



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

HISTORIC BUILDINGS OF THE BRONX





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.



**Council on
the Arts**

**NYC Cultural
Affairs**

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HISTORIC BUILDINGS OF THE BRONX

The only borough contiguous with the mainland, the Bronx was named for Jonas Bronck, a Swedish-born merchant who established the first European settlement in the area as part of the New Netherland colony in 1639, in effect displacing the native Lenape. It was annexed to New York between 1874 and 1895, and in 1898 became part of the five boroughs created through the City's consolidation. The Bronx remained a rural area until the late 19th century, when urban development started to progress north and east from Manhattan.

Over the years, social, economic and historic events have shaped the borough's cultural and built landscape, resulting in one of New York's most remarkable sections. Its significance is, however, currently underrepresented among the designated NYC Landmarks, making it vulnerable to abandonment and/or inappropriate development, especially with real estate demands constantly increasing across the city.

As part of our ongoing advocacy work to help protect the historic fabric of New York City, the Historic Districts Council (HDC) brought together residents and activists from across the borough to create the Bronx Borough Landmarks Preservation Committee. The goal was to provide a space for sharing ideas and discussing the preservation challenges that residents are facing, in order to determine which are the best strategies and priorities needed to safeguard its built and cultural landscape.

The following cases compile the work done by this group during the activities of the Six to Celebrate program, as well as sites that have been identified by HDC as contributing examples of its architectural, cultural, and historical significance, but have yet to be protected.

Among the oldest buildings still extant are those of religious architecture, such as the Evangelical Church of God **(Site 10)** and Iglesia Ni Cristo **(Site 11)**, as well as a notable residential structure at Franklin Avenue **(Site 9)**.

The early 20th century brought neighborhood staples like the St. John's Visitation Church **(Site 13)**, the Church of the Mediator **(Site 14)** and the Mother Walls AME Church **(Site 12)**, as well as educational infrastructure such as the Harriet Tubman School **(Site 16)**, the former NYPL Kingsbridge Branch **(Site 17)**, and later the St. Angela Medici School **(Site 15)**.

The legacy of the entertainment industry in The Bronx is also highlighted through several theatres, including the former Opera Theater **(Site 2)**, a newly designated NYC Landmark. Recent history and the social impact of population changes during the second half of the 20th century have been incorporated through sites of cultural significance **(Sites 5 to 8)**, which in cases like Casita Rincón Criollo **(Site 7)** have transcended the borough's boundaries.

THEATERS

FORMER METROPOLIS THEATRE

I

2640 3rd Ave

(1897, J.B. McElfatrick & Sons)

NR D



Conceived as a live performance venue, the Metropolis was one of the first theaters built in The Bronx, and praised for its ornamented design by leading theater architects J.B. McElfatrick & Sons. The arch separating the stage from the auditorium was adorned with a scene from the opera *Don Giovanni*, which was said to have been exhibited at the Paris Salon. It also included a roof garden, offices, and the basement was reported to have had a bar and restaurant.

Despite the booming theatre scene in The Bronx and across New York at the turn of the century, the Metropolis

was not a financial success. During the next decades it underwent a series of changes in management, and was adapted to host vaudeville, films, Italian stage shows, and finally burlesque. The theater was eventually shut down by the police in 1926, and was purchased by Loew's in 1929 for use as a warehouse. It was partially demolished in the 1940s, leaving only a portion of the building that includes the façade along Third Avenue.

It was listed on the National Register in 1980 as part of the Mott Haven Historic District, which expanded the boundaries of the 1969 local designation.

LEGEND OF DESIGNATIONS

National Historic Landmark	NH L
National Register of Historic Places - District	NR D
National Register of Historic Places - Property	NR P
New York City Historic District	NYC HD
New York City Individual Landmark	NYC IL
New York City Interior Landmark	NYC INL

The Bronx Opera House was conceived by noted Broadway producer George M. Cohan and his partner Sam Harris, as a sister theater to the old Grand Opera House on Eighth Avenue. This new venue was a combination theatre, meaning it would host touring theater companies which performed singular plays. It offered Broadway plays at popular prices, becoming one of the most successful theaters in The Bronx.

