding affluent population at a time when the Upper West Side of Manhattan was undergoing extensive development; that the church complex combines motifs and forms from several historical sources--the Early Christian, German Romanesque, and early Italian Renaissance--to create a single unified design and, that as such, it is a masterful example of "scientific eclecticism"; that while the design looks to historic precedents, the use of light-colored Roman brick and terra cotta, place the complex in the forefront of contemporary architectural currents; that the handsome and finely-executed detail--particularly the octagonal corner tower, the flying buttresses, and the terra-cotta angels of the front facade--is an integral element of the design; and that the church complex remains a vital component of the architectural landscape of the Upper West Side.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, 540 West End Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1234, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW
540 West End Avenue
Manhattan

Built 1895-97
Architect: R.H.
Robertson