

5. Statement of Significance: Former P.S. 160; now The Clemente

Executive Summary: The imposing, buff-colored former P.S. 160 at 107 Suffolk Street, dated 1897-99, presents itself almost as a Gilded Age mansion, set on a narrow street among aging, relatively diminutive tenements. This striking effect is the result of several factors converging at the end of the 19th century, a period when there was an enormous influx of immigrants settling



Former P.S. 160. 1897-99. 107 Suffolk Street. Photo: D. Wye

in New York, and nowhere more so than in this Lower East Side neighborhood. An unprecedented increase in population meant countless children who, with compulsory laws, were required to attend school. This was a moment of crisis and promise. A widespread campaign brought new school construction to Manhattan and the Bronx, and then to the five boroughs, after Consolidation. The gifted architect in charge, C.B.J. Snyder, more than met the challenge and became renowned nationally for the Progressive Era innovations he provided within each school, and for their stunning outward appearances. Each new Snyder building communicated the message that education was of the utmost importance.

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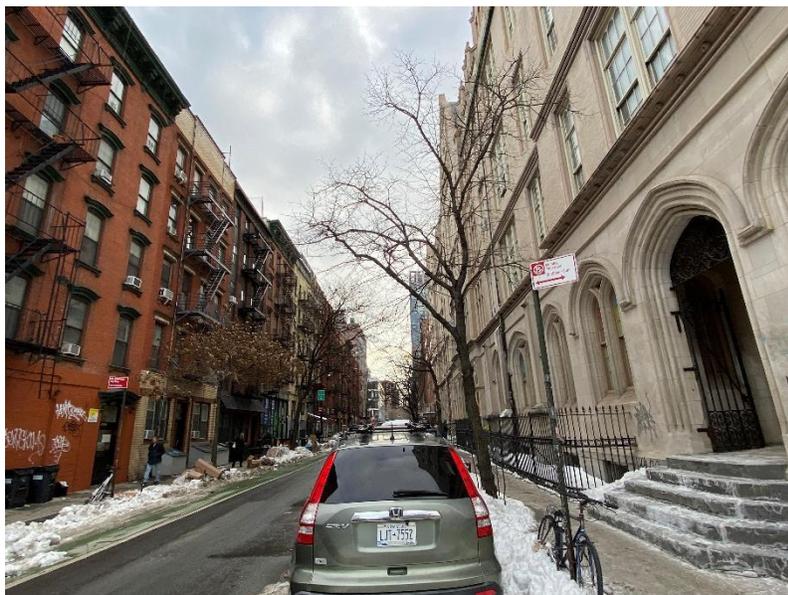
View of former P.S. 160 looking west along Rivington Street. Photo: D. Wye

Not surprisingly, the traditional Lower East Side—from 14th Street to the Brooklyn Bridge and west to Broadway—had the largest concentration of Snyder schools in the city, numbering 39. Twenty-two are extant, with some still functioning as schools and others repurposed. Only one, the former P.S. 64 on East 9th Street, is a designated New York City landmark. Currently under renovation, the mid-block P.S. 64—in a French Renaissance style of

red brick and white stone trim, with an H-Plan configuration—represents a starkly different aspect of Snyder’s work from the quintessentially Collegiate Gothic-style former P.S. 160, on a corner lot where Suffolk and Rivington Streets meet.

The Lower East Side below Houston Street, with no Historic District designations, needs protection for its most significant buildings, as rampant development threatens to erase the neighborhood’s storied past. The historic surroundings of former P.S. 160 remain mostly intact. The exterior of the building has been sensitively restored and interior improvements, including ADA compliance measures, are underway. Representing new waves of migrants and immigrants, the former school now functions as an arts facility, The Clemente Soto Vález Cultural & Educational Center, which celebrates Puerto Rican and Latinx culture with a multi-ethnic and international vision. Designating this building a New York City Individual Landmark would be a fitting way to celebrate the completion of its renovation, its history and promising future.

Architectural Description:



View of former P.S. 160 looking south on Suffolk St. Photo: D. Wye

The unusual, light-colored appearance of the former P.S. 160, striking amidst the surrounding tenements, is the result of buff brick and limestone surfaces. Among the notable elements of the school’s design are prominent gables and smaller gablettes that punctuate the roofline and give the building its picturesque form. The large gables, with their curved and decorated pediments, have given rise to the characterization of the building’s style as Dutch.

