

Landmarks Preservation Commission
August 14, 1990; Designation List 226
LP-1805

574 SIXTH AVENUE BUILDING, (aka 57-59 West 16th Street), Manhattan. Built 1903-04. Architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 818, Lot 1.

On July 10, 1990 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 574 Sixth Avenue Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 22). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A representative of the owner of the building expressed opposition to designation in a written statement. One witness spoke in favor of designation. The Landmarks Preservation Commission has received three letters in support of designation.¹

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The building at 574 Sixth Avenue, erected by the Knickerbocker Jewelry Company in 1903-04 as the firm's retail store, was built in response to the resurgence of retail activity in the Ladies' Mile area around the turn of the century. Designed by Simeon B. Eisendrath, who had worked previously in Chicago and Pittsburgh and was familiar with commercial architecture in those cities, the jewelry store was one of the architect's first commissions in New York City. The Knickerbocker Jewelry Company building, a small commercial palace, exhibits many features found in the design of larger commercial buildings of the period, including a transparent base and mezzanine level and upper stories displaying a cellular wall treatment which emphasizes the structure of the brick building. Eisendrath topped these rationally designed facades with a crowning exuberant cornice, which, combined with the large windows on the Sixth Avenue facade, seem to suggest a glittering jewel-box; the monumentality of the design is furthered by the structural treatment and special aesthetic qualities of the facades, enhancing the presence of the small corner building in the streetscape. The use of the flamboyant cornice and the concentration of ornament on the upper two stories of the jewelry store building were in response to the location of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway in front of the building which obscured the lower stories from view; the crown of the building was intended to attract the attention of passengers on the El. The design of the inventive cornice and other sheet-metal ornamentation reflects a mannerist approach to the design of architectural elements in modern materials.

New York's Sixth Avenue²

The opening of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway in 1878 furthered the transformation of Sixth Avenue from a residential avenue to a commercial shopping street, a trend that had been underway since the years following the Civil War. During the 1880s retail merchants such as B. Altman, Hugh O'Neill, Adams Dry Goods, and Simpson, Crawford & Simpson flourished and expanded in their locations on Sixth Avenue between 14th and 23rd Streets, erecting larger and grander department store buildings. After the economic depression in the early 1890s some of the large department stores in the area of Ladies' Mile continued to expand, spurred in part by the arrival of the massive Siegel-Cooper Store in 1895-97, while others moved to the Herald Square area. Around the turn of the century, the area of Ladies' Mile changed yet again with the construction of many eight- to twelve-story store and loft buildings which replaced rowhouses on the side streets between the avenues, and the area became predominantly a garment manufacturing and wholesale district.

Retail business was still flourishing on Sixth Avenue in 1903 when the Knickerbocker Jewelry Company announced that a new commercial building would be erected on the site of a four-story brick residence at the corner of West 16th Street. Just two blocks south of the large B. Altman and Siegel-Cooper stores, at the southern end of the department store row, the site was surrounded by smaller shops and was located conveniently near the El stations at 14th and 18th Streets. Across 16th Street to the south was the stately Greenwich Savings Bank building, designed by R.W. Gibson in the Renaissance Revival style (1898, demolished). West 16th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, had changed in the late nineteenth century from a residential street to one of mixed use with the construction of the New York Hospital building (1877, demolished) and St. Francis Xavier Church (1882) on the south side; the erection of loft buildings in the early twentieth century furthered this transformation.

The Knickerbocker Jewelry Company³

L.J. Seleznick, a Pittsburgh businessman, established the Knickerbocker Jewelry Company in 1903 and planned to sell jewelry, optical goods, and glassware at the store the firm erected on Sixth Avenue. The four-story building, which was designed to be entirely occupied by the store, featured a mezzanine gallery around the twenty-one foot high main showroom located on the first floor and offices and salesrooms on the upper floors. This project was the first venture in New York City for both Seleznick and his architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath.

The Knickerbocker Jewelry Company appears to have been a short-lived venture; it had vacated the Sixth Avenue site by 1905 when the building was remodeled for use as a retail store for the sale of cloaks in conjunction with construction of the loft building next door, also designed by Eisendrath for Seleznick. The ground story of the adjacent rowhouse at 576 Sixth Avenue was later combined with that of the former Knickerbocker Jewelry Company building to create an enlarged showroom area. This

conversion of the building for garment industry use reflects the changing character of the area after the turn of the century.

