

GRAHAM COURT APARTMENTS, 1923-1937 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard (Seventh Avenue), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1899-1901; architects, Clinton & Russell.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1901, Lot 1.

On August 11, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Graham Court Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition. A number of letters were received in support of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Graham Court Apartments, commissioned by William Waldorf Astor, was constructed in 1899-1901 as part of the great Harlem real-estate boom. Designed by the firm of Clinton & Russell, architects known for their many apartment houses, hotels, and early commercial skyscrapers in New York City, it is one of the signal achievements in the history of the apartment house in New York City. Quadrangular in plan and built around a central courtyard, Graham Court is one of the few apartment houses of this type in New York City. Stylistically the building recalls an Italian Renaissance palazzo in a conscious effort to evoke an image of luxury. Today it is one of the premier reminders of the urban development of Harlem at the turn of the century.

#### Harlem

The area of Manhattan known today as Harlem was originally named Nieuw Haarlem by the Dutch in 1658. It remained much the same, the site of farms and large estates, prior to the middle of the nineteenth century; many of the most prominent families of New York City owned land here. Though the city's grid plan of 1811 included Harlem, it was not anticipated that the area would actually become developed for quite some time. In 1837, however, the New York & Harlem Railroad was opened to Harlem, thereby helping to foster the transition from a rural to a suburban community. Several small villages as well as isolated shanties were scattered throughout the area in the mid-nineteenth century; these were populated largely by recent Irish immigrants.

Harlem was annexed to New York City in 1873 as Manhattan's population growth proceeded northward. In the 1880s elevated rapid transit lines extended to Harlem, followed by subway routes at the turn of the century, providing the crucial transportation links to lower Manhattan. Harlem rapidly became an integral part of the urban fabric of the city. Between the 1870s and 1910, accompanying the

opening of the transit lines, single-family rowhouses, tenements, and luxury apartment houses were constructed in record numbers in two major waves of speculative development. Commercial concerns and religious, educational, and cultural institutions were established to serve the expanding population. West Harlem, in particular, was developed as a prosperous and fashionable neighborhood for members of the affluent classes, who lived in attractive brownstones and in luxury apartment buildings, which included such amenities as elevators and servants quarters, along Seventh and Lenox Avenues. The largest and finest of these luxury buildings was Graham Court, commissioned by William Waldorf Astor. The New York Tribune in 1899 noted the "sharp demand for buildings of the character represented in Mr. Astor's proposed improvement."<sup>1</sup> The residents of this Harlem were mainly established and wealthy New Yorkers of British, Irish, and German stock.

At the same time, a poorer population settled in the fringe areas, those with less desirable land conditions and less access to public transportation. Recent Italian immigrants settled in East Harlem, while a substantial number of Eastern European Jews migrated from the Lower East Side. The speculative over-building of rowhouses and apartments resulted in a Harlem real estate bust in 1904. This real estate climate, combined with a number of other factors, helped to provide an unprecedented opportunity for the black community in New York City, then largely centered on the West Side, to rent attractive housing in Harlem. By 1910 the significant migration of blacks to Harlem had begun, which eventually resulted in Harlem becoming the urban cultural capital of black America.

#### The Astors and Graham Court

The Astor family, which had extensive real estate holdings in Manhattan, had owned land in Harlem from the 1840s. John Jacob Astor I (1763-1848), a German immigrant, was at the time of his death the wealthiest man in America; his wealth, originally accumulated in the fur and China trades, was largely concentrated in New York City real estate after 1834. Successive major inheritors of the Astor fortune were William Backhouse Astor I (1792-1875), John Jacob Astor III (1822-1890), and William Waldorf Astor (1848-1919). The latter Astor ventured, for a time, into politics; he was elected to the New York Assembly (1877) and Senate (1879), and was appointed Minister to Italy by President Chester Arthur in 1882. After a period as a writer, Astor became manager of the family estate upon his father's death in 1890, and had a personal worth estimated at \$100 million. He immediately removed his family to England, expressing a distaste for the United States; he became a British subject in 1899 and eventually was made a baron, then viscount. Despite his residence in England, Astor was responsible for the construction of a number of lavish hotels and apartment buildings in New York City and had substantial real estate holdings here (worth an estimated \$66 million in 1916).<sup>2</sup> The Waldorf Hotel (1893, Henry J. Hardenbergh, West 33rd Street and Fifth Avenue, demolished) was built on the site of his father's house. As the culmination of a longstanding Astor family feud, John Jacob Astor IV built next door the Astoria Hotel (1895-97, Henry J. Hardenbergh, demolished); they were eventually joined as the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Today, the Empire State Building (1929-31, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, a designated New York City Landmark) occupies this site. Other buildings financed by William Waldorf Astor included: the Hotel Netherland (1890-93, W.H. Hume & Son, Fifth Avenue and East 59th Street, demolished), Graham Court (1899-1901), Astor Apartments (1901-05, Clinton & Russell, 2141-2149 Broadway), Hotel Astor (1902-04 and 1909-10, Clinton & Russell, 1511-1515 Broadway, demolished), and Aphthorp Apartments (1906-08, Clinton & Russell, 2201-2219 Broadway, a designated New York City Landmark).