However, these gables and gablettes, with straight edges and pointed silhouettes, are more strictly associated with the Collegiate Gothic style that originated at well-known English universities. It was architect C.B.J. Snyder who introduced the Collegiate Gothic to public schools in New York, while also practicing in a variety of styles and eclectic combinations.

Other Collegiate Gothic features of P.S. 160 are the pointed arched windows and entrances that line the base of the building and the “flattened” arch over the main entrance known as a Tudor Arch. Segmented windows on the upper floors are also Gothic in appearance, with small upper



Former P.S. 160 main entrance. Suffolk St. Photo: D. Wye

arches within overall rectangular enframements. The rhythm of the window arrangement—the fenestration—is somewhat unusual for Snyder who is known for large, horizontal windows employed for maximum light entry. His solution here, however, still results in walls of windows and much interior light, but with a subtle arrangement that gives the building a palatial appearance rather than an institutional one. Other significant aspects of the façade design are slightly projecting central bays on both sides that culminate in the larger gables, and an oriel window projecting over the main entrance.

This entrance, one of five overall, is made a focus with terra cotta ornamentation.



Gable, gablettes, window design. Photo: D.Wye



One of four rondels over main entrance; construction began in 1897 and was completed in 1899. Photo: D.Wye

Amidst foliate details are four rondels, one of which includes the date of 1897, the start of construction. The iron fence surrounding the building, present at least since a 1920 photograph, has been heightened. Finally, a cupola present in an early rendering of the school no longer exists, but its base remains on the roof. It is thought to have had a ventilation function as well as a decorative one.



*Rendering of P.S. 160, showing cupola. Social reformer Jacob Riis turned this image into a slide for his public lectures.
Photo: MCNY*

Architect C.B.J. Snyder (1860-1945)

School buildings by C.B. J. Snyder are widely recognized by those with an interest in the history of New York City and its architecture. But a comprehensive overview of his accomplishments became available only in 2022, with the publication of *From Factories to Palaces: Architect Charles B.J. Snyder and the New York City Public Schools*, by Jean Arrington with Cynthia S. LaValle. With this study, it is now possible to fully explore and evaluate Snyder's immense contribution to New York's built environment.

Snyder was born in 1860, growing up in Saratoga Springs, New York, in modest circumstances. A well-connected friend of the family may have helped him with a job in New York City while he took night classes at Cooper Union, and with securing the position of Superintendent of School Buildings. He served with great distinction from 1891-1922, a period that included the Consolidation of New York City and the subsequent broadening of his purview. Snyder's success has been credited not only to his design abilities and educational innovations, but also to his

personal characteristics. He was organized, courteous, honest, and worked well with a team—all indispensable for success with such a large-scale public building campaign.

Throughout this long period, Snyder oversaw the construction of all New York schools, designing 410 schools and additions. More than half of these are still operational, while others have been repurposed. In all, 277 buildings are extant. During his tenure, Snyder introduced numerous innovations, many that improved the physical plants of schools, including fireproofing, upgraded ventilation, and steel skeletons that allowed for huge expanses of windows to bring in natural light—a signature feature of his schools. He is also celebrated for introducing the H-Plan design for mid-block schools, which provided more surfaces for windows, and thus more light and air for the buildings. Still other advancements affected programs and curricula for students. These included gymnasiums, rooftop playgrounds, manual arts and music rooms, science labs,



Former P.S. 20, 1899, 45 Rivington St. One of 3 remaining Snyder school buildings out of 5 once along Rivington St. Photo: D.Wye

movable walls that allowed for assemblies and, later, street-level auditoriums used to expand offerings for adult education during non-school hours.

But, most remarkable for all New Yorkers—not just students—were the stunning building facades. Imposing in scale, Snyder's schools were designed in a variety of historical revival styles and

combinations of styles, among them Romanesque, Italian, French, and Dutch Renaissance, Beaux-Arts and Collegiate Gothic. Jean Arrington has divided Snyder's work into three phases: 1891-1900, the Creative Period; 1901-1910, the Prolific Period; and 1901-22, the Standardizing Period. On occasion, Snyder would re-use previous building designs for the sake of efficiency and budget, but close inspection invariably reveals significant differences in the results.

