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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

other names/site number

2. Location

street & number 126 Washington Avenue

N/A not for publication

city, town Bridgeport

N/A vicinity

state Connecticut

code CT

county Fairfield

code 001

zip code 06604

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	_____ buildings
_____	_____ sites
_____	_____ structures
_____	_____ objects
1	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

John W. Shannahan
Signature of certifying official John W. Shannahan, State Historic Preservation Officer Date 1/12/90

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Delores Byer

Entered in the National Register

2/22/90

Delores Byer
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious structure

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Romanesque

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONEwalls STONE: SandstoneBRICKroof STONE: Slateother GLASS

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Bridgeport's First Baptist Church (Photographs 1 and 2) is a tall, irregularly shaped, Richardsonian Romanesque-style building constructed in 1893 of East Haven red sandstone. The basic shape of the church is that of an octagon with unequal-length sides, with various towers abutting each of the shorter sides. The central part of the church has a hipped roof, from which gables extend toward each of the four major side walls. The main roof supports an octagonal clerestory of round-arched windows, itself surmounted by a steeply pitched hip roof. The various roofs all have cornices with block-like corbels and are covered with fish-scale slates; there are finials at the apexes of the monitor and tower roofs. The building's stonework consists of a random ashlar of quarry-faced blocks, laid in red mortar with the joint tooled to create a raised bead (Photograph 4). Smooth-finished stone is used for the coping of the stepped buttresses, the cap of the watertable, stringcourses, and other trim. In the peak of each main gable is a pattern of square blocks with all the breaks aligned.

The main entrance (Photograph 3) is in a shallow pavilion at the base of the largest tower, an octagonal shaft the equivalent of 4 1/2 stories in height at the building's west corner. The round-arched entrance has double paneled doors and a stained-glass transom. To either side is a dome-topped round column, from which springs the suggestion of a gable roof. Embellishment of the entry includes a leaf-carved stringcourse at the level of the transom, leaf carving beneath the smooth domes of the columns, a Latin cross above the doorway, and a pinnacle on the gable. Corbelled out over the third story of the tower, which has narrow round-arched windows on each side, is a large belfry of eight round-arched openings, above which is a corbelled cornice and steep hip roof.

The north corner has a similarly detailed square-plan tower. In addition to its double paneled doors and a stained-glass transom, the entry at its base has a carved keystone and elaborate drip molding. There is a stringcourse below the third story, which has three rectangular windows on the sides facing the street. The octagonal towers at the east and south corners (Photographs 4, 5, and 6) are each 2 1/2 stories high, with a tall chimney appended to the east tower. The main gables of the church all have a group of three tall round-arched windows below a small circular window. The windows are glazed with stained glass, with floral and shell motifs alongside traditional Christian symbols such as the Alpha and Omega.

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Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 1 First Baptist Church
Bridgeport, CT

Description (continued):

Attached to the rear of the church is a parish house of the same materials and detailing, including a large round bay similar to the church's towers. In 1930, the parish house was enlarged to the southeast with a 3 1/2-story addition, faced in stone on the street side and brick elsewhere. Because West Avenue descends toward the nearby downtown from a ridge along Washington Avenue, these back parts of the church are a full story lower than the Washington Avenue side. Originally intended for Sunday School classrooms, parish offices, and church organization activities, the parish house now also accommodates the offices of the local council of churches, a meals-for-the-elderly program, and a shelter for the homeless.

