

HAMILTON FISH PARK PLAY CENTER, 130 Pitt Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1898-1900; architects Carrère & Hastings.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 340, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 10, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Hamilton Fish Park Play Center and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Hamilton Fish Park Play Center is among the most notable small civic buildings in New York City. Designed in 1898 by Carrère & Hastings, one of America's foremost architectural firms at the turn of the century, this park pavilion is an exuberant Beaux-Arts style building that is the only survivor of the architects' original playground plan. Beautiful in its own right, the building is even more exceptional when considered in relation to its surroundings. Hamilton Fish Park is located in an area that, for over 100 years, has been one of New York City's most depressed neighborhoods. In fact, the park was constructed as part of a movement to add open space to the densely populated slums of the city. The building was not planned simply as a utilitarian structure, but was designed in the manner of a small garden pavilion placed within a formal park. It was hoped that this sophisticated design would have a positive effect on the area's immigrant population, lowering the crime rate and improving the respect of the residents for the law and for America in general.

In the post Civil War period, immigration from Europe to the United States increased dramatically. New York City's Lower East Side became the home of millions of these new residents and the area developed into one of the world's most densely populated slums. By the late nineteenth century, older buildings in the area had either been converted from private residences to multiple dwellings or had been replaced by three-, four-, or five-story brick or frame tenements, built with few amenities and no regard for light or sanitation. Conditions were made worse by the construction of additional tenements in the rear yards of the buildings that fronted on the streets, thus increasing the population density. The Tenth Ward, centering on Hester and Orchard Streets, was described in 1897 as "notoriously the worst specimen of city overcrowding in the world."¹ This ward contained 109 acres and a population of 70,168 people, or 643.8 per acre; there was an average of 229 children under the age of fifteen per acre, and the population was increasing. The Eleventh Ward, where Hamilton Fish Park was to be located, had a population of 86,722 squeezed into 213 acres (407.1 people per acre). Prior to the 1880s the Lower East Side had almost no open space; no parks had been planned by the city and schools were built without playgrounds. The mayor's Committee on Small Parks wrote in 1897 that:

In the original plan of the City of New York the children seem to have been forgotten. Doubtless this oversight was due to the extensive area of unoccupied land which was available for the games and sports in which the youth of that day were wont

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to indulge. But as the city has grown in population, and especially within the last thirty years, this unoccupied space has been covered by improvements...²

In the nineteenth century there was a widespread belief that urban life was inherently evil and that the sins of urbanism could be cleansed by nature and open space. It is not surprising that such a philosophy would develop in this country which was founded in a sparsely populated virgin wilderness where open land seemed to be limitless. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote about the evils of urbanism, was a proponent of the rural agrarian life; many other nineteenth-century writers, philosophers, and theoreticians condemned the immoral city and praised the moral character of rural life.

As the United States developed into a great industrial power, the open spaces began to be devoured by the growing cities of the East and Middle West. As natural areas became harder for urban dwellers to reach, men like Andrew Jackson Downing and William Cullen Bryant began to campaign for the creation of large parks that would be breathing spaces for the urban masses, bringing the cleansing and healing powers of nature to the city dweller. These men believed that by bringing nature into the cities many of the evils of urban life would be eradicated. This campaign for urban parks led to such great open spaces as Central Park and Prospect Park. The philosophy of creating parks as a way of improving urban life, decreasing crime, and improving the quality of citizenship among urban residents was also a determining factor, later in the century, in the movement for the construction of small parks in Manhattan's slums.

Those people who fought for the creation of small parks believed that they would aid in combating crime among young people and increase respect for the law and for American traditions. The mayor's Committee on Small Parks, established in 1897, was "convinced from the careful consideration which they have been enabled to make... that the failure to provide for the reasonable recreation of the people, and especially for the playgrounds for the rising generation, has been the most efficient cause of the growth of crime and pauperism in our midst."³ It was thought that since there was no parks, children were forced to play in the streets where they obstructed traffic. This caused the police to interfere with their activities, leading to hostility towards the police and, thus, the growth of the criminal class. Parks and playgrounds, it was felt, would give young people a place for healthy activity, insuring their respect for the law and their development as healthy and law abiding citizens. Although this belief seems simplistic and naive today, it was the leading argument used by the proponents of small parks.