When his buildings were in close proximity—within easy walking distance—Snyder would purposely vary their styles. Along Rivington Street on the Lower East Side, for example, where



Former P.S. 4, 1908. 203 Rivington St. One of 3 remaining Snyder buildings out of 5 once along Rivington St. Photo: D. Wye

the former P.S. 160 is located on the corner of Suffolk Street, there were once five Snyder-designed schools. Two have been demolished, while the remaining three have been repurposed. P. S. 160, now an arts center, is in the Collegiate Gothic style, while P.S. 40 from the same year and now a health facility, and P.S. 4, from 1908 and now an apartment house, are both in differing Italian Renaissance styles.

Historical Context

Snyder's achievements in school construction cannot be separated from the period in which he practiced, one that was dominated by the huge influx of immigrants into New York City. Starting in the early and mid-19th century, immigrant ethnic groups arrived in waves, none more so than on the Lower East Side. Beginning with the Irish and Germans and followed by Italians and Eastern European Jews, among other nationalities, the population reached crisis proportions by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the density on some blocks was considered the highest in the world.

This period of historic immigration also saw an emphasis on social reform, stimulated by the negative effects of industrialization and the difficult conditions facing the new arrivals. Education was considered the fundamental pathway to assimilation and Americanization and led to compulsory attendance laws for children up to age 14. Those who previously might have been sent out to work were now among the throngs crowding into schools. In addition, adult immigrants had significant needs, which led to a full range of programs offered in the evenings. English language classes were the most popular, but additional subjects included science, art, music and history, among others. But even the proliferation of new schools could not meet the demand. It was within this urgent moment that Snyder emerged as an exemplar in the field of school design and construction.

Given these circumstances, the reform movement led to the term, “Progressive Era,” indicating a belief that progress and the betterment of society’s ills were achievable, particularly through public projects. While social services were provided by such institutions as settlement houses and a variety of charitable programs funded by philanthropists, the government took responsibility for such initiatives as playgrounds, bathhouses, and hospitals, and partnered for libraries. Public schools were among the most important of these endeavors.

One celebrated reformer was Jacob Riis (1849-1914), an immigrant himself who went on to become a journalist, renowned photographer, and lecturer, bringing his message to enthusiastic



Adult class. P.S. 160. c. 1900. Photo: Harvard Art Museums.

audiences. Riis was among the great supporters of Snyder’s schools, exclaiming that the architect “built them beautiful...Where he found barracks...he left palaces to the people.” Riis included slides of Snyder’s schools in his popular lectures. And, it is said that one such lecture held at P.S. 160 was attended by a crowd of almost 1000. In his book, *The Battle with the Slum*, Riis refers to P.S. 160 and the success it was

having in opening for evening classes and other activities, stating, “One school I found that surged with a happy crowd...was over at Rivington and Suffolk Streets, No. 160.”

But as many schools as Snyder built, there were never enough. Large numbers of children could not be admitted because of overcrowding or had to attend only a morning or afternoon session. It is said that on one registration day, the crowds were so huge on the Lower East Side that the police had to be called to restore order. Among these neighborhood’s students were two graduates of P.S. 160 who rose up from the Jewish immigrant community to positions of great prominence in adulthood. One was Abraham Beame (1906-2001) who, at three months old, arrived on the Lower East Side with his family. He became Mayor of New York from 1974-77. Also, the renowned acting coach and actor, Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), attended P.S. 160. He settled on the Lower East Side with his family in 1909.

This period of social reform had tangible effects on the architecture of New York and other major cities through the City Beautiful movement, inspired by the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago in 1893. That event led city leaders to believe that enhancing the prestige of their communities was tied to outstanding public architecture. In Manhattan, the former Pennsylvania Station, the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, and nearby Grand Central Terminal, were built in that spirit. But, in addition to those grand buildings, adherents of the City Beautiful movement believed that beauty could enrich and inspire all communities, no matter how impoverished. We see the results in exceptionally designed firehouses, public baths, libraries, hospitals, and other such buildings on the Lower East Side, built during these years. Like P.S. 160, they must have been a wonder to come upon within such neighborhoods. Snyder's schools beautified their communities while serving their students. With his particular set of skills, Snyder was clearly the right man in the right place at the right time.

