Landmarks Preservation Commission
Oct. 3, 1989; Designation List 221
LP-1709

COOGAN BUILDING (Originally Racquet Court Club Building), 776-782 Sixth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1875-76; architect, Alfred H. Thorp.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 828, Lot 1.

On May 16, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Coogan Building (Item No. 6). The hearing was continued to June 13, 1989 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the two hearings five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Seven witnesses, including the owner and his five representatives, spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has received numerous letters in support of designation, as well as a few letters and statements opposing designation. Commissioner Sarah Bradford Landau recused herself from voting on the designation of this item because she had testified in support of its designation at a previous public hearing held by the Commission (LP-1567), prior to her appointment as a Commissioner.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Coogan Building is an excellent and early example of arcaded, tripartite facade design, of the type later expounded by Louis Sullivan in his writings on architecture, and established as the aesthetic solution to the design of tall buildings in the 1880s. The elements of the Coogan Building which make it a forerunner of the "skyscraper" type include: the organization of the facade into a tripartite scheme of base, shaft, and capital; the use of tall arcades; and a flat roof. A six-story structure with four-story recessed arcades and deep eaves supported by delicate wrought-iron brackets, this building achieves a monumentality unusual for its size. Renaissance-inspired stylistically, it is faced in common red brick with distinctive corbelled and projecting patterned bands and decorative flat infill. Unusual features of the building include the ground floor commercial space, and its commercial appearance in a period when such clubhouse buildings were frequently residential in appearance. Designed by Alfred Huijkoper Thorp, one of the first Americans to be trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, it was built in 1875-76 for use by the Racquet Court Club, then one of the oldest and most prestigious social and athletic clubs in Manhattan, and notable as one which fostered the elite sport of racquets; it exists as an early surviving athletic clubhouse in New York City. The name Coogan Building derives from the signs painted on both
the Sixth Avenue and 26th Street facades by the second owners, Harriet G. and James J. Coogan.

**Neighborhood Development**

The development of residential neighborhoods north of Greenwich Village commenced around Gramercy Park in the 1830s. By the 1850s Union Square was ringed by large detached houses which were also being constructed along Fifth Avenue and Broadway. From the 1840s through the 1860s tracts of land were being improved with middle class rowhouses and town houses along Sixth Avenue and on the side streets.

By the early 1870s, on Sixth Avenue south of 23rd Street, the retail store district was developing, and the character of Madison Square, Broadway and Fifth Avenue was changing as the wealthy residents of the neighborhood moved uptown, their buildings altered or replaced by retail concerns. In 1875, when the building site for the Racquet Court Club Building was chosen, it was close to an emerging business and commercial district, bounded by Madison and Union Squares, Sixth Avenue and Park Avenue South.

Madison Square, the terminus of the New Haven and Harlem Railroads, had become the transportation hub of the city. Nearby was the entrance to the McDade Tunnel between New Jersey and Manhattan on 23rd Street, and the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railroad (planned in 1875 reaching 26th Street in 1878). As a result the area was accommodated by hotels, theaters, restaurants, shopping, and other amusements for tourists. There were also several clubs in the Madison Square area throughout the 1870s: the Masonic Hall at 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue; the Union League Club at Madison and 26th Street; The Travelers Club on Fifth Avenue between 26th and 27th Streets; and the New York Club on 25th Street between Broadway and Fifth Avenue.¹

**Racquet Court Club**

The Coogan Building, one of the earliest surviving athletic clubhouse in New York, was designed for the Racquet Court Club, the name of the New York Racquet and Tennis Club prior to 1890. Informally existing as a club from about 1793, the Racquet Court Club was organized officially in 1875, preliminary to the construction of the Sixth Avenue clubhouse.² The game of racquets was brought to New York from Canada, shortly after the American Revolution, by James Knox, and with the construction of his racquet court and clubhouse, quickly became a sport popular with the old moneyed families of the city. Historically, the club's members came from New York's established families, a membership shared, for the most part, with the exclusive Knickerbocker and Union Clubs. Notable Racquet Court Club members have included Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt, John Jacob Astor, Rutherford Stuyvesant, and J.P. Morgan.