The first step towards the creation of small parks on the Lower East Side came in 1884 when New York State authorized the laying out of Corlears Hook Park on the East River at Cherry Street in the Seventh Ward.⁴ This was followed in 1887 by a major bill passed by the New York State Legislature that "authorized and empowered" the Board of Street Opening and Improvement of the City of New York "to select, locate and lay out such and so many parks in the City of New York, south of One Hundred and Fifty-Ninth Street, as the said board may from time to time determine."⁵ One million dollars a year was allocated for this purpose.

In 1895 a private group called the Committee of Seventy established a Sub-Committee on Small Parks to study the effect of the 1887 law. The sub-committee found "that the law of 1887, known as the Small Parks Law, which was intended to give needed relief to those congested districts, has failed of its purpose, the net result of such relief of seven years effort under this measure being one park, Mulberry Bend Park, which is as yet only on paper." The only other parks laid out were Corlears

Hook, which had been authorized in 1884, St. John's Park (renamed Hudson Park and now known as James J. Walker Park on Hudson Street at Leroy Place and Clarkson Street) which was formerly a burial ground and thus did not add open space to the city, Rutgers Slip Green, which had been a street, and East River Park, which the sub-committee believed was not urgently needed and had no effect on relieving the overcrowded conditions of the area. The sub-committee felt that "urgent and immediate action for needed relief"⁷ was needed and recommended that: 1) more small parks be built; 2) all public schools be built with playgrounds; 3) Mulberry Bend Park be immediately constructed; 4) the one million dollar yearly allocation under the 1887 law be made cumulative; and 5) that the mayor appoint an advisory committee on small parks.⁸ Many of the sub-committee's recommendations were acted upon. Mulberry Bend Park was completed, replacing the notorious Five Points; a mayoral committee was established in June 1896; and at least one new park, Hamilton Fish Park, was begun.

In March 1896 the Health Board announced that it had selected a site for a new park that "would give an open air space in the most crowded locality and will remove the greatest number of conditions which may have become a menace to the public health."⁹ The blocks chosen for this park contained a large number of tenements including seventeen rear tenements. In May 1896 an official announcement was made, reporting that the area between Houston, Pitt, Stanton, and Sherriff Streets, with Willett Street running through the middle, would be purchased for park use."¹⁰ The 1898 Department of Parks Annual Report noted that land had been acquired and cleared of buildings, but no funds had yet been made available to begin work on the design and layout of the park.¹¹ In 1899 funds were finally allocated and the architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings was given the commission to design the park and the small gymnasium building that was to face Pitt Street at the west end of the site. Work finally began on the park in April 1899.¹²

John Mervin Carrère (1858-1911) and Thomas Hastings (1860-1929) were the leading American exponents of the design philosophy of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts. While both men had attended the Ecole in the late 1870s and early 1880s, each belonged to a different atelier, and they did not meet until after their graduation when both were employed by the office of McKim, Mead & White. In 1885 the two architects established a partnership, first renting space in a small back room of McKim, Mead & White's office and then moving to an old Federal style residence at 3 Bowling Green.

According to David Gray, who wrote a biography of Hastings in 1933, it was Hastings who did most of the firm's design work, while Carrère managed the office and negotiated with clients and contractors.¹³ The firm's earliest commissions were from real estate developer Henry Flagler. Flagler was a friend and parishioner of Thomas Hastings' father, the Rev. Doctor Thomas Hastings, minister of the West Presbyterian Church in New York and president of the Union Theological Seminary. For Flagler, Carrère & Hastings designed the Ponce de Leon and Alcazar Hotels in St. Augustine, "Whitehall," the Flagler estate in Palm Beach, and several churches. Flagler's patronage established the success of the firm and commissions for residences, churches, hotels, and office buildings followed. In 1891 Carrère & Hastings gained prominence for the design they submitted to the competition for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The proposal placed second to Heins & LaFarge's winning scheme. It was, however, their winning design in the New York Public Library competition (1897) that established Carrère & Hastings as one of the leading firms in the United States.