The interior plan of the church has a large auditorium (Photographs 7 and 8) within the central part of the structure, aligned on the east-west diagonal axis, so that the chancel within the east tower faces the doorway leading to the main entrance vestibule in the west tower. The other towers accommodate a vestibule (Photograph 10) for the side entrance and a stairway. Interior finish includes plaster walls and a beaded wainscot or dado throughout, tiled floors in the vestibules (the main room is carpeted), and simple door and window moldings. The oak pews (Photograph 9) have leaf carvings and paneled ends; they are arranged in four curving sections facing the chancel. The ceiling is divided by beams into small areas finished with boards of Michigan ash, the whole supported on large wooden arches which spring from leaf-carved hammerbeams and converge on a carved central ceiling ornament. The interior features are all original except for the lamp fixtures, grill on the south wall concealing the organ pipes (formerly open to the Sunday School area in the parish house), the pulpit and Communion table, and the present chancel's baptistry, choir seats, and paneling. These all date from a remodeling done in 1930 when the parish house was enlarged.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1893-1930

Significant Dates

1893

1930

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Joseph Northrop, architect

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Bridgeport's First Baptist Church has exceptional architectural significance: it is a building with high artistic values, an excellent example of the Richardsonian Romanesque style of architecture, and the work of a locally notable architect, Joseph W. Northrop (Criterion C). These qualities qualify the building for listing on the National Register even though buildings owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes are ordinarily not eligible. Built in 1893, the First Baptist Church building is the third home of what once was one of Bridgeport's largest Protestant groups. Beginning with 39 founding members in 1837, Bridgeport Baptists increased to several hundred parishioners, conducting numerous church-school, missionary, and social activities in addition to worship services. The church building reflects their vitality, not only in its large size, but also in the architecture itself, which specifically adapts traditional church forms to the preferences of the Baptist denomination. Although the original congregation has diminished in numbers in recent years, they share their building with two other neighborhood churches, so the building continues to fulfill its original function.

The church embodies the distinctive characteristics of the American revival of Romanesque architecture as introduced by H. H. Richardson and developed by other architects into one of the major architectural styles of the late 19th century. First Baptist Church exemplifies the heavy massing of the style, with its large gables and the broad roof of the central section giving order and weight to a relatively complicated plan. The church also epitomizes the style in its medieval details -- round-arched openings, buttresses, and leaf carvings -- and its use of rough-surfaced, dark masonry to add to the sense of massiveness which was at the heart of the style. Richness in the masonry is achieved through the select use of smooth-finished details and in the subtle

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

- American Architect and Building News, 44 (June 9, 1894): 115.
- Centennial History of the First Baptist Church, Bridgeport, Conn.
Bridgeport: First Baptist Church, 1937.
- Clipping file, "Architects," Bridgeport Public Library, History Collection.
- Reminiscences of Joseph Northrop. Bridgeport Post, March 3, 1935.
- Scientific American, Building Edition, 26 (November, 1898): 86-87.
- Wells, Ronald V. People are the Church: The One Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary History of the First Baptist Church of Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1837-1987. Bridgeport: RDC Books, 1987.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

Connecticut Historical Commission
59 South Prospect Street, Hartford
CT 06106

10. Geographical Data

Acrage of property .4 acres

UTM References

A 1,8 6,5,1,1,6,0 4,5,5,9,7,0,0
 Zone Easting Northing

C

B
 Zone Easting Northing

D

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property includes the entire lot at 126 Washington Avenue, shown in Bridgeport Assessor records as Lot 1, Block 920, Map 9.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The nominated property is co-terminus with the historical property lines of the Baptist Church lot.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Bruce Clouette, Reviewed by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator
 organization Historic Resource Consultants, Inc. date September 11, 1989
 street & number 55 Van Dyke Avenue telephone (203) 547-0268
 city or town Hartford state Connecticut zip code 06106

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Statement of Significance (continued):

change in stonework in the peak of the gables. Further evidence of the church's high artistic value comes from the way the architect incorporated potentially incompatible elements, such as the tall tower or the large monitor, so as to reinforce rather than diminish the overall effect. The monitor's low band of arched windows, for example, is visually subordinated to its broad, pyramidal roof, and the tower's height is held down by the enlargement of the belfry stage on its huge stone corbels.