C.B.J. Snyder Schools on the Lower East Side

When proposing to landmark a Snyder school on the Lower East Side—the neighborhood that had the largest concentration of his schools—it is important to get an overview of their presence in the neighborhood, then and now. There were originally 39 schools and additions, often clustered surprisingly close to each other; 3 to 6 schools were located just minutes apart by foot. Today, 22 of these Snyder buildings remain, with 13 functioning as schools and 9 others repurposed as facilities for health care, the arts, and housing. They were all primary schools. New York, at the time, was slow to introduce secondary education, but as Snyder's tenure continued, a growing number of students sought higher learning, and he designed some of his largest and most elaborate buildings as high schools. Of the current landmarked Snyder schools, a large percentage are high schools, even though they were only a small fraction of Snyder's



*Former P.S. 64. 1906. 605 East 9th St. Lower East Side's only designated landmark by Snyder.
Photo: Historic Districts Council*

overall output. High schools tended to be built in neighborhoods where families could afford to keep their children in school rather than send them out to work after satisfying compulsory attendance laws. On the Lower East Side, many families needed their children to contribute to household finances.

To better appreciate the distinction of former P.S. 160, it is useful to compare and contrast it with the other Snyder schools in the area. The largest group—16 in all—is constructed in shades of red brick, usually with white stone trim; the remaining, like P.S. 160, are in light-colored brick and stone. The former P.S. 64 on East 9th Street, from 1906—the Lower East Side’s only landmarked Snyder building—is among those in red brick. Its H-Plan layout contrasts with the rectangular-shaped “chateau” style of P.S. 160.

Snyder’s distinctive chateau style, usually for corner lots, is found in only one other Lower East Side school: the still



P.S. 1. 1899. 8 Henry St. Photo: D. Wye

functioning P.S 1, at 8 Henry Street. The former P.S. 160 and P.S. 1 are some 25 minutes apart. They are both constructed in buff-colored brick and stone and have a considerable impact in their neighborhoods. Their picturesque, gabled rooflines are among their defining features, yet their gable designs differ—with former P.S. 160’s in the Collegiate Gothic style, and P.S. 1’s in the curved, or

“Dutch” style. Overall, P.S. 1 can be considered eclectic in its combination of Dutch-style gables with a generally Italian Renaissance design, including a prominent cornice, quoined window surrounds, and classicizing entrances. Its main entrance veers toward the Baroque with angled and pedestaled columns.



Former P.S. 160. Windows at first and second floors. Photo: D. Wye



P.S. 1. Windows at first and second floors. Photo: D.Wye



Former P.S. 160. Main entrance. Photo: D. Wye



P.S. 1. Main entrance. Photo: D.Wye

C.B.J. Snyder Individual Landmark Buildings



P.S. 9. 1896. 460-466 West End Ave. Photo: Daytonian in Manhattan.

Arrington's survey of Snyder schools and additions highlights his landmarked buildings. Although she includes the demolished P.S. 31 in the Bronx and omits P.S. 27, also in the Bronx, the overall number is 21.

Two of these schools are on corner lots and in a "chateau" style quite like that of P.S. 160—they are P.S. 9 on Manhattan's Upper West Side and P.S. 27 in the Bronx.



P.S. 27. 1898. 519 St. Ann's Ave. Bronx. Photo: LPC, Jim Henderson

P.S. 9 now sits amidst high-rise apartments and fronts a wide avenue. Its Gothic and stepped Flemish gables and gablettes contribute to a picturesque appearance. Its fenestration, however, made up of expenses of large rectangular windows, gives its facade a more austere quality than the subtle arrangement of segmented windows on P.S. 160's facade. Still further, P.S. 160 is in a unified Collegiate Gothic style, while P.S. 9 is eclectic, with

a classically inspired portico entrance, rock-faced rusticated base, and prominent diagonal entrance staircases.

The landmarked P.S. 27 also differs from P.S. 160. It sits across from the expanse of St. Mary's Park, rather than a streetscape made up of tenements. While its light-colored materials, corner location and picturesque gabled roofline are similar to P.S. 160, as with P.S. 9, it can be thought of as eclectic rather than unified Collegiate Gothic. Its Dutch-style gables top a building that has Italian Renaissance features, such as suggestions of Gibbs surrounds on windows at the base, quoins, string courses and a cornice, as well as Federal-style elements including keystones on the upper-level windows and a roof tower. Its secondary entrances are arched with columns, while its elaborate, two-story main entrance is Baroque.