The first court was built on Allen Street, between Canal and Hester Streets, in what was then a fashionable residential neighborhood. The court had no roof and stood adjacent to the modest frame clubhouse.³ In 1845, a
The encroaching commercial district pushed the racquet players northward in 1854, and the Broadway clubhouse was sold. New courts were built on 13th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, by a former racquets champion, Edward La Montagne, who called his enterprise the Gymnasium Club. A more modest establishment than the Broadway Racquet Club, the Gymnasium Club nonetheless offered the club members two regulation "English-sized" (i.e. smaller) courts. After four years, La Montagne sold the building to Andrew Thorp (brother of the Coogan Building architect), a club member, who continued the club for several more years.

Andrew Thorp sold the 13th Street club building in 1868, and from 1868 to 1875 there were no racquet courts in New York. In 1875, Thorp, with the assistance of racquets-playing financial backers, including the wealthy land developer Rutherford Stuyvesant, bought the property at 26th Street and Sixth Avenue, and erected a clubhouse with two racquet courts designed by his brother Alfred Thorp, which he rented to the newly organized Racquet Court Club for $14,000 per year.

Perhaps due to the speculative nature of the clubhouse project, and wishing to safeguard their investment from the start with a commercial ground floor, builder Andrew Thorp and his financial backers chose a developing commercial neighborhood. The location on Sixth Avenue, a generally commercial street, and the planned use of the ground floor for stores no doubt influenced architect Alfred Thorp’s design for the clubhouse. This commercial appearance for the Racquet Court Club Building differed from the domestic character of contemporary clubhouses, but was soon acknowledged as a precedent-setting style for later athletic clubhouses.

It was realized by the late 1880s, that the Sixth Avenue building was not large enough to meet the needs of the growing club. The decision to relocate was ultimately made in 1890 when tennis courts were required in the clubhouse, after the re-incorporation of the Racquet Court Club as the Racquet and Tennis Club. In 1891, the Racquet and Tennis Club moved to a new clubhouse at 27 West 43rd Street (now demolished), designed by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz. One final relocation to larger quarters, in 1918, brought the club to its current location at 370 Park Avenue in a building designed by McKim, Mead & White (1916-18), a designated New York City Landmark.

Alfred H. Thorp

Alfred Huidekoper Thorp (1843-1917) was the sixth American to attend the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris (the well-known architect Richard Morris Hunt being the first, in 1846). Beaux-Arts training was well respected in the United States, especially before academically oriented architectural training programs were available here.
In Paris, Thorp attended Honore Daumet's atelier from 1864 to 1868. He appears to have terminated his schooling at the Ecole upon achieving first class, the final level before the Prix de Rome competition, for which foreigners were not eligible, in 1868. He returned to the United States, and practiced under his own name as early as 1870.7

Thorp worked as an associate of one of America’s pre-eminent High Victorian architects, Edward T. Potter (1831-1904), under the name of Potter & Thorp, on the Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) house (1873-74) in Hartford, Connecticut. It is possible that the French features of the house design are Thorp’s.8 In 1874, Potter entrusted Thorp with the design of Clemens’ study in Elmira, New York.9

New York architect Bruce Price (1845-1903), later a notable architect in his own right, worked with Thorp in 1879, preparing the designs for the Union League Club competition, submitted under the name of Thorp & Price.10 With these exceptions, Thorp worked alone from 1874 until 1892, and of his work in New York from this period only the Coogan Building (1875-76) still stands.

Wilbur S. Knowles (1875-1944) worked with Thorp between 1892 and 1898. While their partnership produced several buildings (in what is now the Ladies Mile Historic District) within the vicinity of the Coogan Building, none are extant. Thorp & Knowles also competed for and designed residential, ecclesiastical and commercial buildings in Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.11

Design and Construction

The growth of New York by the 1850s and the increasing value of property in the commercial and business centers of Manhattan required the maximization of the building lot. Yet, before elevators, six stories was the maximum height at which a building was commercially viable. By the late 1860s, a combination of technological improvements allowed for the construction of tall buildings: the perfection of the passenger elevator, fireproof construction, and partial metal framing for floor support systems.12 Although tall building construction was popularly accepted by the mid-1870s, the aesthetics of the new architecture were not completely resolved until the 1890s, with Louis Sullivan’s celebrated tripartite arcaded skyscrapers in Chicago.