The church was especially well suited to the needs of its Baptist congregation. The very size of the auditorium and the numerous parish-house facilities addressed the requirements of a large urban parish, and the baptistry with a pool for immersion directly followed from the denomination's particular practices. Also notable is the provision of clear, unobstructed views, made possible by the arch-supported roof, and the use of the diagonal axis, octagonal plan, and curving rows of pews to bring the people close to the pulpit and reading desk. These features reflect the emphasis Baptists placed on preaching and the consequent need for hearing and seeing the preacher as clearly as possible. Coupled with the abundant light from the large arched windows and monitor, the interior arrangement made for an almost modern sense of openness and intimate scale.

The auditorium plan exemplified by this building has been identified as one of the important innovations in 19th-century church architecture. Except for the sloping floors and galleries found in larger auditorium-plan buildings, Bridgeport's Baptist church has all the distinctive characteristics of the type: unobstructed views, curved seating, radiating aisles, bright lighting, and plainly finished walls. The diagonal pulpit-entrance axis within a square room was also one of the most common arrangements. The Richardsonian Romanesque style of many auditorium-plan churches reflects not only the coincidental popularity of the two ideas but also the relative ease with which the auditorium plan could be accommodated within the style. The auditorium plan began among evangelical urban churches shortly after the Civil War, where there was great emphasis on charismatic preachers. By the 1890s, it had become standard for the churches of non-ritual Protestant denominations, such as Baptists and Methodists.¹

Joseph W. Northrop was one of Bridgeport's leading architects in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to this building, he was responsible for many important institutional commissions, such as the Milford, Connecticut, Public Library, and the remodeling of Bridgeport City Hall; several schools and churches; and numerous large

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Statement of Significance (continued):

private homes. He also designed the 28-story tall structure known as the Mott building on Lexington Avenue in New York City. The First Baptist Church was Northrop's first large project, and he continued to consider it one of his most important buildings.² Although the congregation turned to the denomination's own architects for the 1930 remodeling, the changes to the chancel and the enlargement of the parish house are relatively minor parts of the present appearance and in no way diminish the impact of Northrop's work.

NOTES

1. A. Robert Jaeger, "The Auditorium and Akron Plans -- Reflections of a Half Century of American Protestantism" (M.A. Thesis, Cornell University, 1984), 32-37; 72-84; 91. In addition to developing the close tie between evangelical practices -- especially the "primary emphasis on the sermon in the worship service" -- Jaeger discusses the claims made by advocates of the auditorium plan that it was a more economical use of urban land and generated better pew rents. The first consideration does not appear relevant for the Bridgeport Baptist building: indeed, a Gothic or basilican plan would seem as well or even better suited to the lot. However, the church did levy substantial pew rents in its early years.

2. In addition to attracting attention in the architectural periodicals of the day, the design won the hearts of a congregation in Yonkers, New York, which requested Northrop to build a similar church for them.

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Major Bibliographical References:

Historical and Architectural Survey of Bridgeport. Phase II. Citywide.
1986. Bridgeport City Archives and Connecticut Historical
Commission.

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Photographs _____ Page 1 First Baptist Church
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All photographs:

1. FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
2. Bridgeport, CT
3. Photo Credit: HRC, Hartford, CT
4. Date of Photograph: June 1989
5. Negatives filed with the Connecticut Historical Commission, Hartford, CT

