



200-206 St Nicholas Avenue

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Studio I

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200 to 206 St. Nicholas Avenue is a group of four residential buildings, located at the northeast corner of Saint Nicholas Avenue and West 120 Street. According to the *Record and Build Guide*, the four five-story stone front flats, named Scotia, were built in 1889.¹ The architect, C.P.H. Gilbert, designed it for the owner David T. Kidd.²

The establishment of the apartment was closely related to transportation development and speculative residential construction in Harlem. The elevated rail lines which reached Harlem from Second, Third and Eighth Avenues largely stimulated the urban development of Harlem.³ The transformation of Harlem from farmland to residential communities “took place in the late 1880s and early 1890s”.⁴ According to the atlas of 1890 published by G.W. Bromley & Co., housing development along Eighth Avenue was greater than that in the nearby areas. The Scotia was located near to Eighth Avenue, where development benefited from the rail lines. The speculators were particularly active in residential construction, borrowing money to erect houses and then reselling them.⁵ A large number of row houses were built by speculators, and multiple dwellings such apartments were also developed to attract the middle-class.⁶ The Scotia is one example of the early apartments that were established in these speculative housing projects. From the atlas of 1890, when Scotia was built, the surrounding lots were still vacant. Wooden houses and stables still existed in this area, which indicates that South Harlem was experiencing the transition from a rural farmland

¹ *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*: 110th and 125th Streets, between 5th and 8th Avenue. v. 44, Sep. 28, 1889. no. 1124, p.1316.

² *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*: 110th and 125th Streets, between 5th and 8th Avenue. v. 44, Sep. 28, 1889. no. 1124, p.1316.

³ Andrew S. Dolkart, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan* (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997), 10.

⁴ Andrew S. Dolkart, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan* (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997), 10.

⁵ Andrew S. Dolkart, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan* (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997), 11.

⁶ Andrew S. Dolkart, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan* (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997), 11.

to an urban residential area. Therefore, the Scotia can be regarded as a witness to the transition.

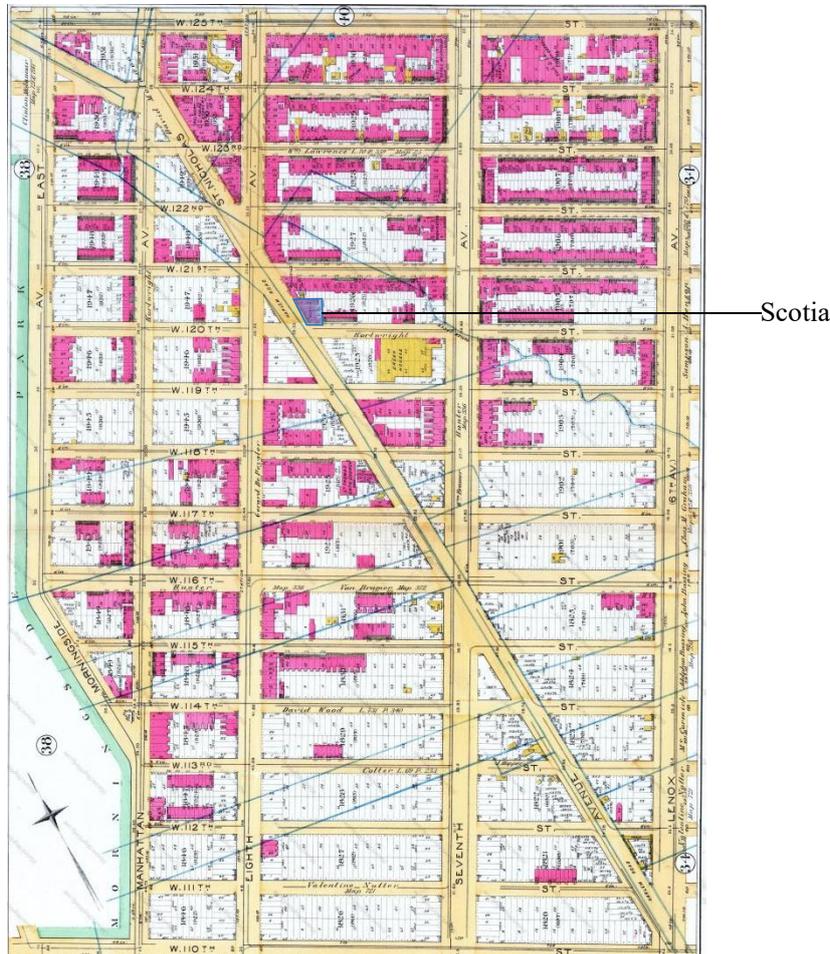


Figure. 1 1890 atlas, from

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C.P.H. Gilbert, the American-born architect who studied at Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, started his work in New York City in 1885.⁷ He was famous for his domestic works, popularizing “the chateau-like Francois I style and the mansarded beaux-arts style” in New York.⁸ As an example of his works in the early years of his career in New York, Scotia cannot be defined by any particular architectural style but presents

