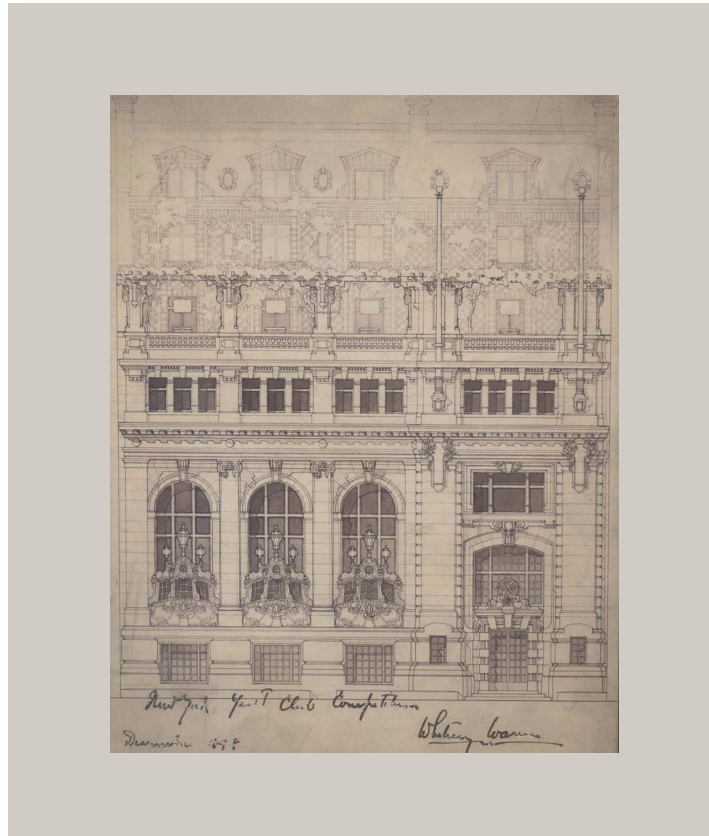


## THE FAÇADE THAT MIGHT NEVER HAVE BEEN

By Jill Connors



This 1898 signed copy of architect Whitney Warren's design submission shows the elaborate ornamentation that won him the commission, including the monumental and ships windows that have made the façade famous and an entry door offset at the building's east side, unusual for an era when many clubs had symmetrical façades.

Today, it is impossible to imagine the 44th Street Clubhouse without its stunning monumental and ships windows set within a limestone façade of ornately carved sea motifs. But what if that façade had never been?

After Commodore J.P. Morgan's generous 1898 gift of land on 44th Street, the Club sent an invitation to leading architects of the day to submit proposals for the design of a Clubhouse. The invitation included a list of requirements prioritizing a Model Room and Library, with details about what those two rooms must provide; the guidelines also indicated the importance of an overall design that was "dignified and simple, suited to the character of the club, without conspicuous ornamentation."

Club members most likely were hoping the design of their new building would reflect the handsome, imposing and symmetrical stone edifices characteristic of the city's many esteemed clubs of the day. Noted clubs were building significant structures throughout the city: The clubhouses of the Century Association (1891) and the Metropolitan Club (1894), for example, featured grand yet restrained façades that had also been selected after a design competition among prominent architectural firms.

The New York Yacht Club Building Committee received seven sets of plans in December 1898, and the entries were a who's who of late 19th-century architecture: R.H. Robertson; Peabody & Stearns; Clinton & Russell; H. Edwards Ficken; Howard, Cauldwell & Morgan; George A. Freeman; and Whitney Warren. These well-regarded firms had designed everything from New York City's Hotel Astor (Clinton & Russell) and Park Row

## FOUNDATION CORNER



The 1898 design submission from architectural firm R.H. Robertson for the 44th Street Clubhouse was dignified but staid with a façade largely free of ornament and a central entry reached via a wide set of steps. The Club's Building Committee passed on this submission, in favor of Whitney Warren's exuberant design.

skyscraper (R.H. Robertson) to Boston's Custom House Tower (Peabody & Stearns).

The Building Committee asked Columbia University architecture professor William Ware to review the designs for how well they fit the Club's stated requests. Ware found several to be of architectural merit, favoring those "without conspicuous ornamentation"—guided no doubt by the Club's original request for restraint. Indeed, Professor Ware found the design by Whitney Warren to be objectionable because of its excessive ornamentation and did not recommend it to the Club.

The Building Committee, however, had other ideas and appears to have been taken with Warren's design precisely because of its ornamentation. Warren, who had recently returned from Paris, where the exuberant Beaux Arts architectural style was emerging, was fascinated by naval architecture and yachting.