The Italian Renaissance Revival building was designed by famous theater architect George Keister, responsible for the Apollo, Belasco and Selwyn, among others. With an exterior of brick, limestone and terra cotta, it had a seating capacity of 1,900 people on three levels.

Over the years, the theater hosted vaudeville shows and movies, but lost its license in the 1940s. It regained notoriety as a Latin music hub during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and was purchased in the 1980s by a Pentecostal church. In 2010, plans began for a conversion into a boutique hotel, which opened in 2013 as The Opera House Hotel. The original façade, lobby and restaurant space were connected to a new structure built on the site of the auditorium, which had been demolished years before. It was designated as an NYC Landmark in 2023.

OPERA HOUSE HOTEL

2

436 E 149th St
(1913, George Keister)
NYC IL



FORMER MELROSE THEATRE

3

421 E 161 St
(1916-21, Schaefer & Lavelle)



Plans for the construction of the Melrose Theater were first announced in 1916, but the onset of World War I caused most construction projects to be put on hold, then delayed due to increased costs over the following years. It was finally completed in 1921.

Conceived as a movie theater with a capacity for 1,100 people with a roof garden, it featured a symmetric façade with two entrances marked by pilasters and intricate carved classical ornaments. Designed by local architect Charles Schaefer Jr. and Swiss-born architect Paul La Velle, the theater is the pair's only known collaboration, after which La Velle relocated to White Plains, while Schaefer continued his career designing buildings in The Bronx and Manhattan.

In the 1940s, the theatre was converted into the Embassy Ballroom, which became one of the most important venues for the Latin music movement, hosting legends like Tito Puente and Celia Cruz. It is one of the last remaining examples of the borough's Latin clubs. Most recently, the building served as a day care center.

Operated by the Consolidated Amusement Company, the former Fleetwood Theatre opened in 1927 with a 1,600-seat capacity. In 1940, the company had a total of 22 locations in Manhattan and The Bronx, but soon began to withdraw from the film industry. In 1941, they announced the leasing of 18 of their venues to J. J. Theaters Inc. for a 25-year period, including the Fleetwood. Renovation work was done in 1945 by architect Julius Bleich, and in 1953 the theatre and adjacent stores were sold.

The theater closed in 1958, and two years later it was purchased by Seymour M. Tannenbaum to be converted into a bowling center. It later housed a Fedco Foods store, a company owned by prominent African-American

businessman J. Bruce Llewellyn in the late 1960s. Over the years it maintained its commercial use, with the upper floors most recently occupied by a church. The interior has been mostly gutted, but the façade maintains its ornamental brickwork, terra cotta pilasters and classical pediment. *Photo courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archive.*

FORMER FLEETWOOD THEATRE

1000 Morris Ave
(1927)

4



CULTURAL LANDMARKS

PLAYGROUND 52

Kelly St bet. Av St John and Leggett Av
(1958)

5



This playground in Longwood is named after the advocacy group “52 People for Progress”. The group was organized in 1980, and was one of the first to collaborate with the Parks Departments to help revitalize and maintain their neighborhood park.

Built in 1958 as a school playground for P.S. 52, it had a wading pool, basketball courts, and a comfort station. During the social and economic crisis of the 1970s, the park and

its structures deteriorated, causing concern among residents. This prompted the creation of 52PPF, who volunteered to rehabilitate the park.

The site was transferred to the Parks Department in 1986, and in 2017 it underwent extensive renovations. An adjacent parcel of land was also purchased to add basketball courts to the playground. In 1990, the playground was rededicated to commemorate the contribution made by 52 People for Progress. *Photo courtesy of NYC Parks.*

Built during C. B. J. Snyder's tenure as Superintendent of School Buildings, this five-story Collegiate Gothic brick structure was originally P.S. 52, and is almost identical to P.S. 179 in Kensington, Brooklyn.

Besides its remarkable architectural features, the school became a hub for young musicians during the 1950s. At the time, a group of local alumni needed a rehearsal space for their new band, and found the school auditorium to be an ideal place to practice in, as it had a piano and could accommodate the sound of trumpets. In exchange, they played for free at Friday night dances.

Band members included Eddie Palmieri, Orlando Marín, and Joe Quijano, who would later become famed figures in Latin music. They alternated performances with Gilbert Maldonado's band from

the Bronx Vocational High School, and featured musicians like Johnny Pacheco and Barry Rogers. The experience gained through these performances allowed them to build up audiences, and eventually play at larger venues like Hunts Point Palace.