Two notable examples of early New York skyscrapers were contemporary with the Coogan Building: the Western Union Building, by George Post, ten and a half stories; and the Tribune Building by Richard Morris Hunt, ten stories (both 1873-75, now demolished). Although these buildings expressed some verticality through the arrangement of fenestration, the soaring appearance of a skyscraper as we know it was checked by the introduction of horizontal elements such as stringcourses, projecting bays, and picturesque details at the rooftop.

The Coogan Building (Racquet Court Club Building) is in a Renaissance-inspired style of the 1870s, a style which features less ornament than the
earlier Italianate style of the 1850s. Usually designed with stone facades but occasionally with cast iron or brick, buildings in this style almost invariably have solid-looking bases and terminating cornices, with the simple repeated elements of the midsection arranged horizontally. The Coogan Building facades are similarly composed of three articulated zones of base, midsection, and attic capped by a flat roof. The mid-section, however, is unified through the use of tall unbroken arcades which draw the eye upward, enhancing the verticality and height of the building. The overall effect is further enhanced by the corbelled and projecting patterned bands and decorative brick infill and the deep roof eaves supported by delicate wrought-iron brackets. Examples of unbroken arcades are found in the neo-Gothic style commercial buildings in Philadelphia in the 1850s, and two-story, tiered arcades are used in the "sperm candle" designs of New York in the 1860s. The early use of arcades in Philadelphia and New York City is viewed by architectural historians as forerunner of modern skyscraper design.13 Two well-known examples of tall arcades as a skyscraper aesthetic (both demolished) were George Post’s Produce Exchange Building in New York (1881-84), and the celebrated Marshall Field Wholesale Store by H. H. Richardson in Chicago, (1885-87).14 Thus the Coogan Building, which achieves a monumentality unusual for its size, is an excellent and early example of arcaded tripartite facade design which was established as the aesthetic solution to the design of tall buildings in the 1880s.

The opening of the Racquet Court Club Building on June 20, 1876, was well-covered by the local daily newspapers, although the progressive nature of the architecture impelled descriptions of the building, by these conservative contemporary writers, as "queer shaped" and in a "decidedly peculiar style." The strictly architectural criticisms were, however, free with their praise. In American Architect and Building News, 1878, it was called "...one of the few buildings of the city that are really architectural in conception and treatment." And it was noticed and favorably commented upon by the famous architectural critic, Montgomery Schuyler, in the Architectural Record of 1909.15

The interior of the building, above the commercial first story, was divided into the club offices, public rooms and residences on the second and third stories, and the gymnasium and racquet courts on the double-height fourth story. Bowling alleys were located on a partial fifth story. A walking track and cantilevered spectators’ galleries (at the level of the current sixth story) looked down onto the racquet courts.

The two racquet courts of regulation "English-size" were each sixty-three feet long and thirty-one and one-half feet wide, with twenty-eight foot high cement-covered walls. The location of the courts were expressed on the exterior as blind arches; there were no windows cut through on the Sixth Avenue facade above the third story, as this was a playing wall of one of the courts. The courts were open and sky-lit from forty feet above by the attic windows which were designed with the incorporation of the deep eaves so as not to require blinds. Also equipped with gas lighting, one court was designed for night-time play and for optimum visibility was painted white and was played with a black ball; the day-time court was
painted red and used with a white ball.

Description

The red brick facades of the Coogan Building are broken into a tripartite scheme of base, midsection, and attic. By virtue of this tripartite division, its tall unbroken four-story arcade, and flat roof, it is a significant and early surviving example of proto-skyscraper design.

The non-original glass and metal storefronts of the commercial base, are capped by a red terra-cotta tiled canopy, part of an 1899 alteration, which follows the contours of the building facade. The entrances to the building are at the eastern end of the 26th Street facade, separated by a narrow pilaster.