⁷Dennis Steadman Francis and Mosette Glaser Broderick. *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, ed. By Adolf K. Placzek (London: The Free Press. 1982), 270.

⁸ Dennis Steadman Francis and Mosette Glaser Broderick. *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, ed. By Adolf K. Placzek (London: The Free Press. 1982), 270.

Gilbert's trademarks. Originally, Gilbert designed 202, 204, 206 similarly with the entrance on St. Nicholas Avenue. For 200, he designed a store on the first floor around the corner, with an entrance to the building on West 120 Street.

For the design of the building, Gilbert tried to achieve symmetry in each of the four buildings. For the corner building 200 where it is difficult to create a symmetrical facade, he used one bay at the corner that can form pairs with the bays on both sides to achieve symmetry. The bay of windows he used is rhythmical on the facade, and the rhythm is varied. The rhythm of 206 and 204 is AA, 202 is ABA, while 200 is ACBCA. Compared with the buildings located at the other three corners, all of which have square corners or straight lines separating different facades, Gilbert's buildings use a curved shape around the corner to create fluidity between two facades. On each bay, Gilbert used a combination of various kinds of windows, from the biggest windows with elaborate decorations, including the bricks recessed from the adjacent surfaces and rowlock arches, to the more unadorned windows in the middle and to the simplest ones on the top. Such a combination of windows and elaborate brick decorations cannot be seen on other buildings in this area. Also, he used pulled bricks on the frieze and floriated running ornament on the string courses and above the doors. He designed different string courses for different floors, namely string courses with floriated running ornaments and with dentil. The facade of these flats are highly decorative with the rhythm of windows and variations of ornaments.

Design-Rhythm

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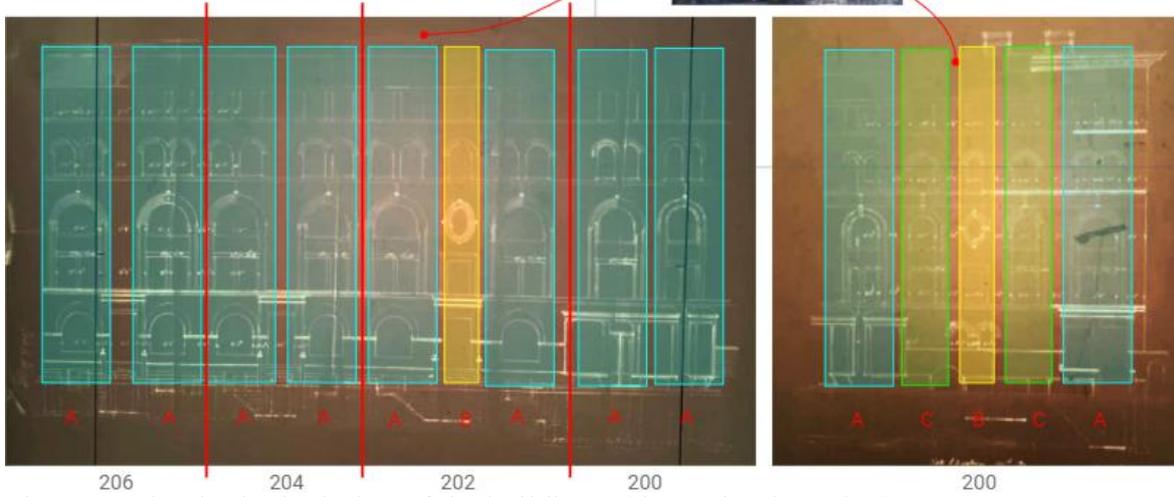


Figure 2. The rhythmic design of the buildings. (drawn by the writer)



Figure 3. Floriated running ornament on the string courses and above the doors. (Photo from the writer)