The land on which Graham Court stands, along Seventh Avenue between West 116th and 117th Streets, was acquired by William Backhouse Astor in the 1860s and was transferred to William Waldorf Astor by the Astor estate in 1890.<sup>3</sup> Graham Court was constructed by architects Clinton & Russell at an approximate cost of \$500,000 as one of New York City's largest and finest apartment buildings or "flathouses." The builder was John Downey.<sup>4</sup> Residents, primarily from the business and professional classes, rented suites (some with as many as 19 rooms) at rents ranging from \$900 to \$2000 a year.<sup>5</sup> The plan of the building, around an interior courtyard, allowed for an increased amount of light and air to all apartments, which contained the latest conveniences (including elevators) and the finest workmanship and materials.

### The Architects

Clinton & Russell, architects of Graham Court and one of New York City's leading architectural firms at the turn of the century, was responsible for many buildings ranging from fashionable hotels and apartment houses to institutions and early skyscrapers. During the years when the financial district was transformed into dramatic "canyons" of monumental structures, some of the most prominent buildings were by the Clinton & Russell firm.

Charles William Clinton (1838-1910) was born and raised in New York and educated in the local schools. His architectural training was received in the office of Richard Upjohn, which he left in 1858 to begin an independent practice. The following year he formed a partnership with Anthony B. McDonald, Jr., which lasted until 1862. For the next 32 years Clinton practiced alone; most of his important buildings during this period were office buildings based on Italian Renaissance prototypes. In 1894 Clinton joined with William Hamilton Russell. Russell (1856-1907), also a native New Yorker, had studied at the Columbia School of Mines before joining the firm of his great-uncle James Renwick in 1878. He became a partner in the firm five years later and remained with it until 1891.

Clinton & Russell's residential buildings were monumental, classically-inspired, and included design features typically found in their commercial structures. One example is the Beaux-Arts style Langham Apartments (1904-07, 135 Central Park West), located in the Central Park West-West 73rd-74th Street Historic District. Besides Graham Court, the firm designed the Aphorp and Astor Apartments, all based on Renaissance prototypes and built for William Waldorf Astor. The Astor patronage of the firm started in 1897-98 when Clinton & Russell designed a group of four French Renaissance-inspired town houses for Astor on the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 56th Street (now demolished). The firm also produced the Beaux-Arts style Hotel Astor, one of Times Square's most famous buildings until its demolition in 1966.

### The Style of Graham Court

The design of Graham Court exemplifies the firm's facility at adapting classical architectural elements, here based on Italian Renaissance palazzo prototypes, to modern building forms, specifically the luxury apartment house. American interest in employing architectural forms of the Italian Renaissance palazzo first came from early nineteenth-century English precedents. Two of the earliest examples of Renaissance Revival style buildings in the United States are the Athenaeum of Philadelphia (1845-47, John Notman) and the A.T. Stewart Dry Goods Store (1846, Trench & Snook, 280 Broadway, New York City). The style was employed

for numerous buildings in New York City and elsewhere, including large town houses as well as public buildings and commercial blocks. Italian Renaissance forms, though frequently of Venetian inspiration, were also used in the design of many American cast-iron commercial buildings, such as the Haughwout Building (1856, John P. Gaynor, 488-492 Broadway), a designated New York City Landmark.

In the 1880s and '90s American architects, influenced by the principles of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts and later by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, again turned to interpretations of Renaissance prototypes (among others) in a reaction against the architecture of the High Victorian period and in a search for an architecture characterized by order and sobriety. The firm of McKim, Mead & White was instrumental in the return to Italian Renaissance prototypes in many of their works after the construction of the palazzo-inspired Villard Houses (1883-85, Joseph M. Wells of McKim, Mead & White, 451-457 Madison Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark), which were U-shaped in plan around a courtyard. Other influential commissions by the firm based on the Renaissance palazzo included the Boston Public Library (1888-95), the Century Association (1890-91, 7 West 43rd Street), and the University Club (1897-1900, 1 West 54th Street), the latter two designated New York City Landmarks.