Recent History

After students moved out of P.S. 160 in 1975-76, the building was vacant until 1981, when it began to house *Solidaridad Humana*, a community-based, bilingual education program for Spanish-speaking immigrants. Some of these students started the Teatro Latea (Latin American



Theatre Experiment and Associates), which continues to this day. In 1993, a new organization was founded there by Puerto Rican poet Ed Vega Yunque, Uruguayan actor and director Nelson Landrieu, and Dominican actor Mateo Gómez. It was named for Puerto Rican poet, journalist, and activist, Clemente Soto Vélez (1905-1993), who died right before the organization opened. The Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural & Educational Center is now a widely recognized and admired multi-arts institution, anchored in a vibrant Lower East Side community. Its mission is to celebrate Puerto Rican and Latinx traditions while also

embracing a multi-ethnic and international vision. Programs include managing studios for visual artists and offering a full calendar of performing arts productions, exhibitions, and education and community activities within its theaters, galleries and rehearsal studios. Its stunning historic building is a source of pride for the organization, enhancing all activities held within its walls—walls that echo from the time school children filled its halls and classrooms.

Conclusion

Clearly, C.B.J. Snyder's contribution to the education of New York City youth during the period of his tenure was substantial, both through the Progressive Era innovations he made possible within his buildings and for their place as civic monuments in their neighborhoods. Hopefully they will continue to have a revered place in New York's cityscape.

The merits of the former P.S. 160 for landmarking are numerous. It is in the historic immigrant community where Snyder designed his largest concentration of schools, but to date has only one that is designated—former P.S. 64, located many blocks to its north, and representing a markedly different design.

The former P.S. 160 was built during what is considered Snyder’s most creative period. Its imposing presence makes it stand out in its neighborhood context and it becomes only more remarkable upon close inspection. Designed in a quintessential Collegiate Gothic style, resembling a chateau, it is not duplicated among any of the city’s current Snyder landmarks.

P.S. 160 had a long history as a public school, and it has been repurposed and reinvigorated for new generations. Its exterior was sensitively restored by Superstructures Engineers + Architects, with the project winning a Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award in 2013. Its current interior renovation will result in full accessibility. The future of P.S. 160, in its rebirth as The Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural & Educational Center, is bright. Designating it a New York City Individual Landmark would protect the building and provide a tangible link between the Lower East Side’s immigration past and present, and to all those for whom it has functioned as a vital community resource. Landmarking provides the only means of ensuring the building continues to serve as a neighborhood beacon far into the future.

Prepared by Deborah Wye, 2nd Vice President, Lower East Side Preservation Initiative

Timeline

1852

Map shows a coal yard on the lot that would hold P.S. 160.

1860

C. B. J. Snyder born; raised in Saratoga Springs, New York.

1888-1917

Wide-reaching adult education classes take place in public schools in off hours; include English language classes as well as business subjects, vocational training, art, literature and history.

1891-1922

Snyder is Superintendent of School Building, initially for Manhattan and the Bronx and then in 1898, for all boroughs.

1893

Chicago's Columbian Exposition takes place and inspires the City Beautiful movement.

1891-1900

Phase 1 of Snyder's work, deemed "The Creative Decade: by specialist Jean Arrington.

1897-1899

Construction of P.S. 160 at 107 Suffolk Street in Manhattan.

1898

Consolidation of the five boroughs of New York City.

1899

Snyder's first H-Plan school, P.S. 147 on Henry Street, since demolished; first extant H-Plan school is P.S. 165, from 1900, on 108th Street in Manhattan.

1901-1910

Phase 2 of Snyder's work, deemed, "The Prolific Decade" by specialist Jean Arrington.

1902

Snyder completes his first high school, Wadleigh High School for Girls, in Manhattan. High Schools will become more widely available in the ensuing years.

1906

Completion of P.S. 64 on East 9th Street, the Lower East Side's only landmarked Snyder school.

1911-1922

Phase 3 of Snyder's work, deemed, "The Standardizing Decade," by specialist Jean Arrington.

1945

C.B.J. Snyder dies

1975-76

P.S. 160 is closed; students transferred to newly opened P.S. 142 on Attorney Street.

1976-1980

P.S. 1 is vacant.

1981

Solidaridad Humana, an educational organization, begins to use the P.S. 160 building.

1993

The Clemente founders take over the lease for the building. The Clemente Soto Vález Cultural & Educational Center celebrates and preserves Puerto Rican and Latinx traditions while embracing a multi-ethnic and international vision.

2012

Superstructures Engineers + Architects completes exterior restoration of P.S. 160, funded by the city.

2013

Superstructures Engineers + Architects restoration awarded the Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award by the New York Landmarks Conservancy as a prime example of preservation benefiting the community.

2024-present

City- funded renovation of P.S. 160 by Sage & Coombe Architects to add an elevator and improvements to the lobby and corridors; will make The Clemente fully ADA compliant.

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