The flat layout shows that the shapes of the buildings are irregular, like dumbbells to some extent. The airflows were designed to admit more air and light into the apartments for better ventilation, in order to abide by the 1879 tenement law. The Tenement House Act of 1879 “set the minimum standards for lighting and ventilation of the tenements”.⁹ As a result, the shape of the apartments buildings built after the Act was like “dumbbell” to fulfill the requirements. As for the apartment's interior, the arrangement of rooms shares similarities with that of other flats developed in Manhattan. In the 1870s, the small flats continued to develop for the next two decades, whose “interior arrangements were preserved in William Tuthill’s *The City Residence* of 1890”.¹⁰ For instance, Tuthill put forward one idea for “a one-unite-per-floor middle class apartment plan”, which shows “the dimensions of a moderate flat” and the separation of bedrooms “from reception space”.¹¹ “The kitchen and dining room were grouped at the rear, the bedrooms grouped in the center on a light court” “to get adequate fresh air circulation”.¹² Although Gilbert designed two apartments on one floor, the arrangement of rooms with different functions is similar. For example, in 202 and 204, He arranged the parlor near the entrance, the bedroom near the airflow to ensure that every bedroom could have a window, and the kitchen and the dining room at the rear. Through such interior design, Gilbert clearly functionally and spatially differentiated the social or public zone, private zone and service zone, which was regarded as “the proper way to lay out a family apartment unit”.¹³

⁹ “1879 Tenement House Competition,” *The Living City*, accessed by January, 28, 2022, http://www.tlcarhive.org/htm/framesets/themes/tenements/fs_1879.htm.

¹⁰ Elizabeth C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 174.

¹¹ William Burnet Tuthill, *The City Residence, Its Design And Construction* (New York: W.T. Comstock, 1890), 39.

¹² William Burnet Tuthill, *The City Residence, Its Design And Construction* (New York: W.T. Comstock, 1890), 39.

¹³ Elizabeth C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 174.



Figure 4. (left) Design of narrow apartment buildings, from William B. Tuthill, *The City Residence: Its Design and Construction*, p.39; (right) Layout the 202, 204 St. Nicholas Avenue, from Microfilm of Department of Building, Block 1926, lot 8, New Building Permit 1616-1889

Compared with the decoration, the material Gilbert used is relatively simple. The basements of the buildings are constructed with bricks. The front of the building, the pointed arches of the windows on the first floor, and the door frames are made of brownstone. In addition, sheet metal and terra cotta were used for the string courses and sheet metal for the protruding cornice.

The character-defining features of these four buildings were not well-preserved. Particularly, the alterations at the first floor and at the cornices affect the perception of the buildings. The facade of the four buildings has been altered to various extents. For 200, the store on the corner has been completely blocked with bricks and limestone, and the original cornice was removed. The brownstone on the first floor of 202 has also been replaced by

Garden State brick face, without any trace of the original door frame and pointed arches. The cornice of 204 is completely lost, and thus the deterioration caused by moisture is severe on the facade. For example, biological growth can be noticed on the brick walls and around the string courses, and the soluble salt can be noticed on the pointed arch. The original design of 206 seems to be well preserved, except for the string courses between the third and fourth floors.



Figure 5. Garden State brick face on the first floor of the 202 building. (Photo from the writer)



Figure 6. The biological growth on 204 building. (Photo from the writer)

The same design, materials, and shape features can also be found on another group of buildings designed by Gilbert in Central Harlem, namely 202-208 West 133rd Street, originally known as the “Boston”. Built in 1889 as well, the four flats of the “Boston” are typical dumbbell buildings.¹⁴ They also show a symmetrical facade, but the rhythm is relatively regular, which is ABBA.¹⁵ Gilbert’s trademarks are apparent on the facade, including the combination of brownstone front and bricks, the round shape, rowlock arches, the recessed and pulled bricks decoration, and floriated ornament. In addition, on residential buildings, 803 Carroll Street, that Gilbert designed in 1888 in Park Slope,¹⁶ Brooklyn, he also shows his preference of using rhythmic windows and floriated ornament. In his design of 36, 38, 40 Montgomery Place in 1889,¹⁷ he displayed his adept skills at using elaborate brick

¹⁴ Chris Kumaradaja. “Gilbert in the Rough: The Boston”. Columbia University Coursework, 2021, 1.

¹⁵ Chris Kumaradaja. “Gilbert in the Rough: The Boston”. Columbia University Coursework, 2021, 2.

¹⁶ Christopher Gray. “C. P. H. Gilbert: The Wild Years,” *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2012.