Most of the work designed by Carrère & Hastings was in the French Renaissance tradition and this accorded with the philosophy espoused by Thomas Hastings in his numerous articles and lectures. Hastings believed that American life was still motivated by the forces that had brought about the Renaissance. He saw himself as a

Renaissance architect and believed that only architecture based on Renaissance precedents was applicable to modern building.¹⁴ These forms were seen as appropriate to contemporary culture, while the use of styles other than those of the Renaissance was inappropriate. He noted, in a 1913 lecture, that "the irrational idiosyncrasy of modern times is the assumption that each kind of problem demands a particular style of architecture"¹⁵ and believed that the use of medieval styles "has shown a want of life and spirit, simply because it is an anachronism."¹⁶

It was Hastings' belief that architects needed to be educated in one style and that this should be a style that reflected their own time. This style, however, should not be an imitation of past architecture, but an adaptation of past work to modern needs. Hastings chose to adapt French Renaissance precedents because he felt that only in France was architecture "consistently modern."¹⁷ To Hastings, French architecture had evolved a style that was distinctly representative of the nineteenth century. This was because of the "high classic standards of study which has... always been adhered to by the authorities in the art schools."¹⁸

An overview of the Carrère & Hastings oeuvre shows how closely they worked within this philosophy. Almost all of their work is based on French Renaissance prototypes, and it shows the influence of the educational system of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The New York Public Library, with its classical forms, bold carving, and union of architecture, sculpture, painting, and the decorative arts is the firm's most famous Beaux-Arts design, but city and country residences, churches, office buildings, government buildings, and other works by Carrère & Hastings also reflect a consistent design outlook with roots in the French Renaissance. Among the major surviving French-inspired works designed by Carrère & Hastings in New York City are the Henry T. Sloane Residence (1894-1896) at 9 East 72nd Street, the First Church of Christ, Scientist (1899-1903) at Central Park West and West 96th Street, the Henry Hammond Residence (1902-1903) at 9 East 91st Street, the Staten Island Borough Hall (1903-1906), the arch and colonnade approach to the Manhattan Bridge (1912-1915), the William Starr Miller Residence (1912-1914) at 1048 Fifth Avenue on the corner of East 86th Street, and the Frick Collection (1913-1914) at 1 East 70th Street. Occasionally Carrère & Hastings designed works in other Renaissance-inspired styles. For example, Hastings showed an interest in English architecture, particularly evident in the Fort Washington Presbyterian Church (1914), 21 Wadsworth Avenue at West 174th Street. In addition, Italian Renaissance precedents are prominent in the design of the Richmond County Courthouse (1913-1919).

Carrère & Hastings received the Hamilton Fish Park commission shortly after winning the prestigious New York Public Library competition. The library design consisted of a large symmetrical Beaux-Arts style building surrounded by a formal axially-designed park composed of terraces with parterres and trees. Carrère & Hastings' design for Hamilton Fish Park also includes a Beaux-Arts style structure set amid formally designed grass parterres, trees, benches, and exedra. Hamilton Fish Park was not Carrère & Hastings' first commission for a small park laid out along formal lines. The firm had already designed Hudson Park, replacing St. John's Cemetery. This park was modeled on formal Italian gardens. It contained a small rustic stone pavilion, and axially arranged stairs, balconies, parterres, and fountains (none of these features are extant).

At Hamilton Fish Park, the small pavilion is strategically placed to the west, making it visible to those approaching from the heavily populated areas that lay between the park and the Bowery. Behind the building was a pair of small curving exedra and sculpted water fountains and grass parterres, benches, and trees, all arranged in straight rows. Across Willett Street, which was left open to traffic, was the play-

ground, demarcated by larger exedra, near Houston and Stanton Streets, and by additional symmetrical arrangements of lawn, trees, and benches.

The park plan is in accord with Hastings' view of small city parks. Hastings believed that:

A small park bounded by straight lines in the heart of the city, with winding paths and irregular grades, is in my opinion quite out of place; such a park should be architectural in character. It should be in other works a public square rather than a park.¹⁹

Although built in the midst of one of the world's worst slums, the park building, meant to be used as a gymnasium with minor bathing facilities, was not designed as a dull utilitarian structure, but rather was given great architectural distinction. A key tenet of Beaux-Arts theory was that every type of building, no matter what its use, should be given a careful and sophisticated architectural treatment. This belief nicely complemented the American view of parks as areas that would serve to cleanse the masses of the evils of urban life. Just as the open space of the park and the recreational opportunities afforded by its presence were planned to add to the health and moral conduct of the residents of the area, so too, the architectural embellishments of the park would have a positive effect on the well being of the people in the neighborhood. The following comment on Carrère & Hastings' Hudson Park, which appeared in the Scientific American, Building Edition in June 1899, is equally appropriate to Hamilton Fish Park:

