

5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: Former Young Men’s Benevolent Association

Executive Summary

The former Young Men’s Benevolent Association, at 311 East Broadway and Grand Street, opened in 1905. The building was later occupied by Arnold Toynbee House (renamed Grand Street Settlement), and then Mikvah of the Lower East Side. It was designed by Sass & Smallheiser in the Flemish Revival style with Beaux Art elements, and constructed of brick and stone. It is primarily intact, with some modifications over the years.

311 East Broadway is a striking and singular presence in a Lower East Side neighborhood that has been largely demolished and rebuilt since its historic immigrant past. As such, it provides a vital link to a highly significant period in New York City history while also maintaining its cultural association to the Jewish community that filled this area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is worthy of landmark designation for both its architectural and cultural significance.

(I) Overview

“The spirit of neighborhood endeavor which has raised this club-house in East Broadway is a grateful manifestation of the uplift idea upon which the final hope must rest of a general city betterment”. The Evening World, 1905 (May 2)

Sitting prominently on the curve of the intersection between East Broadway and Grand Street, the unusual building at 311 East Broadway has been a center for Jewish community life on the Lower East Side since 1905.



311 East Broadway, Today

Built from small contributions of working people, 311 East Broadway has an architectural distinction enhanced by its mixture of styles, which incorporate elements of Flemish Revival—with the use of red brick, contrasting white trim, and stepped gables—as well as an elaborate stone base with flourishes of the Beaux Arts movement.

Almost immediately upon its opening, the building served as a venue for political action, social services, and community organizing. It is here that the Jewish Defense Association organized mass meetings and protests across New York against pogroms in Ukraine. (*The Sun*, Nov. 19, 1905)

The building’s founding organization, The Young Men’s Benevolent Association, shared many links with the settlement house movement through its educational and recreational programs for the community. The next occupant was a more traditional settlement house, based on a model for social programs and economic protection first promulgated by British economist Arnold Toynbee. This resident organization was called Arnold Toynbee House in honor of its predecessor. The

abbreviation, “ATH” is still found carved in a stone medallion at the center base of the middle second floor window.

Toynbee House eventually evolved into the Grand Street Settlement and later moved to larger premises. The final, and present occupant maintains the building’s function as a center for Jewish life, housing a ‘mikvah’ bathhouse for ritual purification according to Orthodox Jewish traditions.



(II) Architectural Development

“Largely overlooked today, Sass & Smallheiser were prolific in the Lower East Side at the time, producing for the most part tenement structures. But their design for the Young Men’s Benevolent Association would dazzle”. (Daytonian in Manhattan, 2015)

The 311 East Broadway building was designed by the firm of Sass & Smallheiser as a ‘club-house’ for the Young Men’s Benevolent Association and included a library, meeting rooms and other facilities that furthered its educational and social service goals for the Jewish population in the area. This architectural firm also designed many tenement buildings and has been praised for the solid quality of their designs and their Classically-inspired decorative elements. Francis Morrone notes that Sass & Smallheiser was not the sort of Beaux-Arts firm that garnered civic commissions, rather, “their instructions were to impress the average person, and at that they excelled.”

However, their tenement projects would not prepare one for the elaborate design of 311 East Broadway. As noted by *Daytonian in Manhattan* (2015):



Young Men’s Benevolent Association, 1905

“For more than a decade the Flemish Revival style had been popular in Manhattan, most evidently on the Upper West Side. But Sass & Smallheiser brought it downtown to East Broadway; adding touches of the equally-popular Beaux Arts style for good measure. An exuberant concoction of red brick and granite, it featured all the decorative elements of Flemish Revival—the stepped side gables, playful dormers poking through the steep tile-covered mansard, and bold stone voussoirs that fanned out over the openings—all on a rusticated Beaux Arts base supporting a Beaux Art stone balcony.”

“The New York Times called it ‘one of the handsomest buildings in that section of the city.’ The New-York Tribune said it ‘is now one of the show places of the East Side.’ “

While the entrance porch, cornice and tall decorative element atop the building were removed at some point, the overall impact of 311 East Broadway has not substantially changed, and it remains a striking architectural centerpiece at the intersection of East Broadway and Grand Street. Its prominence is enhanced by

an open approach from Grand Street, which includes a triangular park space.