¹⁷ Christopher Gray. “C. P. H. Gilbert: The Wild Years,” *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2012.

decoration around two levels of windows and the complex recessed and pulled brick decorations. As he “left no diary, no notes on design”,¹⁸ these buildings are essential resources to understand his ideas.

In the late 19 century, a large number of European immigrants flowed into the United States.¹⁹ Later, about 1916, the widespread migration of the Black people occurred, who moved from the southern rural area to the northern cities, such as New York.²⁰ Such a change in demography is also reflected in the census of the flats. The census in 1900, 1910, and 1920 showed that besides American-born individuals, there were immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Scotland, and Russia living in the flats.²¹ The flats were dominated by middle-class or lower-middle-class white people who worked as clerks, typewriters (i.e. secretaries), salesmen, or engineers. The year 1925 witnessed a tiny change in the race, that one black family appeared in the white-dominated apartments.²² The race of residents changed rapidly during the next five years. By 1930, all the residents were Black, whose originality included South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. With the change of race, the change of social class also happened. Lower middle and Working class jobs, such as porters, laborers, and housemaids, appeared in the census.²³ What did not change was the size of the household. It seems that from 1900 to 1940, although some families had two or three people, other families contained six or seven people in total, including immigrant

¹⁸ Christopher Gray. “Streetscapes/Charles Pierrepont Henry Gilbert; A Designer of Lacy Mansions for the City's Eminent,” *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2003.

¹⁹ T. Britannica. ed., “Great Migration”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. June 30, 2021.

²⁰ T. Britannica. ed., “Great Migration”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. June 30, 2021.

²¹ United States Census, 1900, ED 0853, p.32-p.34

United States Census, 1910, ED 0559, p.8-p.10

United States Census, 1920, ED 1318, p.25-p.27

²² New York, U.S., State Census, 1925, ED 19/14, p.1-p.2.

²³ United States Census, 1930, ED 0905, p.54-p.56

families where there were four or more children or the black families where three generations lived together or had several loggers. In general, the living capacity was always intensive.

In the mid-1970s, Harlem began to suffer from depopulation and disinvestment.²⁴ Many residential buildings became abandoned or even demolished. Later, to revive Harlem, the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development launched affordable housing projects.²⁵ The aim of these projects was to rehabilitate the vacant houses and to make them affordable for less wealthy families.²⁶ The Federal National Mortgage Association and Housing Preservation and Development both financially sponsored the projects to ensure that the rent would be affordable for the lower-income households.²⁷ As for the four flats, 200 and 202, which were vacant, were involved in the affordable housing projects. As a result, there were many alterations not only on the exterior, as mentioned above, but also on the interior. Firstly, the number and the size of rooms were changed. For 200, the former floor plan was completely demolished. Two small apartments on one floor were substituted by one apartment with bigger rooms on each floor. Similarly, the room size in 202 was also enlarged. Three bedrooms in one apartment were changed into one bedroom. Additionally, Gilbert's arrangement and separation of different function zones were also altered, with the kitchen near the airflow and bedrooms located on the rear.

By analyzing the design of the four flats and investigating the regional history, I assume that the flats are significant enough to be preserved. For the aspect of architecture, the buildings represent C.P.H. Gilbert's ingenious efforts to create intricate brick decorations and

²⁴ John Mollenkopf. "The Evolution of New York City's Black Neighborhoods", *Metropolitica*, 9 May 2017.

²⁵ New York City Department of Buildings, Block 1926, lot 9, New Building Permit 1616-1889.

²⁶ New York City Department of Buildings, Block 1926, lot 9, New Building Permit 1616-1889.

²⁷ New York City Department of Buildings, Block 1926, lot 9, New Building Permit 1616-1889.

achieve his aesthetic ideas on an irregular site. For other residential buildings he designed they are usually located on one side of a straight street, which would make it easier to achieve symmetry and create rhythmic bays. However, four flats at 200-206 Saint Nicholas Avenue are located along a diagonal avenue and around a corner. Gilbert needed to adjust his design strategies according to the shape and size of the lots. He successfully adhered to his ideas of symmetry and rhythm in the design and had some variation to some extent to distinguish these buildings from his other works. From the aspect of social development, they represent the early residential development in South Harlem caused by speculative projects. Its interior layout reflects one type of the typical arrangement of a family unit at that time. It witnessed the social transformation of South Harlem from a community of white to one for Black households. It survived from the era of disinvestment when many vacant buildings were demolished. It also witnessed the effort of revitalizing Harlem by the government and became an example of the important affordable housing projects. These four flats survived from the ups and downs of the region and should stand in the future.

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