The school became an incubator for new talent, constantly exposing local children to all aspects of music through the school band and frequent dances. Other noted P.S. 52 alumni in Latin music include Charlie Palmieri, Hector Rivera, Ray Barretto, and Manny Oquendo. *Photo courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archives.*

GIRLS PREP BRONX ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

6

681 Kelly St

(1915, C. B. J. Snyder)



7

CASITA RINCÓN CRIOLLO

749 Brook Ave
(Ca. 1970 original)

Casitas are inspired by vernacular housing from Puerto Rico's countryside. The typology originated during the 1920s and 30s, and consisted in balloon-frame structures that were made from scrap materials and were easy to disassemble.

Casita Rincón Criollo, also known as *La Casita de Chema*, was built in the late 1970s by José Manuel "Chema" Soto, when he and his neighbors reclaimed an abandoned, garbage-filled lot on the corner of 158th Street and Brook Avenue. It soon became a place to gather,

garden, hold community events and pass down musical and cultural traditions.

From 1987 to 1997, *La Casita de Chema* was part of the city's GreenThumb community garden program, until the City's Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD) announced the lot would be auctioned for the development of low-income housing. Thanks to the efforts of community organizations, the structure was reassembled on its current location at Brook Avenue. This new iteration, although smaller than its predecessor, maintained the same layout, with a large front porch adorned by a diagonal cross balustrade. The lot was also replanted with fruit trees and gardens of flowers and vegetables.

La Casita is managed by community members, and welcomes people of all ages, becoming a powerful tool for community organizing and activism. It was listed on the State Register in 2023, and is being considered for the National Register of Historic Places.

El Maestro Inc. is a community organization focused on the social and cultural development of the Puerto Rican, Latin American, and Caribbean community of the South Bronx. Through sports and cultural activities and programs, the organization provides support to people of all ages and advocates for improving their quality of life.

The center first opened as a boxing gym in 2003 by Fernando “Ponce” Laspina, an aspiring boxer who was sent to prison before he could start training. After Ponce’s release, he became involved in education and social justice, and by 1987 he had received a Master’s Degree and was a lecturer at Hostos University.

While working for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), Ponce was hired as director of an afterschool boxing initiative in 1997. The success of this program motivated him to create his own, and in 2003 he rented a space at Elton Avenue and 156th St. Ponce chose the name El Maestro in honor of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, the first Puerto Rican to graduate from Harvard University.

Over the years, rent increases have forced the club to relocate to smaller venues. Their latest efforts have been focused on purchasing the two-story commercial building they currently occupy at Southern Boulevard. This, however, has not hindered the growth of the club’s cultural work, expanding their

scope of work to community engagement and education. El Maestro has become a stabilizing institution, helping to preserve and revitalize the local community. *Photos: (top) exterior view of El Maestro. (bottom) Training session, courtesy of Place Matters.*



RESIDENCES

9

FRANKLIN AVE. MANSION

1198 Franklin Ave
(1894, Michael J. Garvin)



During the late-19th century, Franklin Avenue was one of the most prominent residential streets in Morrisania. The area was once part of the Bathgate Estate, which in 1888 was developed to create the Crotona Park. Many mansions were built on the surrounding streets, although almost none of them survive today.

This Queen Anne three-story structure was designed by noted American architect and Bronx resident Michael J. Garvin. A graduate of Manhattan College, Garvin served as the first Building Commissioner of the borough from 1897 to 1903, and its first Under Sheriff. His prolific career coincided with the borough's growth at the turn of the 20th century, and he was best known as the architect of record for the Bronx Borough Courthouse, the Haffen Building and the Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17, all designated as a NYC Landmarks. He also had to face a series of controversies surrounding the authorship of his work

and political influences.

The house is set back from Franklin Ave, with a large front yard framed by a stone wall with an iron picket fence. It features a tower at the southwest corner, capped by a conical roof and weathervane, and a mansard roof with dormer windows. The main façade has a porch with a front facing gable and decorative spindlework.