It might, of course, be argued that the architectural adornments of this park would be more suitable for Central Park, the park par excellence of the rich and well-to-do; but there is really no harm in allowing the poor to enjoy good architecture, and such adornments...cannot fail to have an elevating influence on visitors.²⁰

The Hamilton Fish Park gymnasium (now the play center) is not the only example of a sophisticated architectural design being applied to a utilitarian structure in New York City. Many public baths were modeled after the Roman Baths of Caracalla; the power stations of the original IRT subway system were designed to resemble Italian Renaissance palazzi; both Carrère & Hastings and McKim, Mead & White designed comfort stations based on monuments of classical architecture (in Bryant Park and Fort Greene Park), and many of the parks on the Lower East Side and elsewhere in New York were graced with structures modeled after classical and Renaissance garden pavilions.

The design for the Hamilton Fish Park gymnasium was inspired by Charles Girault's Petit Palais in Paris. The Petit Palais was designed in 1895; construction began in 1897 and was completed in 1900. The building won critical acclaim from the time of its initial design.²¹ With their deep interest in contemporary French architecture, both Carrère and Hastings certainly were familiar with the structure. The stone Petit Palais centers on an enormous centrally-placed round-arched entrance portal flanked by wings that end in projecting pavilions with round-arched windows and pedimented rooflines. For their gymnasium design, Carrère & Hastings have compressed and adapted Girault's building to fit the demands of a small urban park in America. This was not the only design for which Carrère & Hastings took the Petit Palace as precedent. The

Agricultural Building at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition also borrows heavily from the Girault work.

As at the Petit Palais, the Hamilton Fish Park building is symmetrically massed and focuses on a projecting centrally-placed round-arched entrance portal, here constructed of limestone with brick trim. This portal, with its modillioned stone cornice rises above the roofline of the main section of the building. A short flight of nine steps leads to the entrance which is set within a Doric-columned enframing topped by a large sexpartite round-arched window. This entrance enframing and window opening are set within the deep concave intrados of the arched portal. To the sides of the arch are brick piers that support the cornice which enframes the arch. These piers have stone quoins and rusticated limestone dados ornamented with smooth oblong panels. The dados rest on smooth stone bases.

To either side of the entrance are three brick and stone bays set above a continuous high limestone basement. Projecting brick and stone piers, similar to those at the entrance, although lacking the oblong panels, separate the window bays. Each bay is composed of a large arched window, set above brickwork accented by a small blind rectangular opening with a limestone enframing located near the base. Each limestone-enframed arch is marked by a faceted keystone and each is surmounted by a pedimented cornice. Four growling lion's heads carved in limestone glare down from the imposts between the windows. At the corners of the building, the piers are accented by the oblong panels seen at the entrance. These projecting panels visually strengthen the corners. A handsome iron fence on a stone platform (part of the original park layout) gives additional emphasis to the southwest and northwest corners. With the exception of the arched entrance, which forms a barrel vault running through the entire building, the structure is crowned by a copper-clad mansard roof. Ocular windows once lit this mansard, but they have been removed. Each side elevation copies a single bay of the front facade. The rear elevation is virtually identical to that of the front, with the additions of an octagonal brick chimney and a limestone clock frame (the clock face has been removed) above the entrance enframing.

On the interior, the building was designed with a central entrance hall of brick, flanked by identical gymnasiums, each with a length of 60' 5½"; to the north was the men's gymnasium and to the south that for women. Each gymnasium was designed with a gallery to be used as a running track (removed) and a wood beam ceiling (intact). In the basement was a boiler room, coal storage room, toilets and dressing rooms for men and women, each with three "needle baths," i.e., showers.²² The building was not meant to be used as a public bath house, thus the bathing and dressing facilities were designed to be large enough to service only those who were using the gymnasiums.

