

Public School 109 (now El Barrio's Artspace PS 109)

215 East 99th St., Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1649 Lot 9

Built: 1899-1901

Architect: C. B. J. Snyder

Style: Collegiate Gothic

Proposed Action: Item Proposed for Commission Calendar November 14, 2017



El Barrio's Artspace, previously PS 109, Barrett Reiter (LPC), October 2017

The former Public School 109 at 215 East 99th Street, constructed in 1899 and transformed in 2015 into an affordable housing complex for local artists, is architecturally and culturally significant as a Progressive-era school designed by the Superintendent of School Buildings Charles B. J. Snyder. Combining the eclectic historicism of the Collegiate Gothic style with modern construction methods and a forward-thinking site plan, P.S. 109 embodied the goals of urban educational and social reform at the turn of the twentieth century.

Built during a time of burgeoning school enrollments and an increase in immigrant populations in East Harlem, P.S. 109's five stories could accommodate more than 2,000 students. The building is clad in limestone and brick, with a stylistic expression that joins elements of the late Gothic with French Renaissance motifs and the order of Beaux-Arts planning. Its decoration is relatively restrained on the lower levels, with terracotta stringcourses subdividing the spare façade, and rounded turrets placed at each interior corner. The former entrance on the right side of the building is topped with medievalizing terracotta ornament such as ribbons, crests of arms, foliage, projecting gargoyles, and a pointed Tudor arch enframing, while elaborate dormer windows with decorative finials and a large copper-clad spire line the roof.

At P.S. 109 Snyder used an H-plan layout, which he had recently adopted as the plan of choice for mid-block school sites. This form, characterized by a central block with parallel wings surrounding two street-facing courtyard spaces, was intended to create large recreational areas while protecting students' access to light and air from future development of neighboring buildings. These courtyards were havens on a site sandwiched between tenement housing and two elevated subway stations at Second and Third Avenues. The building's multi-paned double-hung windows are notably large, a feature made possible through the use of steel-frame construction. Other technological innovations included a forced-air cooling system, electric lighting, ventilated wardrobe closets, and tile-wainscoted playrooms that were easier to clean. Snyder embraced these advances as a means of improving environmental conditions within his buildings, emblematic of the Progressive-era social reforms to which he subscribed. With its ample opportunities for recreation and its light-filled classrooms, the design of P.S. 109 was intended to create an uplifting educational setting that could help overcome the congestion, contagion, and social inequalities of the city street.

By the 1960s, the blocks immediately surrounding P.S. 109 were radically transformed by urban renewal and the construction of a NYCHA public housing project, the George Washington Houses. P.S. 109 functioned as a school until 1996, when due to its poor condition it was shuttered and threatened with demolition. Through the advocacy of local residents and preservation organizations, the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. A decade later, Artspace began redeveloping the former school, restoring its exterior while renovating its interior into artist housing and studio space that opened in 2015. The former P.S. 109 remains an important symbol of an early twentieth-century moment in which school architecture called on cosmopolitan historical traditions to enrich the lives of an entire community.