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STREETSCAPES: The Harlem Courthouse; A New Tack for the City on a Landmark

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HOW can a building be preserved? By landmark designation? By careful, expensive restoration? By finding appropriate new uses?

With the Harlem Courthouse at 121st Street and Sylvan Court, the city's Department of General Services is trying a new tack. The 1893 building has landmark designation, is far from areas coveted for development and gets a steady flow of money for restoration and renovation. Most preservation battles are considered successful with much less. What is unusual is that the department is also actually seeking a use for the largely dormant building.

Harlem had a local court as early as 1660 and by the 1880's what was originally a remote village was becoming a regional center. Theaters, clubs, churches, blocks of houses and department stores sprang up, especially around Mount Morris Park and along 125th Street, which had rail stops at Park, Third and Second Avenues.

The city's courts were divided between criminal and civil and the Police Court and District Court shared rented quarters in the old Harlem Hall at 125 East 125th Street. In 1889, the clerk of the District Court, Thomas F. Gilroy, was appointed Commissioner of Public Works. One of his first projects was a new courthouse for Harlem at the southeast corner of 121st Street and Sylvan Court.

Designed by Thom & Wilson and completed in late 1892, it gave an unmistakably civic air to tiny Sylvan Court, a little street connecting 120th and 121st, between Lexington and Third. The building is symmetrically organized around a round corner tower that extends up to an octagonal belfry with four clock faces. Gable-end bays and arch-topped windows spread out on each side. The individual elements are generally Romanesque in style but the spiked, choppy quality of the massing contributes a Victorian air.

Gilroy officially opened the building on New Year's Day 1893 in his new capacity, as Mayor.

Vehicular bays, some for arriving prisoners, occupy most of the ground floor and the corner tower serves as an entry. The tower also has an early, perhaps original, open-cage elevator and a tightly curved open spiral stair providing vertical travel as dramatic as in any John Portman hotel. There are several floors of bare brick jail cells in the rear but the principal rooms are the two courts.

The old Police Court, on the second floor, is used for storage and, though littered with equipment and boxes, is still a wide, grand room with oak paneling and Renaissance revival plasterwork ceiling.

The old District Court on the third floor is still used one night a week as a Small Claims Court and seems largely intact. The varnished oak paneling, podium, jury box and railings are a soft orange-brown and the ceiling is a huge, three-centered curve with plaster molding, simpler and grander than that of the Police Court below.

Money had been allocated for decoration but never spent and in 1936 two Works Progress Administration murals were painted by David Karfunkle. They show an Egyptian scene with laborers and a Venetian scene of commercial trading. Their titles are uncertain, but according to Marlene Parks, an art historian, they were known as "The Exploitation of Labor" and "The Hoarding of Wealth."

Deborah Bershad, director of archives at the Art Commission, said that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League and Harlem activists protested the original designs because they depicted blacks in submissive roles. In the final painting, skin colors were changed.

A COURT consolidation in 1962 shifted most court functions downtown and since then city agencies such as Sanitation, Environmental Protection and Consumer Affairs have used the building for a variety of purposes.

The courthouse was designated a landmark in 1967 and in the last five years General Services has spent \$5 million upgrading it, including giving it a new copper roof and boiler. But there has been constant vandalism - parts of the new roof have been stolen - because the building is so little used.

While planning a facade restoration and a new mechanical system for the building, General Services also hired Cannon architects to analyze how the courthouse could most economically be reused - different uses could trigger substantially different requirements for egress and fire protection.

The preliminary report calls for court records storage in the jail section, a day-care center on the ground floor and a center for the elderly on the second floor. The department is trying to find interested users; if it succeeds, a new chapter will be added to the preservation history of this unusual building.

Photo: The Harlem Courthouse at 121st Street and Sylvan Avenue in 1892. (King's Handbook, 1892/O.M.H.)