Washington Avenue (northwest) elevation, view south
Photograph 1 of 10

West Avenue (southwest) elevation, view east
Photograph 2 of 10

Detail of main entrance, in tower, view southeast
Photograph 3 of 10

Detail of stonework, west corner, view southeast
Photograph 4 of 10

Parish house to rear, view northeast
Photograph 5 of 10

Northeast elevation, view west
Photograph 6 of 10

Interior, view east toward chancel
Photograph 7 of 10

Interior, view west toward entrance
Photograph 8 of 10

Interior, detail of pews
Photograph 9 of 10

Interior, detail of side vestibule, view north
Photograph 10 of 10

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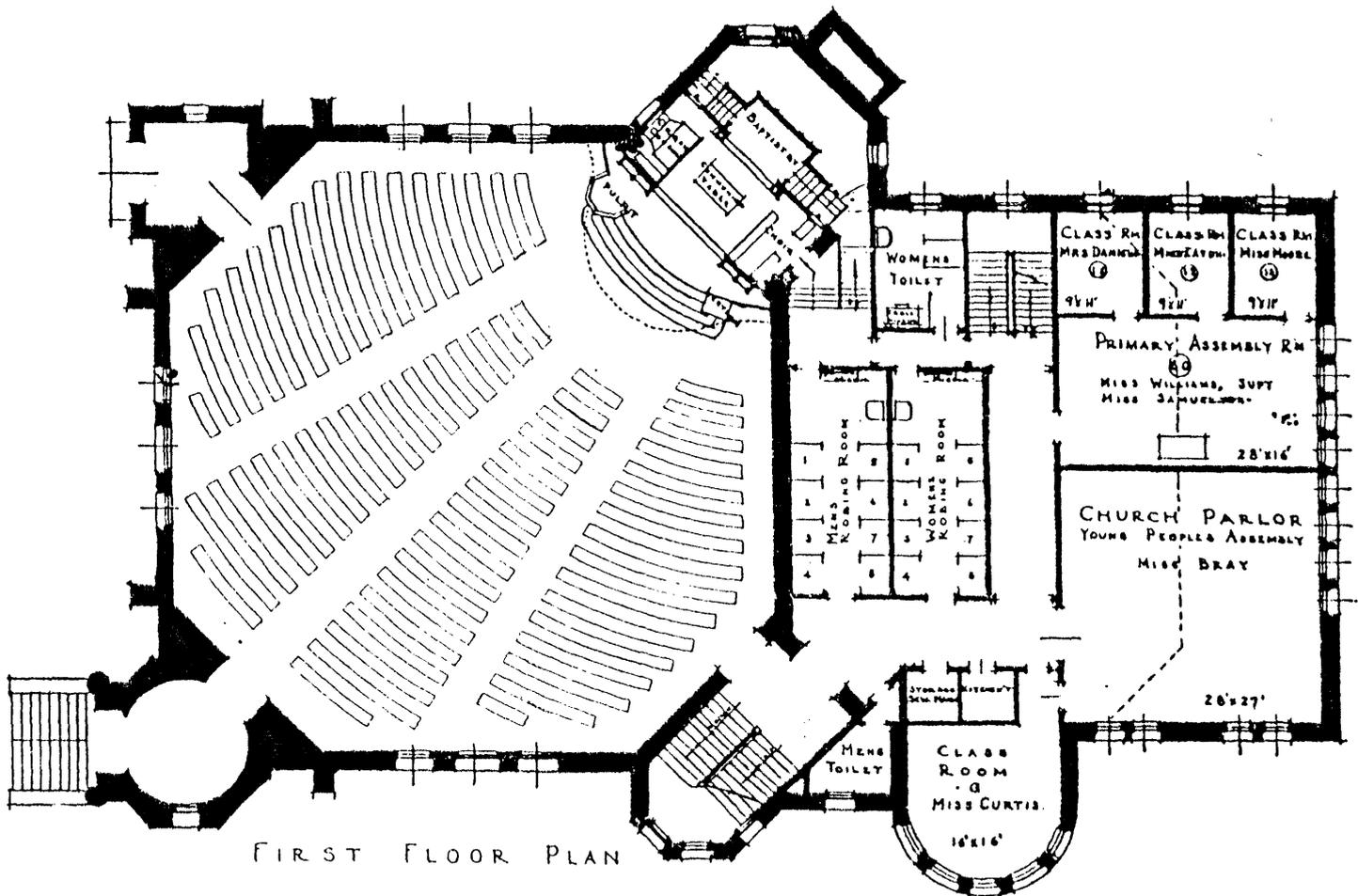
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Sketch
Plan

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FLOOR PLAN, AS REMODELED IN 1930



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: Approximately 1"=20'

Note: classrooms are now used for offices.