The four-story midsection is unified vertically through the use of slightly recessed, continuous arcades which terminate in round-headed segmental windows, under arches defined by an archivolt of raised patterned brickwork. The windows below the fifth story are square-headed with stone sills and lintels and set within relieving arches. Alternating single- and double-width windows are used on the facades, developing an A-B-B-A-B-A rhythm along the Sixth Avenue facade and an A-B-B-A-B-A-B-A rhythm along 26th Street.

The building’s primary window type is a one-over-one wood-framed double-hung unit with a shorter upper sash. The fifth story windows are wood, and have a tripartite arrangement with operable sash and a segmental transom. The windows behind the fire escape are metal replacements. The window openings in the previously blind openings at the fourth and fifth stories of the Sixth Avenue facade were cut in 1918. Given the uniformity of window sash throughout the Sixth Avenue and the West 26th Street facades, (with the exception of the ones opening on the fire escapes) it is likely that all were replaced in 1918.

The small identical arched windows of the attic story are set under deeply overhanging wood eaves with carved rafters. Set on a corbelled band at the sixth story, delicate wrought-iron brackets, detailed with an open circle and naturalistic forms support the eaves. The eaves are punctuated by a fire escape on 26th Street leading to the roof.

Brick piers, or buttresses, project slightly from the facade, in the center of the 26th Street facade and one bay from the corners on Sixth Avenue, and terminate in chimneys on the roof. At the springline of the arcade, the impost blocks are decorated with a raised brick diamond pattern with a double diamond at the corner. Brick in herring bone pattern is used under the relieving arches over the second-, third-, and fourth-story windows. Raised brick bands run across the facade at the spring points of these arches. Cross-shaped tie bars are used at the second-, third-, and fourth-floor levels, with tie bars shaped as an "18" and a "76" substituted on the two piers on the Sixth Avenue facade at the third floor level.

The northern elevation is partially visible from Sixth Avenue. Brick-
faced, it has raised piers terminating in chimneys as on the other facades, with double-hung metal-clad windows at the fifth and sixth stories, but it has no applied architectural detail.

Subsequent History

In 1891, following the move of the club, the commercial capacity of the building was increased by altering the first two stories of the building's eastern end on 26th Street, while retaining the rest of the building as a gym, which was rented to the University Athletic Club. 17

Andrew S. Thorp sold the building to Harriet Coogan, a wealthy real estate heiress, in 1898. 18 In 1899, Coogan invested $20,000 in the renovation of the building for offices and for light manufacturing and warehouse use. Employing architect G.H. Schellenger, the alteration commenced in December, 1899 and was completed in November, 1900. Internally, the space was opened up by removing walls on the second and third stories, and installing columns and girders to support the floor and roof beams. It was probably at this time that the red tile canopy was installed over the first story. 19

In 1918, to conform to the Labor Law, windows were cut in the building. This is probably when the blind windows, along the former court playing wall on the Sixth Avenue facade, were opened. Also at this time the fire escape on 26th Street was installed, necessitating cutting an opening for the stairs through the eaves to the roof.

Alterations to the interior have modified the use of the Coogan Building into some residential loft space. The ground story has been altered but these changes to the original commercial ground story are well screened from the street by the tiled canopy. A wrought-iron balcony at the fifth story of the 26th Street facade has been removed.

Report prepared by Mirande Dupuy
Research Department

Report edited by Marjorie Pearson
Director of Research
NOTES


4. An off-shoot of the earlier racquets-playing group, this club was established in protest to the practice of high wagering on matches at the Allen Street clubhouse by some members and their guests. The Allen Street clubhouse subsequently closed after losing its prestige along with its important members.

5. Racquets is a racket sport played against the walls and floor of a court, with opponents facing front, as in contemporary racket ball and squash. Regulation courts reduced the earlier court size from 120’ x 36’ to 65’ x 32’. Rushmore, The Racquet and Tennis Club, 8.


