

5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: University Settlement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University Settlement building at 184 Eldridge Street, opened in 1898, was designed by Howells & Stokes in a Neo-Federal Style. Its materials are red brick laid in Flemish bond, with cast-stone lintels and ground floor, on a granite base. A sixth floor was added to the building not long after the original opening. The building remains essentially intact, with some modifications to the detailing of the façade that do not diminish its overall impact.

As the first settlement house in the United States, the University Settlement is a highly significant institution for the nation and the city. The social and cultural impact of its programs on the Lower East Side neighborhood during the historic immigrant period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are unquestioned; and its services continue to this day. For both its architectural and cultural distinction, University Settlement is highly worthy of landmark designation.



University Settlement, Today

OVERVIEW

On the corner of Rivington and Eldridge sits the six-story University Settlement building on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The entrance portico is adorned with free-standing columns, and an entablature inscribed with the words, "Neighborhood Guild," an early name for the organization whose headquarters has remained continuously at this location since the building's construction in the late 19th century.

The words "University Settlement" are centered and incised just above the second-floor windows, a permanent fixture advertising its operators, the first settlement house in the United States. It is also the name by which the organization has long been known. Franklin Roosevelt, whose wife Eleanor taught dance there before they were married, once described University Settlement as "A landmark in the social history of America."

From then to now, its operation has been continuous as is the legacy of 184 Eldridge's initial mission—strengthening the community by strengthening families, through a range of social services and support. The building and its programs still draw a diverse clientele as it did from the time of its opening in 1898, and the organization has now spread to various locations across lower Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Immigrants, the underserved and marginalized, the economically unempowered – these groups in the present still trek to 184 Eldridge much like the scores of neighborhood residents before them coming from foreign countries and landing on New York City's Lower East Side. The people of the present come

seeking assistance for mental health, adult literacy classes, a community performance space, and childcare. Historically, the building instituted the first kindergarten in the country and the first public baths among other pioneering social programs. In the present day, on the façade facing Rivington Street, a poster sits in white letters against a black background loudly proclaiming “Black Lives Matter.”

ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

The building at 184 Eldridge Street was designed by the architectural firm of Howells & Stokes named after its founders, John Mead Howells and Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes. The firm would later go on to



University Settlement, c. 1900

design St. Paul’s Chapel at Columbia University and the Engineering Quadrangle at Pratt Institute, among other structures across the United States.

Howells, the son of the writer William Dean Howells, studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He would go on to co-design the Tribune Tower in Chicago in 1922 and the New York Daily News building a few years later.

Stokes also studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and was the brother of James Graham Phelps Stokes, a leader at the University Settlement. After the construction of 184 Eldridge, Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes would go on to create his own legacy of public service outside of his architectural practice. Stokes co-authored the Tenement House Law of 1901, which banned the construction of the then-prevalent dark and poorly ventilated tenement buildings scattered all over the city and concentrated in neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side. That law also required new buildings to

be built with standards such as outward-facing windows, indoor toilets and fire safeguards. He also authored *The Iconography of Manhattan Island*, a pioneering and monumental 6-volume study of the borough that remains an essential resource for all those with an interest in New York City history.

The Neo-Federal style, as the name suggests, references an early American architecture style of design with an eye towards elegance and stately in nature – an obvious nod to traditional American ideals and notions of identity in our young nation, no doubt to have a symbolic impact and patriotic resonance with its intended audience - recent immigrants. The architects made graceful use of traditional forms across the façade: symmetrically placed windows display brick arches with contrasting white keystones and impost blocks, on the second floor, while splayed lintels top the windows on floors three through five. Stone plaques add further decorative, yet restrained, flourishes.

When the Howells & Stokes firm began designing 184 Eldridge Street, their specific functional mission was to enact the vision of Dr. Stanton Coit, an American-born and educated man who would go on to lead the Ethical movement in England built around the mission of promoting a culture of mutual community support. Coit wanted to create in New York City a version of London’s Toynbee Hall, the first

settlement house, which opened in 1884. Coit spent three months at the London settlement house before returning to New York and using the experience to model, in 1886, what would ultimately become the University Settlement. In 1891, he published *Neighborhood Guilds: An Instrument of Social Reform*. He would then settle in England and found what is presently known as the British Humanist Association.

In the last few decades of the 19th century, Coit had joined a growing movement of socially conscious progressives that would come to be called the Ethical Movement – the general premise being that practitioners should support one another to become better people and to generally do good in the world. The movement inspired others such as Jane Addams, the acclaimed Nobel Peace Prize winner who co-founded Hull House in Chicago only a few years after Coit founded University Settlement.



Girls Practicing on the Roof



Adult Music Group

The success of the settlement house led to its growth from earlier locations to the construction of the building at 184 Eldridge Street. However, even after its construction, the settlement continued growing with a sixth floor being added to the original structure in 1904 to

house a gymnasium for the growing clientele. The original cornice remained and served as a belt course with the addition of a newer abbreviated cornice, accompanied by a parapeted roof line and protective caging for outdoor roof activities.

Later, at an unknown date, the cornice/belt course element was removed leaving the prominent band over the 5th floor windows that remains today. A centralized balcony at the 5th floor level on the Eldridge Street façade was eventually removed, and a modillioned cornice was added at the top. The ground floor remains remarkably intact and none of the alterations diminish the overall impact of the building as it was originally conceived.



University Settlement, c. 1906

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

As to be expected, the kind of rapid growth in the immigrant population during those years influenced not only larger cultural changes in the community but also the physical makeup of the neighborhood. Shortly after 184 Eldridge Street's construction, noted Progressive Era school architect, C.B.J. Snyder, would open the now former Public School 20 in 1899. That building still sits across the street from University Settlement at 45 Rivington Street.

At 61 Rivington, the building adjacent to University Settlement, is a former Carnegie Library designed by

the renowned architecture firm of McKim Mead and White, who also designed the former Penn Station and the Brooklyn Museum. The former library opened in 1905. That building is now being topped by a contemporary addition.

And across the street at 58-60 Rivington, the former Congregation Adath Jeshurun of Jassy opened in 1904, designed by another famed architect - Emery Roth, who began his apprenticeship at the legendary firm of Burnham and Root in Chicago, even working on the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

These prominent buildings, along with 184 Eldridge Street, are located within a mixture of tenements and commercial structures that give this small area of the Lower East Side a sense of place that would still be familiar to the immigrants of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Such streetscapes are a vital connection to our collective past—an historic period for New York City and the nation.

PRIMARY REFERENCES

About Us: University Settlement. [Available at <https://www.universitysettlement.org/us/about/>]

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ADDITIONAL MISCELLANEOUS ONLINE SOURCES