Hamilton Fish Park was completed in 1900. By the time of its completion a new administration had been installed at City Hall and the new parks commissioner, George C. Clausen, postponed the opening of the park because of his disappointment with many of its features. Commissioner Clausen felt that the "designers of this park seem to have secured neither a park nor a playground. The improvement is on very extravagant lines, \$183,000 having been so far spent upon it; this in addition to the \$1,719,505 which it cost to acquire the property. Most of the \$183,000 has been put in an extensive building whose architectural features are not at all consistent with the character of the park or its surroundings. This expenditure for buildings has not resulted in providing for any practical use that seems at all adequate. The gymnasium feature is not complete, and is without apparatus. The public-bath feature is ridiculously inadequate, there being room for only 3 persons to bathe at a time on each side, that for men and that for women, yet with nickel-plated plumbing and costly tilework, enough money has been spent to fit up in a highly sanitary and useful manner much more bathing room."²³ He also complained that there was little planting for

the money, and was quite clear in noting that all of this had been approved under a previous administration.

Despite Clausen's objections, some of which seem justified (particularly those about the planting and arrangement of the grounds) and some of which were not (those about the building, which was designed according to a perceived need for a small gymnasium with related bathing facilities), the park was opened on June 1, 1900.²⁴ The New York Times reported that the park had been "hewn out of the darkened mass of brick and mortar in the very heart of the east side,"²⁵ and that upon its opening "a throng of nearly 10,000 children of the tenements swarmed out upon it with a mighty shout and claimed it for their own."²⁶

The park, as designed by Carrère & Hastings, did not wear well. Planned for quiet activity, its formal arrangement of architectural and landscape features was not appropriate to the activities of large numbers of slum children. The park was soon in ruins "owing, it is said, to the radical defects of the original plan and to the strenuous nature of the youth of the neighborhood."²⁷ The park was soon closed and redesigned. In October 1903, the park was reopened with new trees, new asphalt paths, basketball and tennis courts, and an eight-lap running track. Much of this remodeling was removed in 1935-36 when Aymar Embury designed a swimming pool for the park.²⁸ Embury adapted the original gymnasium building to locker rooms for the pool.

The Hamilton Fish Park Gymnasium, now known as a play center, but still used for locker rooms and as the entrance to the swimming pool, stands as a monument to nineteenth-century civic betterment -- to the belief that great architecture and design would aid in the formation of citizens of outstanding moral character. Although the park itself has been redesigned twice since it was completed, the pavilion has remained a success and is one of the Lower East Side's great architectural treasures.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart
Senior Landmarks Preservation Specialist

Report typed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. Report of the Advisory Committee on Small Parks to Abram S. Hewitt (New York: October 18, 1897), p. 9.
2. Report of Committee on Small Parks (New York: Martin B. Brown, 1897), p. 1.
3. Ibid, p. 2.
4. The population density of this area was 360.7 people per acre.
5. Act of New York State, Chapter 320, May 13, 1887.
6. Report of the Sub-Committee on Small Parks (New York, 1895), p. 1.
7. Ibid, p. 4.
8. Ibid, p. 5.
9. New York Times, March 25, 1896, p. 9.
10. Ibid, May 23, 1896, p. 9.
11. New York City Department of Parks, Annual Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1898, p. 20.
12. Ibid, 1899, p. 8.
13. David Gray, Thomas Hastings Architect (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933), p. 30.
14. Ibid, p. 32.
15. Thomas Hastings, "Modern Architecture," paper read before the Royal Institute of British Architects, May 26, 1913, reprinted in Gray, p. 101.
16. Ibid, p. 107. An examination of Carrère & Hastings' church designs shows the firm's adherence to this philosophy. They did not design religious buildings with Gothic and Romanesque forms, but chose Renaissance forms instead. New York City's First Church of Christ, Scientist, with its Ionic columns, stone spire, and cartouches, is one of the best examples of this type of church.
17. Thomas Hastings, "The Influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts upon American Architecture," Architectural Record, Beaux Arts Number (January 1901), p. 89.
18. Ibid.
19. George Burnap, "Thomas Hastings on Small City Parks," Architectural Record, 51 (1922), 282.
20. "The New Hudson Park," Scientific American, Building Edition, 27 (June 1899), 101.
21. Arthur Drexler, ed., The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 457.
22. Carrère & Hastings, Hamilton Fish Park Drawing No. 3, January 24, 1899 (In the collection of Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.).
23. New York Times, May 24, 1900, p. 14.