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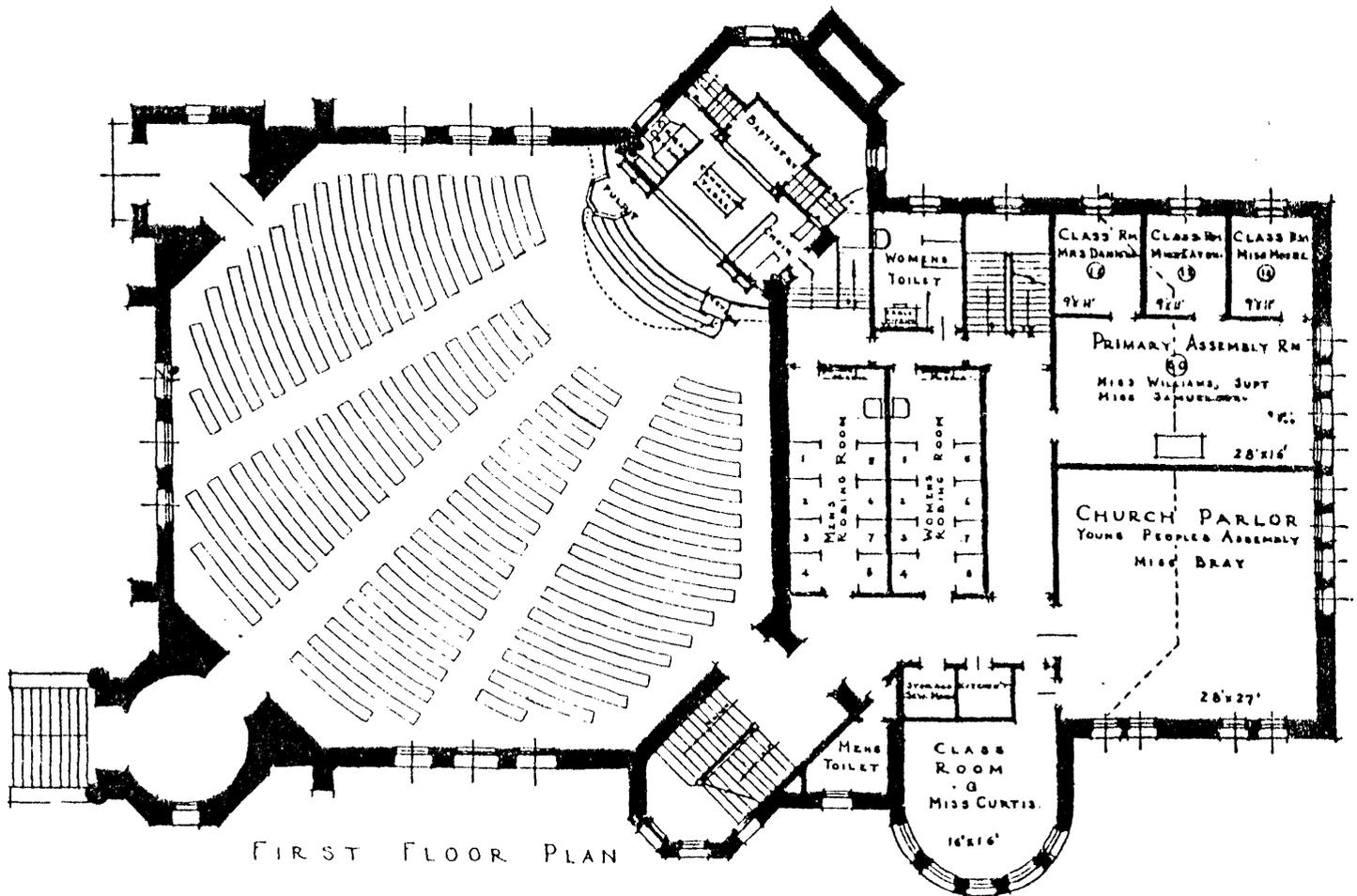
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Sketch
Plan

First Baptist Church
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FLOOR PLAN, AS REMODELED IN 1930



SCALE: Approximately 1"=20'

Note: classrooms are now used for offices.