Burchard and Bush-Brown note that "the big town house built for the rich was only a smaller version of the palaces of commerce and government. The individuality characteristic of mansions like the William K. Vanderbilt house, by Hunt, disappeared in favor of formal, uniformly anonymous houses, usually in Renaissance or Roman styles...by the turn of the century everyone had to have a Renaissance palace, with detail taken from Italy, France, or England.... Some of the rich people hired architects...keeping them on a permanent basis, charging them personally with all the family architectural work."<sup>6</sup> The Clinton & Russell firm in their work for William Waldorf Astor were in the forefront in their usage of the Renaissance palazzo as inspiration for the style of the large luxury apartment building. Graham Court, the first of Clinton & Russell's apartments in this style, can thus be seen as a precursor to numerous large Renaissance-inspired apartment buildings, particularly on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, such as the Apthorp, also by Clinton & Russell, and the Belnord (1908-09, H. Hobart Weekes, 201-225 West 86th Street, a designated New York City Landmark).

William Jordy comments that "although different Beaux-Arts designers favored different styles, while almost all varied their styles with different commissions, and some worked in a number of styles, Renaissance forms provided the norm for the period.... The planar surfaces of these styles, their rhythms, and their reticulated character accorded well with the boxy massing and skeletal framing of commercial and institutional buildings."<sup>7</sup> As Graham Court demonstrates, Renaissance forms could be successfully employed on the large apartment block. Characteristic of these apartment house commissions are their monumentality and large scale, symmetry, restraint, and concentrated use of ornamentation over flat wall surfaces. Typical features include a plan based around a central courtyard, the division of stories into differently articulated horizontal zones, and the use of rusticated stone, monumental entrances, balconies, and projecting cornices.



## The Luxury Courtyard Apartment House<sup>8</sup>

The traditional upper- and middle-class ideal of housing in Manhattan during most of the nineteenth century was a privately owned and occupied single-family town house or mansion. During the fourth quarter of the century, however, this ideal became increasingly unattainable for all but a small percentage of residents due to economic realities: the values of and pressures on Manhattan real estate as well as the rising costs of housing construction. Multiple dwellings, or "tenements," were the standard mode of housing for the majority of Manhattanites from the 1870s to around 1930. The American upper classes long resisted the concept of shared habitation due largely (along with the connotations of lower class status) to the associations with New York City's very real tenement conditions, overcrowded units with inadequate light, air, and sanitary facilities. Both economic considerations and a number of reforms, advances, and improvements made multiple dwellings more palatable to the upper classes by the end of the century.

Tenement house laws in 1867 and 1879 introduced minimum standards for housing and resulted in the "dumbbell plan" which featured side light wells. Prominent Beaux-Arts trained architect Richard Morris Hunt introduced to the United States what is generally considered the first "French flats," or multiple dwellings for the upper classes, in his Stuyvesant Apartments (1869-70, 142 East 18th Street, demolished), inspired by a popular Parisian housing type. The Home Buildings (1877-79, William L. Field & Sons, 134-140 Baltic and 439-445 Hicks Streets, now in the Cobble Hill Historic District, Brooklyn), built by businessman Alfred T. White who had an interest in housing reform, were the first courtyard apartments in New York City; they provided amenities of increased light and air and shared exterior social space. The Dakota (1880-84, Henry J. Hardenbergh, 1 West 72nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark), also based on a Parisian model and considered the first American luxury apartment house with a courtyard, helped to foster the social respectability of this housing type in New York City. At the turn of the century, after a period of national economic instability, there was a surge of apartment house construction for the middle and upper classes. Technological innovations in elevators made taller buildings more feasible and desirable, and apartments were seen as more attractive investments for developers. The era of the smaller luxury "French flats" ended with the construction in New York City of new courtyard apartment buildings, monumentally scaled and generally of classically-inspired design; Graham Court was in the forefront of these.

### The Design of Graham Court

Graham Court, an eight-story building faced with limestone, light brown Roman brick, and terra-cotta, is divided horizontally into three parts. The main facade, on Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard (Seventh Avenue), is divided into five parts vertically as well, having slightly projecting central and end pavilions. The two-story rusticated base, consisting of limestone set in alternating wide and narrow horizontal bands which show only the horizontal joints, has simple rectangular fenestration and rises above an areaway with molded watertable and wrought-iron railing. Capping the base is a projecting string-course which is decorated with a wave molding on the center and end pavilions. The monumental main entrance, leading through an arcade to the interior courtyard, is a Palladian motif consisting of a central molded arch, with a key-stone ornamented with a cartouche, rising from an interrupted entablature which is supported by pinkish polished granite columns of composite order and pilasters with entasis. A pair of large central ornamental wrought-iron gates is

flanked by smaller gates. The spandrels carry inset granite roundels. The entrance is flanked by round-arched first-story windows with molded surrounds and keystones and second-story rectangular windows with surrounds. The inscription "Graham Court" appears above the arch, flanked by horizontal terra-cotta panels with anthemion motif decoration. The arcade leading into the courtyard continues the treatment of columns and pilasters. A barrel vault, faced with Guastavino tiles, rises from the entablature and is decorated with broad ribs which extend from the columns.