24. Ibid, June 2, 1900, p. 7. Clausen did not attend this opening. The newspaper reported that he was ill.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. This pool was built by the Works Progress Administration.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

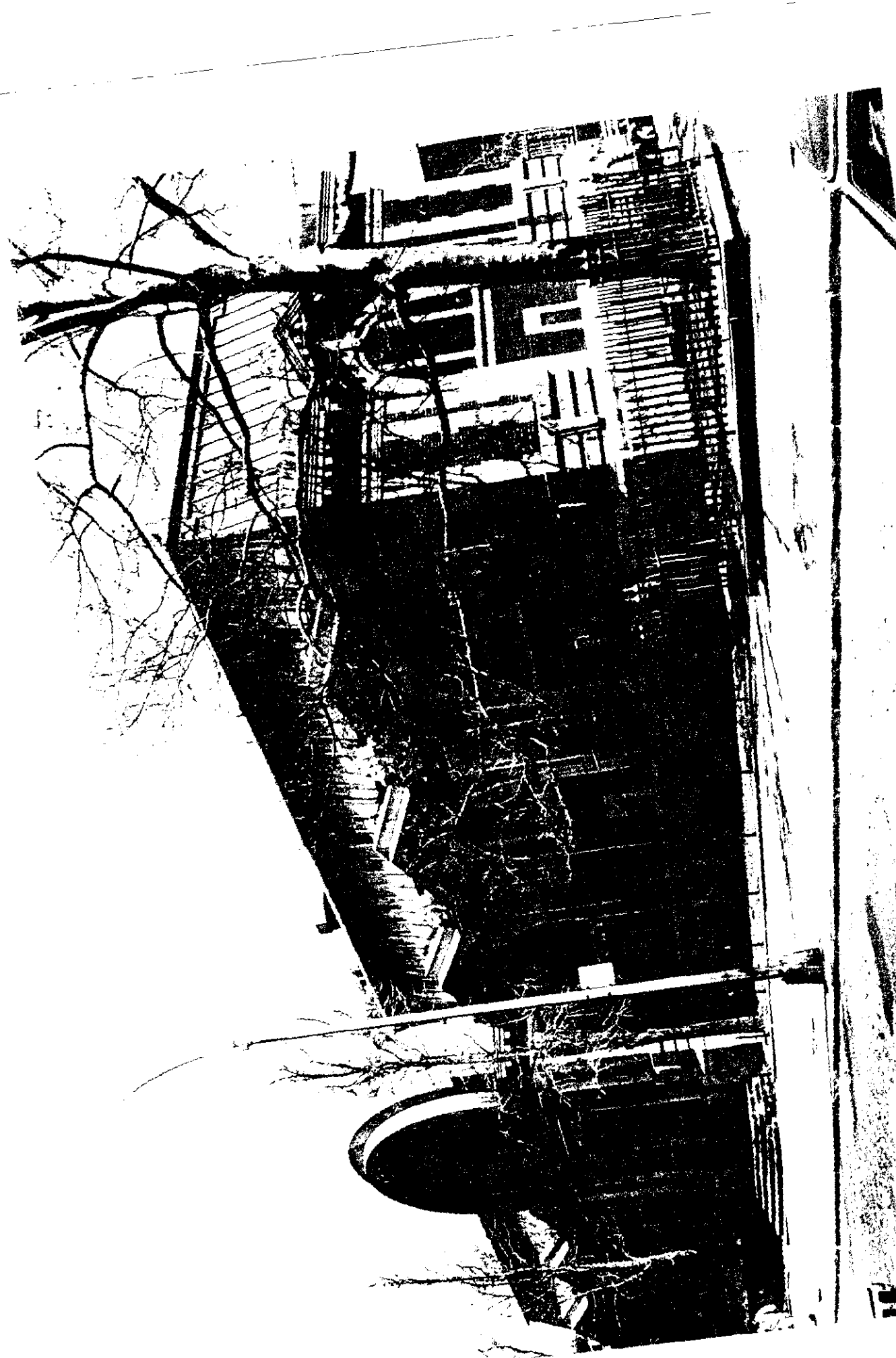
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Hamilton Fish Park Play Center has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Hamilton Fish Park Play Center is among the most notable small civic buildings in New York City; that it is an outstanding example of the French Beaux-Arts inspired design favored by Carrere & Hastings, a firm that was among the most prominent in America at the turn of the century; that the building reflects the beliefs of the architects that utilitarian structures deserved a sophisticated architectural treatment; that it is a major feature of a larger park originally laid out as part of an effort to add open spaces to the overcrowded slums of the Lower East Side; and that, still in active use, the Hamilton Fish Park Play Center remains one of the significant architectural embellishments of the area.