The first residents were Conrad Müller and his family, who had emigrated in 1872 from Switzerland. He was a steam engineer, and lived at the house until the 1930s with his youngest son Frederick, a teacher, and his wife. The house would later become a multi-family residence.

CHURCHES

EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF GOD

10

1205 Washington Ave
(Ca. 1850)



Originally built by the Disciples Church, this brick structure became the First Presbyterian Church of Morrisania in 1865. The congregation had been organized in 1849, and was placed under the supervision of Reverend Arthur Potts, from New York, in 1865. Soon after, they were able to request recognition and began plans for a new church. Instead of building a new structure on existing lots in their possession, the congregation decided to sell the land to purchase and renovate this church on Washington Avenue.

Upon learning of the efforts made by the son of their late Pastor, Rev. George Potts D.D, the congregation of the University Place Church in Manhattan made a donation of \$9,000 (\$167K today) to help with the repairs. This included the addition of a new spire, a bell, and changes on the finish both of the exterior and interior. The church's name was changed to "Potts Memorial Presbyterian Church", as a tribute to their Pastor.

In 1967, the building was purchased by the Evangelical Church of God.

IGLESIA NI CRISTO

1343 Fulton Ave
(1896-97, J. W. Walter)

11



This Gothic style two-story brick structure was originally built as the St. John's German Lutheran Church. The congregation was founded in 1860 as the Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische St. Johannes Kirche, and initially met at a local beer saloon and social hall managed by Conrad Hubner, one of the founding members. Their first building was a wood frame structure on the north side of East 169 Street, dedicated in 1865. In 1893, they purchased this lot on Fulton Avenue for a new church building. The property also included two houses, one of which was renovated into a parish house, and the other as the parsonage.

In 2010, the congregation disbanded and the building became Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), an independent Nontrinitarian Christian church, founded in 1913 in the Philippines.

Located in the Morrisania neighborhood, this small one-story brick structure was originally built for the Ebenezer Baptist Church. The congregation purchased the land from Charlotte S. Trowbridge, and hired the Manhattan-based architectural firm Thompson & Frohling to design this two-tone Gothic style building. Frohling was a Swedish-born architect who resided in the area, and would later become known for his design of Charleston, South Carolina's first "skyscraper", the *People's Building*.

The church features a semicircular apse at the corner of Home Street and Intervale Avenue, where the altar is located and is highlighted by a polygonal belltower. Both facades are identical, with three pointed-arch windows and a hipped roof with dormer windows.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s, the building hosted the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and the Immanuel Spanish Church. It was later used as a synagogue, and by 1955 it was handed over to its current owner, the Mother Walls A.M.E. Zion Church.

Directly across the street, at 1213 Intervale Ave, stands FDNY Engine 82/Ladder 31. The building was prominently featured in Dennis Smith's 1972 book about firefighting in the South Bronx *Report from Engine Co. 82*.

12

MOTHER WALLS A.M.E. CHURCH

891 Home Ave

(1909, Thompson & Frohling)



ST. JOHN VISITATION CHURCH

13

3033 Kingsbridge Ave
(1907-09)



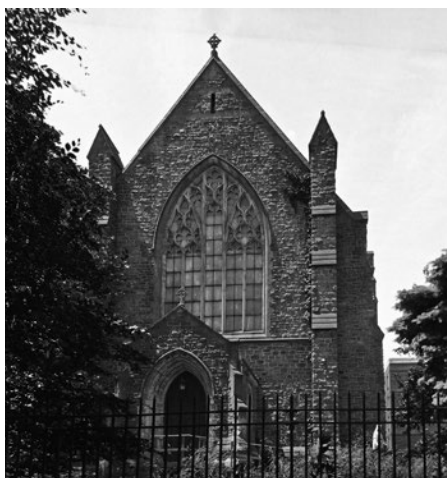
The St. John's parish was founded in the 1860s as a mission in Yonkers, and was later attached to the Jesuits of Fordham University. In 1870, they purchased this plot of land and built a small timber-framed church, formally establishing the parish in 1877. In the following decades, the church grew considerably, allowing for a new building to be erected in 1893.