Interestingly, William A. Potter (half-brother of Edward and architect of some major New York City buildings, including the designated New York City Landmark, St. Agnes’ Parish House and the Universalist Church of New York in the Central Park West - 76th Street Historic District), used tall arcades in his buildings designed after Thorp’s Racquet Court Club Building, as can be seen in the brick factory building at 186 Mulberry Street (1882-83). Landau, Edward T. and William A. Potter, 324, 444.

10. This uncommissioned design was published in American Architect and Building News 6, (Aug., 1879), 60, pl. 191. It is a striking design featuring vertical banding of arcades, a flat roof, and tripartite massing with a slightly cantilevered attic story and a base set off by a stringcourse. The Union League Club design was not well reviewed by the journal in this critique of architectural entries despite its resemblance to the Racquet Court Club which had been admired by W. [Peter B. Wight] in his column "Correspondence" in American Architect
and Building News the previous year.

Samuel H. Graybill, in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Bruce Price, American Architect," (New Haven, 1957), 30, comments that Henry Hobson Richardson may have been aware of the Union League Club design when he built the Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1885-87), in Chicago.

11. This information is taken from issues of the Journal of the Architectural League, 1882-98.


16. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 828, Lot 1. Alt 867-1918, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court.

17. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 828, Lot 1. Alt 376-1891, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court.

18. Harriet Gardiner Lynch Coogan, a descendant of the Gardiner family of Gardiners Island, was identified in her obituary as "one of the most important landholders on Manhattan Island." She was the daughter of William Lynch, "one of the largest realty owners in this city" from whom she inherited much property. Harriet Coogan kept her offices in the Coogan building up until the time of her death. Her husband James J. Coogan, who is listed as the owner of record in two alterations for this building in 1913 and 1914, was a prominent merchant, and was elected Manhattan's first Borough President in 1899. James J. Coogan obituary, New York Times, Oct. 25, 1915, p.9; Mrs. James J. Coogan

19. This canopy is not identified in any Alteration applications for the building, which has led to speculation that it was part of the original design. A photograph in King's Handbook, 1893, brought to our attention by Sarah Bradford Landau, documents the adjacent Edison Electric Illuminating Co. Building and affords enough of a view of the Coogan Building to ascertain that the canopy belongs to a subsequent alteration.
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 Coogan Building 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 Coogan Building was built as a clubhouse for the Racquet Court Club, then one of the oldest and most prestigious social and athletic clubs in Manhattan; that the Coogan Building, built in 1875-76 to the designs of Alfred H. Thorp, is an excellent and early example of arcaded, tripartite facade design, of the type later expounded by Louis Sullivan in his writings on architecture, and established as the aesthetic solution to the design of tall buildings in the 1880s; that the elements of the Coogan Building which make it a forerunner of the "skyscraper" type include: the organization of the facade into a tripartite scheme of base, shaft, and capital; the use of tall arcades; and a flat roof; that the skillful Renaissance-inspired design features distinctive patterned and corbelled brickwork, tie irons with the date of completion, single- and double-width window rhythms set within relieving arches, and unusual naturalistic wrought-iron brackets which support deep eaves designed to regulate the sunlight into the fourth-floor racquet courts; that the six-story Coogan Building achieves a monumentality unusual for its size; that the design solution of a commercial appearance for an athletic club set a precedent for future athletic clubs in Manhattan; that its architect, Alfred H. Thorp was one of the first American architects trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris; and that it is one of the oldest surviving club buildings in Manhattan and notable as one which fostered the elite sport of racquets.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Coogan Building, 776-782 Sixth Avenue, Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 828, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Coogan Building
(Originally Racquet Court Club Building)
Landmark Site

Graphic Source: Sanborn
Manhattan Land Book,
1988-89
Coogan Building  (Originally Racquet Court Club Building)  Photo Credit: Mirande Dupuy
1875-76
776-782 Sixth Avenue
View Facing Northeast
Coogan Building
(Originally Racquet Court Club Building)
View Facing East

Photo Credit: Mirande Dupuy
Coogan Building
(Originally Racquet Court Club Building)
View Facing North

Photo Credit: Mirande Dupuy