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 Hamilton Fish Park Play Center, 130 Pitt Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 340, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, as its Landmark Site.

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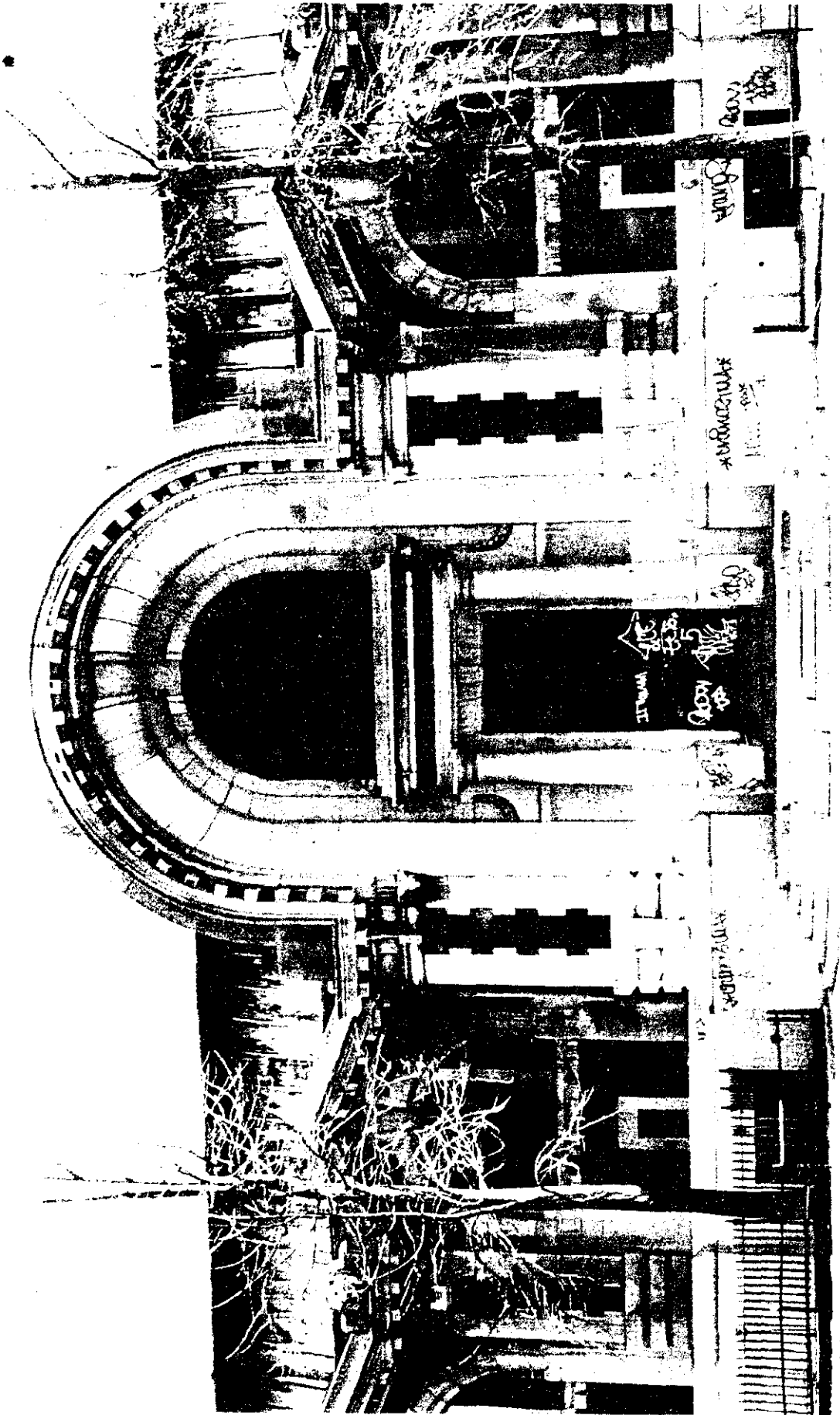
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Architects: Carrere & Hastings
Built: 1898-1900

Hamilton Fish Park Play Center
130 Pitt Street
Manhattan

Photo Credit: Andrew S. Dolkart



Hamilton Fish Park Play Center
Detail

Photo Credit: Andrew S. Dolkart