This Neo-Gothic structure was built a few years later, during Rev. Daniel O'Dwyer tenure as Pastor, and used part of the former building's basement. It features buff brick with limestone accents, with a double-height stained-glass window set above three arched wooden entrance doors at the main façade. At the southwest corner there is a tall spire installed in 1966 as part of a large renovation project, which also reportedly removed some of the exterior ornamentation. *Photo courtesy of the NY State Historic Preservation Office.*

CHURCH OF THE MEDIATOR

14

3053 Kingsbridge Ave
(1908-14, Henry Vaughan)



This congregation's first church was a wooden structure that opened in 1857. After 50 years, they were able to begin construction of a new building, but it would take another six years to be completed. Nicknamed the "Little Cathedral of the Bronx, it was officially named Church of the Mediator in 1921.

Designed by famed architect Henry Vaughan, this Gothic Revival structure rises approximately four stories in height, with a steep pitched roof. The main façade features a double-height pointed-arch stained-glass window, flanked by a pair of stone buttresses, beneath of which is the entrance with an enclosed porch. A stone tower rises at the northwestern corner of the building, with Gothic arched windows with wooden tracework.

Vaughan's work includes the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., as well as three Chapels of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, the Mother Church of the Diocese of New York. This is believed to be the only church where he included internal buttresses in the structure. *Photo courtesy of the NY State Historic Preservation Office.*

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS



ST. ANGELA MERICI CHURCH AND SCHOOL

15

266 E 163rd St

(1923, William E. Erb & Paul
R. Henkel)



By the end of the 19th-century, a sizeable Catholic population concentrated in the Melrose area of The Bronx, which prompted the establishment of St. Luke's Church in 1897 and SS. Peter and Paul in 1898. The following year, this property on 163rd St was purchased to create a third parish, for which Father Thomas W. Wallace was appointed as pastor. Since he had two sisters who were Ursuline nuns, the parish was named after the founder and patron saint of the order.

The first church was a small wooden building which opened in 1900, with the rectory located on Morris Avenue between 162nd and 163rd Streets. The parish school was established in 1907 in a small parish hall on Grant Avenue.

Plans for a new church and school were announced in 1920, with the school being completed first. The three-story brick structure features limestone trimming and carved ornamentation. It consisted of 22 classrooms, a gymnasium in the basement, and a large auditorium. Construction of the new church at the corner of Morris Avenue never materialized, and the school auditorium became the permanent church. *Photos: (left) Church (right) School entrance.*

**HARRIET TUBMAN
CHARTER SCHOOL**

1176 Franklin Ave

(1904-06, J. O'Connor)

16



The school was originally part of the Roman Catholic parish of St. Augustine, the first one founded in the Bronx. The complex included a church, the school, and an annex. The oldest building was St. Augustine's Church, which opened in 1895 and was designed by noted architect Louis C. Giele. It closed in 2011, and was demolished in 2013.

The school opened in 1906 to serve the growing population of the Bronx. It is a three-story Classical Revival brick structure with a stone base, and features a full-height projecting central bay at the main façade, capped by a classical pediment. This element is highlighted by glazed blue and white terra cotta sculptures. It was designed by architect J. O'Connor, whose work is also featured in the Fieldstone and Upper East Side Historic Districts.

In 2011, St. Augustine School closed and the building became the Harriet Tubman Charter School. This institution, founded in 2004, has a focus on science and offers kindergarten through 8th grade education.

**FORMER NYPL,
KINGSBRIDGE BRANCH**

3041 Kingsbridge Avenue

(1905, McKim, Mead & White)

17



This former Branch of the New York Public Library was established in 1894 by Dr. James Douglas as the Kingsbridge Free Library. A local resident, Douglas was a vestryman at the Church of the Mediator, and in 1902 he offered to donate this property so that a new Library could be built in the neighborhood. With funds contributed by Andrew Carnegie, this neo-Federal style building opened in 1905, and became the second NYPL branch in The Bronx.

The one-story, three-bay, red brick structure has splayed stone lintels characteristic of the style, as well as an oversized pedimented entrance. By the late 1920s, the library was overcrowded but no plans to renovate or expand it were ever implemented. In later years, the opening of new branches in Van Cortland and Riverdale prompted the reduction of the library's service area, and in 1959 it was replaced by a new building at 280 West 231st street. The original building was sold to the Church of the Mediator in 1960, and in 1982 it was converted to a Preschool, which still uses the property today. *Photo courtesy of the NYPL.*