(III) Prominent Cultural Associations

“The new building is the occupying association’s [Young Men’s Benevolent Association] very own in every way. It is the fruit of sixteen years joint planning and harmonious effort. The \$50,000 which the establishment cost came in contributions from four hundred very earnest and hard-working young men; not in gifts from any great and rich friends. In this fact is the special pride and exemplary worth of the institution. (The Evening World, 1905, May 2)

The cultural significance of 311 East Broadway can be traced through the three main stages of its ownership and use by the Jewish community. The dedication of the new building of the Young Men’s Benevolent Association in 1905 was attended by Manhattan Borough President John F. Ahearn and Congressmen Henry Goldfogle and William Sulzer, as noted by the *New York Tribune (Notice, 1905, April 26)*. *The Evening World* welcomed it as a successful example of local organizing and observed that the clubhouse contained a circulating library, buffet, bowling alleys, gymnasium, billiard room, lecture room and meeting rooms (1905, May 2).

Almost immediately upon its opening, 311 East Broadway became a center not just for learning but also for political action to protect Jewish people in the United States and abroad. This included resistance to stricter immigration laws and prejudice against Jews in naturalization, as well as the organization of city-wide protests against the Odessa pogroms in 1905.

The second phase in the life of the building began in 1918, when it became the site of Arnold Toynbee House, a settlement named after the British social reformer and economic historian. New York’s Toynbee House was founded by Rose Gruening with some colleagues from Madison House, another Lower East Side settlement.



Rose Gruening Obituary, The New York Times, 1934

While little-known today, Rose Gruening, born in New York City in 1876, deserves much wider recognition for her contribution to the settlement house movement. She follows in the line of such distinguished women pioneers as Lillian Wald of Henry Street Settlement, Mary Simkovich of Greenwich house, and Jane Addams of Chicago’s Hull House. Her obituary in *The New York Times* lauded Gruening as, “known and loved by thousands of the East Side’s poor,” going on to point out that she had “founded the settlement with her own funds and worked for it without compensation.” She died in 1934 at the summer camp she had founded for neighborhood children.

When Toynbee House moved into 311 East Broadway from their first location on Division Street, the settlement was the base of operations

for the same mix of social services and political activity as the Young Men’s Benevolent Association. This was in line with the mission of the American settlement house movement, which, as noted by Da Costa Nunez and Scribnick (2013), often put more focus on the social and economic forces that were creating

dehumanizing conditions and less on the individual person than was the case in the UK, where the movement began.

Arnold Toynbee House was subsequently renamed Grand Street Settlement (for the building's location at the corner of East Broadway and Grand Street) and continued to grow. In addition to social services like childcare, summer camp, and showers for the community, it housed a women's college—the Hebrew Teachers Training School for Girls, later part of Yeshiva University. It also hosted performances of works like "Macbeth" and "Julius Caesar," and clubs and classes dedicated to art and literature. (Newman, 2013) For her contributions to the neighborhood, Gruening became known as the "Angel of Grand Street."

In 1941, the Grand Street Settlement moved to larger premises and is still thriving today, serving the Lower East Side and Brooklyn in over thirty locations. The building at 311 East Broadway was converted by the Jewish Association of Family Purity to a 'mikvah,' or a bathhouse for ritual purification according to Orthodox Jewish requirements. It was again renovated in 1966 to meet the latest requirements and to provide updated plumbing.

As noted by Kate Newman (2013), the fact that the building is still used as a mikvah is significant:

"Without community use and support, the mikvah would likely have gone the way of the neighborhood's kosher restaurants and yarmulke shops — shuttered, or at the very least Brooklyn-bound".

Lastly, it is notable that 311 East Broadway is one of only three exceptional buildings representing the Lower East Side in the volume, *Five Hundred Buildings of New York*, 2002 (Text by Bill Harris). The other two—Bialystoker Synagogue and Henry Street Settlement—are already designated New York City landmarks.

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