

Background

360 W 34th Street, alternatively known as the William Sloane YMCA, was opened in 1930. The building was named after William Sloane (1873 - 1922), President of W. & J. Sloane Furnishings, a luxury furniture and rug store. Sloane was Chair of the Army and Navy International Committee. In addition, he helped to raise \$4 million for war relief while working on the National War Work Council of the YMCA during World War I.

The YMCA noticed the changing landscape of Midtown West in the early 20th century and wanted to take part. The area around Penn Station, the US Post Office and Hudson Yards became busy and congested. Brownstones were replaced with larger, loft buildings and property values were rising. The YMCA decided to take part in the movement and build what was the organization's largest residential facility in the country at the time, 360 W 34th Street.

The architecture firm, Cross & Cross was hired for the project. The building is in the Georgian style and is fourteen stories high. Limestone runs along the bottom of the building's facade and limestone bands are present on the building's corners. Twin entrances ornamented with broken pediments and eagles clutching bas-relief shields with the words "spirit, mind, body" - a motto of the YMCA sit within the stone. Directly above the limestone are large windows with fanlights. Flemish bond brick makes up the rest of the building. The tallest portion is set back from the street with two sections projecting out to the lot line to create an open court for the terraces above. Matching pediments and finials are seen along the roofline (Pennoyer & Walker, 54). Today, the building's exterior remains intact with the exception of a new awning entrance, replaced windows and front doors.

The purpose of the William Sloane YMCA was to create a space for young men new to the city and for members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. Specifically, Sloane House was “a place where those coming to New York to make a start in life can stay until they have located work and a permanent residence”. The building provided sleeping accommodations for 1,676 guests (The William Sloane House NYC, 93). A NYT’s article from the day before the YMCA’s opening, March 2, 1930 said the building was “to be the last word in a structure of its type”. The top twelve floors were dedicated to dormitories while the bottom floors were used as social rooms. This included recreation rooms, offices, a barber shop, showers, lockers, a large banquet hall, reading rooms and an extensive gymnasium with basketball, volleyball and handball courts and athletic equipment of all kinds” (New \$3M YMCA). Today, the interior has been entirely altered.

Sloane House began to see changes in the 1940s. The number of servicemen who needed housing dwindled and women and girls were now allowed to stay in the building. Additionally, long-term accommodations to college students and welfare recipients were welcomed. A fire in 1972 caused even more change to the building. The YMCA had multiple unsuccessful fundraising attempts in the 1980s, causing the building to close in 1993. By 1995, the building was purchased and remodeled as affordable apartments for young professionals new to New York (William Sloane House, Y.M.C.A). Today, the William Sloane YMCA has been rebranded as The Sloane, an apartment complex featuring “260 gracious residences”. Apartments range from studios to three bedrooms and “private maisonettes boasting modern finishes and high ceilings” are available (Sloane Chelsea NYC). Sixty-five years later the building has come full circle, to create a space for people starting out in New York City.

Architects - Cross & Cross

Cross & Cross was founded in 1907 by the Beaux-Arts-trained brothers, John and Eliot Cross. Famed architect, Peter Pennoyer described the brother's work as "part of New York's essential character in the 1920s and '30s, shaping the skyline that we know today." Amongst their most well known projects include the: Tiffany & Co. Flagship, General Electric Building (RCA Victor Building), and One Sutton Place (Pennoyer, Mar. 2014). Eliot founded the real estate firm, Webb & Knapp which allowed the brother duo to succeed in both architecture and real estate development. One of the firm's earliest, largest projects was a twelve-story apartment house at 405 Park Avenue in 1911. Following this project, the Cross brothers went on to design more than twenty large apartment houses in New York's east side. A few examples include 25 Sutton Place, 4 East 66th Street, 720 Park Avenue, and 834 and 960 Fifth Avenues.

In addition to working on residential projects, the Cross brothers succeeded in commercial building. In 1926, the duo built the Barclay Hotel, at 111 East 48th Street. Today, the hotel is known as the InterContinental New York Barclay. The brothers went on to build the City Bank Farmers Trust Company (1929) at 20 Exchange Place in the Financial District. The firm's most celebrated design is the RCA Victor (Now GE) at 570 Lexington Avenue (Pennoyer, April 2014). Cross & Cross built masterpieces throughout New York City, many either in Historic Districts or individually landmarked. The William Sloane YMCA is another example of Cross & Cross's fine work.

YMCA Background

The YMCA, or The Young Men's Christian Association was founded in London in 1844 by 22 year old George Williams, a farmer-turned-department store worker. The organization was

established as a refuge for young men seeking escape from the hazards of life on the streets. In 1851, Thomas Valentine Sullivan, a retired Boston sea captain, saw a similar need to create a safe “home away from home” for sailors and merchants. Thomas opened the first US YMCA in Boston of that year (Who We Are). Today, the Y engages more than 10,000 communities across the US. In addition, the organization describes itself “as the nation’s leading nonprofit, the Y is committed to empowering people to reach their full potential, to improving well-being, inspiring action, strengthening communities and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to become healthier, more confident, connected and secure.” (Our History). The William Sloane YMCA was an essential part of people starting out in New York, thus contributing to the city’s continuing growth of community and culture in the 1930s.

Many YMCAs across the US are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One example is the San Diego Army and Navy YMCA, built in 1924 in the Italian Renaissance style by Architect Lincoln Rogers. The building met the NR’s Criteria A and C for its importance to San Diego’s social history and its distinctive and significant architectural style. Specifically, this Y “played a unique and extraordinary role in providing a variety of religious, physical, cultural and educational, social, and outreach programs to San Diego’s military personnel and citizens from the mid-1920s through the early 1980s.”, leading to the building’s designation in 2007 (NRHP). Today, the interior of the San Diego YMCA has been converted into a Marriot Bonvoy named The Guild Hotel.

Threats: Potential Development

In November 2021, Governor Kathy Hochul proposed a development plan to make Penn Station and the surrounding area into a modern, transit-friendly station and neighborhood.

Specifically, the plan includes building a new, world class train facility, underground corridors to connect subway lines, 1,800 residential units and a 30,000-square foot plaza similar in size to Rockefeller Plaza. Penn Station's plan alone might cost up to \$7 billion dollars and the surrounding development is said to help fund the project (Governor Hochul Unveils). As of April 2022, the redevelopment plan has received pushback after multiple NY Senators wrote to Empire State Development (ESD) to halt the project until explanations are shared with the public regarding cost, design, scope and bond liabilities (Holyman). Kathy Hochul's plans for Midtown West are a threat to the William Sloane YMCA because development can expand beyond the perimeter, ultimately destroying historic buildings in the surrounding area.

Conclusion: Why the William Sloane YMCA Should Be Landmarked

360 W 34th Street meets the LPC's criteria for becoming a historic landmark. The property is over 30 years old and has value in the development and heritage of NYC. Famed architects, Cross & Cross helped shape NYC's essential image by producing significant buildings throughout the city, the Georgian-style Y is one of them. In addition, YMCAs have helped to shape not only NYC's community and culture, but the entire nation's. Specifically, the William Sloane Y made a significant contribution to history by creating a safe space for individuals, especially WWI veterans to start fresh after returning home from service. The Y provided safe and affordable accommodations for those new to the city during one of the most harsh economic times in American history, the Great Depression. Furthermore, Governor Hochul's plans to develop Midtown West act as a threat to 360 W 34th Street, creating an urgent need to save the property. In today's ever changing architectural landscape, the William Sloane YMCA should be saved for being a significant piece of New York's history.

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