He had filled his European notebooks with sketches of sailboats and had noted in a diary that he was fond of ships because they "seem to me to be things appearing to have a soul."

His highly ornamented design for the Club's 44th Street façade featured wavy-glass windows evoking ancient yachts; sea creatures, anchor chains, and marine vegetation all rendered in limestone; and an asymmetrical plan with the entry at the east side of the façade.

Other submissions paled by comparison; the design by R.H. Robertson, for example, had the entry depicted as a central feature flanked by columns and reached via a wide set of steps, set within a dignified façade of granite blocks in a repetitive linear pattern.

Not so the exuberant Warren design. In explaining his design

in the entry competition materials, Warren noted, “This being a Club with the special object—the furtherance of naval architecture from an amateur point of view—I consider that externally and internally the arrangements should be such as to place that object in evidence, and not to retire it and make the Club House appear that of an ordinary social institution.”

In their book *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore*, authors Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker addressed Warren’s design vs. others: “Unlike most of his competitors, Warren produced an asymmetrical scheme with the entrance of the club at the east side of the façade and the three bays of the model room occupying the remaining 45 feet and reaching back through the depth of the 100-foot lot.” Warren’s decision to have the Model Room stretch back deep into the building instead of across the entire width of the front of the building was unusual, with most club designs of the day putting the major rooms across the front.

Notes author John Rousmaniere in *The Clubhouse at Sea*:

*“This highly unusual unbalanced arrangement and the three-dimensional carvings combined to make the building look far larger than its 75-foot width and far more fluid than the heavy limestone construction could reasonably be expected to allow.”*

Against all odds, with a design that clearly celebrated the Club’s love of the sea, Warren won the commission. His original submission was scaled back slightly—one story and a rear patio were eliminated—but otherwise, it was built as he envisioned. Today, that fanciful façade is considered one of the most significant examples of Beaux Arts architecture in the country. To think it might never have been. 🇺🇸

#### ABOUT THE NEW YORK YACHT CLUB FOUNDATION

*The extensive window restoration project would not be possible without the support of the New York Yacht Club Foundation. Created in 2007 for the sole purpose of maintaining the Club’s two historic properties, Harbour Court and the 44th Street Clubhouse, the Foundation has provided more than \$14.5 million in grants for preservation projects. Phases 3 and 4 make up a portion of the \$4.25 million overall window restoration project budget.*



To make a tax-deductible donation for historic preservation and learn more about the four giving societies please visit [www.nyyclubfoundation.org](http://www.nyyclubfoundation.org)

## 44TH STREET CLUBHOUSE WINDOW UPDATE: Restoration Project Prepares for Phases 3 & 4

For the past three years, the Club has been in the process of restoring the 44th Street Clubhouse windows according to a phased plan that will eventually see all 149 windows updated. After much planning, the work got underway in 2021, and Phases 1 and 2 are complete—including the distinctive pivoting windows of the Library and the architecturally significant monumental and ships windows of the Model Room.

The Club can now turn its attention to the remaining windows, most of them in guest rooms, banquet areas or office spaces, located on the 44th Street façade from the terrace level up and on the rear and courtyard façades. The emphasis continues to be on upholding the Clubhouse’s landmark architecture. “Speaking historically, the new windows will almost perfectly replicate the original windows in terms of size, sash, wood and paint finishes, so there will be no effect on the façade,” says restoration architect Tomasz Mlynarski.

The performance of the new windows will be far superior, however. Most of the Clubhouse’s original 1901 windows were built as double-hung, counterweighted sash windows with wood frames and single-pane glass; while typical of the era, the windows are drafty and inefficient by today’s standards.

The solution for the Phase 3 and 4 windows is to replace them with units custom made by Tischler, a renowned window manufacturer. The new windows will simulate the original double-hung style but in actuality will operate as casement-style windows that can tilt in or out moderately, which is a more energy-efficient design. The windows will feature Sipo Mahogany frames and sashes and double-glazed low-E insulated glass. “The new windows will easily be at least twice as energy efficient simply from a seal and draftiness point of view, before you even start talking about the glass itself,” says the architect. “And they will be a huge improvement in terms of noise reduction, while still providing an operable window.”

With a lengthy manufacturing process ahead, the Phase 3 and 4 windows will not be installed until 2025, according to Tim McCormick, general manager at the 44th Street Clubhouse. The installation will include extensive preparation work to remove existing windows and prepare the opening and to finish all surfaces and trim after the window is installed. The exterior finish work is particularly important to ensure that the Club’s façades retain their historic characteristics.