

## **Casa Italiana**

Individual Landmark

1151-1161 Amsterdam Avenue

Designation Date: March 28, 1978



*Casa Italiana, 1151 Amsterdam Avenue. Date: 1926-27. Architect: McKim, Mead & White. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Casa Italiana Designation Report.*

Casa Italiana, a neo-Italian Renaissance style institutional building, was designed as a center for Italian studies by the prestigious architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White. Built in 1926-1927, it is located on the Morningside Heights campus of Columbia University at Amsterdam Avenue and West 117th Street.

Casa Italiana had its beginnings in 1914 when a group of students of Italian descent organized an Italian club at Columbia College, in an effort to promulgate knowledge of modern Italy. In 1920, a group of 25 students formalized themselves into the Circolo Italiano. Under the chairmanship of student Peter Riccio (later a professor of Italian at Columbia), they began seeking funds to establish a collection of books specializing in Italy's contribution to culture and learning, and facilities to house the collection. President Nicholas Murray Butler encouraged the students in their endeavor, and suggested that an Italian House be established as a center for Italian studies and activities within the university context, as the already established Maison Francaise was a center for French studies and activities.

The construction of Casa Italiana was accomplished through the combined efforts of Americans, Italians, and Italian Americans. Fundraising was begun under the leadership of Judge John Freschi, and the establishment of the Institute of Italian Culture at Columbia in 1923, with Professor John Gerig as chairman, gave further impetus to the Casa Italiana campaign. The project aroused the enthusiasm of the Italian American community, and committees were formed throughout the United States to help raise money. Many prominent citizens contributed time and money to the effort.

The well-known building contractors, Joseph Paterno, Michael Paterno, and Anthony Campagna, of the firm Paterno Bros. Inc., offered to build the Casa. Columbia University donated the site on the condition that the Casa be suited to the University's needs, and conform in general style and structure to other campus buildings. The architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, the official Columbia University architects, agreed to offer their services at cost. Many of the workmen who were of Italian descent volunteered a portion of their labor as a contribution to the Casa Italiana. The Italian government donated furnishings, and the Italian royal family gave two oil paintings.

The cornerstone was laid on August 5, 1926, by President Butler. The Italian Ambassador to the United States, the Italian Consul General, and representatives of Italian societies in New York City were also present. Construction proceeded rapidly, and the dedication of Casa Italiana took place on Columbus Day, October 12, 1927. The Italian government sent Senator Guglielmo Marconi as their representative. President Butler, Judge Freschi, Joseph Paterno, and Professor Dino Bigongiari delivered speeches.

When opened, the Casa was placed under the administration of the Institute of Italian Culture, with Professor Gerig as director. In 1930, Giuseppe Prezzolini, who had served as a visiting professor of Italian in 1929-1930, was appointed director of Casa Italiana. During his 10-year administration, he established a close relationship between the Casa and the Columbia Italian Department, and he furthered the role of the Casa as a center of Italian culture in the United States.

Casa Italiana now serves as the home of the Columbia University Italian Department, which has trained more PhDs in Italian studies than any other university in the United States. The Casa also sponsors numerous conferences, seminars, congresses, and forums on a wide range of cultural subjects. Its large auditorium offers a site for many varied musical and theatrical performances. The Casa is a center for interdepartmental studies and events in such fields as art, science, architecture, and medicine, contributing to the broader understanding of Italian influence in these areas.

Casa Italiana is situated outside the boundaries of the original campus master plan, which the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White designed in 1894-1903. In 1894, Charles F. McKim (1847-1909) began to lay out the Morningside Heights campus of Columbia University between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway, and between West 116th and 120th Streets. McKim's design was chosen for the university because of its monumentality and its classical style. The preference for this style reflected the success of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, whose buildings had also been designed in the classical style.

The axiality and symmetry of the Columbia University design were in the tradition of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where McKim had studied during the 1860s. In 1903, the firm designed an extension of the campus southward to West 114th Street. The extended campus, covering the six blocks between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway, and between West 114th and 120th Streets, constituted a new comprehensive design that incorporated and respected the original one from 1894. In the 1920s, the university began building outside the extended campus plan. Although not part of the master plan, Casa Italiana maintains the cornice line of the original campus buildings, and the design was praised at the time of construction for conforming to the previously established campus architectural scheme.

The Casa as designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White is a free adaptation of an Italian Renaissance palazzo. William Mitchel Kendall (1856-1941) was the partner in charge of the design. A graduate of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Kendall also studied independently in France and Italy. He joined the firm of McKim, Mead & White in 1882 and worked very closely with McKim. Kendall became a full partner in the firm in 1906.

A handsome structure, the Casa Italiana rises six stories on a rusticated limestone base which is pierced by grilled window openings and the main entrance on Amsterdam Avenue. Handsome wrought-iron entrance doors are set within a rich enframingent with foliate molding. The smooth limestone facade is enhanced by quoins delineating the end bays. Prominently featured at the second story are full-height arched windows with keyed enframingents. These open onto the Casa auditorium which seats approximately 400 people. Handsome stone balustrades accent the window bases; that at the central window projects and rests on the cornice above the main entrance.

The third and fourth stories are treated visually as a unit, separated from those stories above and below by band courses. At the third story, arched windows with keyed enframingents and balustrades indicate the location of the Charles Paterno Library. Dr. Paterno, the brother of contactors Joseph and Michael Paterno, donated a library collection worth \$15,000 to the Casa when it opened. Three of the rectangular windows at the fifth story are accented by pediments and projecting balconies. Decorative panels flank the rectangular windows at the sixth story which is surmounted by an impressive entablature. A low hipped tile roof rising above this is pierced by two dormers flanking a loggia. The treatment of the facade on West 117th Street is similar at each story to that on Amsterdam Avenue.

The building continues to effectively serve the functions for which it was designed. The largest portions of the interior are occupied by the auditorium and the library. Other floors contain meeting rooms and offices. Casa Italiana remains an adornment to the Columbia University campus in scale and design, and an impressive symbol of the institution it houses.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)