The pavilions of the midsection of the building, extending from the third through the seventh stories, are framed by quoins; the rusticated stone bands of the central pavilion are punctuated by fenestration. All windows have simple rectangular terra-cotta surrounds; those at the fourth, fifth, and seventh stories of the centermost portion of the central pavilion have entablatures. Each floor is separated by a continuous stone stringcourse. Above the entrance on the third story, between the windows, are terra-cotta panels of foliate design. The fourth floor of the central pavilion has a stone balcony with cartouches (part of the coping is missing), and there are also iron balconies with a harp motif at the fourth-story end and seventh-story central and end pavilions. The seventh story is capped by an ornamental terra-cotta stringcourse (reeds bound by bay leaf garlands) with central and end cartouches. The top story has alternating round-arched windows and terra-cotta panels with decoration of classical derivation. The metal cornice, originally denticulated and modillioned, has been removed; remaining are the dentils and an egg-and-dart motif molding. A parapet wall, acting originally as subtle pediments for the central and end pavilions, is now fully exposed and covered with tar.

The two side facades are identical mirror images (except for two round-arched entrances at either end on 116th Street and one larger one at the western side on 117th Street) and continue the same treatment as the main facade. The two side facades are arranged vertically as three pavilions. The unarticulated rear facade is of plain brick.

In the courtyard, a driveway and sidewalk encircle an oval garden area with walks in a cross pattern which originally had a central fountain (the stone base remains). Eight iron lampposts were located in the oval and one pair flanked each of the four interior entrances (only four posts, one globe, and the stone pedestals remain). The reverse of the front facade entry arch, on the courtyard, is similar to it but without the keystone and is flanked by a pair of blind oval bulls-eyes with top and bottom keystones. The building is entered from the courtyard through four porticoes with columns of composite order, Guastavino tile ceilings, and balustrades (part of the one at the northeast corner is missing) which are set against the angled corners. Wood double doors with glass central panels and transoms are surrounded by egg-and-dart moldings and are flanked by small round-arched windows (most of which have been filled with polished granite). The courtyard walls maintain the building's overall horizontal division and materials, except that the base is one story high and is composed only of wide limestone bands and the brick is set in horizontal bands with plain and denticulated stringcourses. The first story has simple rectangular fenestration; the windows of the second through seventh stories have flat-arched lintels with triple keystones (some have end voussoirs), except for the second-story corner windows above the entrance porticoes which have molded surrounds with cartouche keystones. The top story has round-arched windows with keystones and is capped by a copper cornice with egg-and-dart and patterned motif moldings.

## Conclusion

Graham Court, not opened to black residents until 1928, was one of the last major apartment buildings in Harlem to become integrated.<sup>9</sup> It remained under the control of the William Waldorf Astor estate until 1933,<sup>10</sup> and became known as one of the more fashionable addresses for black Harlemites. The design of Graham Court continues to make it one of the most notable of many distinctive buildings in Harlem; it remains one of the significant achievements in the development of the luxury apartment house in New York City.

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## Footnotes

1. New York Tribune, October 20, 1899.
2. New York Times, October 20, 1919.
3. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances.
4. Charles H. Israels, "The Metropolitan Apartment House and Hotel," Record and Guide, 73 (June 11, 1904), 1464.
5. New York Tribune, March 3, 1901.
6. John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), p.266.
7. William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects: Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1976), p.348.
8. Robert A.M. Stern, "With Rhetoric: The New York Apartment House," Via, 4 (1980), 78-111.
9. Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).
10. Liber Deeds and Conveyances.

## 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 Graham Court Apartments 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 Graham Court Apartments is a major apartment house commission by the prominent architectural firm of Clinton & Russell, known for its many apartment houses, hotels, and early commercial skyscrapers in New York City, and displays their facility at adapting classical architectural elements to modern building forms; that it is one of the significant achievements in the development of the luxury apartment house in New York City, and helped to mark the end of the era of "French flats"; that its distinctive, refined, and monumental design, based on Italian Renaissance palazzo prototypes, and its interior courtyard placed it in the forefront of turn-of-the-century apartment house architecture and planning and served as models for subsequent luxury apartment house construction in Manhattan; that it was constructed as the finest and largest apartment house in Harlem; and that it remains one of the most notable buildings in Harlem, a survival of its urban development at the turn of the century.

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 Graham Court Apartments, 1923-1937 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1901, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



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Graham Court Apartments, 1923-1937 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Blvd.  
Clinton & Russell, architects. Built: 1899-1901

Photo credit: Andrew Alpern, Apartments for the Affluent



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Photo credit: Landmarks Preservation Commission