The Commercial Palaces of New York⁴

The design of commercial architecture in New York during the last half of the nineteenth century was dominated by what Winston Weisman has dubbed the commercial palace type⁵ which evolved from the prototypical Italianate style A.T. Stewart Store, opened in 1846 at Broadway and Chambers Street (later known as the Sun Building, Trench & Snook, a designated New York City Landmark). The massive Stewart Store introduced several features that became characteristic of commercial architecture, including increased transparency of the base of the building with the use of larger show windows and the use of marble sheathing, classically-inspired window surrounds, and an interior rotunda, creating a more elegant public architecture. The emergence of cast iron as a facade material and the use of interior cast-iron structural supports in the next decades enabled architects to create a sense of lightness and openness in commercial buildings, warehouses, and lofts, and suggested the suitability of expressing structure in commercial design. Italian Renaissance and Second Empire styles continued to influence commercial architecture, although over the course of time stylistic sources varied and became less historically derivative, as seen in the designs of large department stores in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These five- and six-story buildings in the commercial palace mode shared several characteristics: a facade organized into regular bays on a twenty to twenty-five foot wide module; a one- or two-story base with double-height show windows; a major entrance treatment which often incorporated a pediment, dome, or tower at the roofline; and upper stories arranged in a layered manner to accentuate horizontality. The organization of the facades of many commercial structures with arcades, formed by prominent piers supporting arches that project beyond the plane of the windows and spandrels, was another method of expressing the structural quality of the buildings. The development of steel frame construction furthered this interest in expressing the structural system of commercial buildings, as well as skyscrapers. By the 1890s the commercial palace type was characterized by systems of piers and spandrels creating cellular facade compositions with ornament often treated in the popular Beaux-Arts style.

In the first years of the twentieth century, many retail stores were built in the 34th Street-Herald Square district and along Fifth Avenue in midtown. The use of Beaux-Arts and Renaissance-inspired ornament on these structures presented a genteel, richly decorative appearance appropriate to upscale shopping areas. In the first years of the twentieth century a group of specialty stores built on Fifth Avenue (referred to even then as commercial palaces) set the standard for commercial architecture, including the Tiffany & Company building at 409 Fifth Avenue (a designated New York City Landmark) and the Gorham Company store at 390 Fifth Avenue, both designed in the Italian Renaissance Palazzo style by McKim, Mead & White and built between 1903-06. These stores were described by contemporary critics as matching the taste demanded in the design and workmanship of their wares as well as the taste of their patrons.⁶

Smaller commercial buildings, such as the Knickerbocker Jewelry Company store, were designed with characteristics similar to the prominent department stores and specialty shops, and were intended to be "read" from the street as stores. Merchants desired distinctive store buildings which would attract the shopper's attention, and the commercial structure usually featured transparent lower stories and applied ornament on the upper stories. The use of an unusual, architect-designed cornice was a strategy occasionally employed to enhance the presence of a commercial building. An overscale cornice of inventive design was used on the prestigious Gorham Company store, as well as on smaller commercial buildings such as the brick structure at 557 Eighth Avenue (1902-03), designed by Emery Roth of the firm of Stein, Cohen & Roth, the remodeled rowhouse at 830 Sixth Avenue, and the Knickerbocker Jewelry store building.⁷

Eisendrath's design for the Knickerbocker Jewelry store drew on several characteristics of contemporary commercial architecture that were emerging in both New York and Chicago. The structural quality of the building was emphasized and expressed through the use of rusticated and smooth brick piers that project beyond the plane of the spandrels and visible iron lintels. This facade treatment suggests the steel-frame construction of larger commercial and store and loft buildings of the era, even though the small building is a brick load-bearing structure, and the two-part scheme, a transparent base with a cellular, pier-supported volume above, is a truncated version of these taller buildings. The segmentally-arched window heads at the top story of the Sixth Avenue facade terminate the vertical bays in a manner that suggests the arcaded upper stories of larger commercial buildings.

Eisendrath successfully expressed the jewelry store function of the building by topping the rationally organized facades with a crowning exuberant cornice, which combined with the large windows on the Sixth Avenue facade, seems to suggest a glittering jewel-box. The use of the flamboyant cornice and the concentration of ornament on the upper two stories of the jewelry store building were in response to the presence of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway in front of the building which obscured the lower stories from view; the crown of the building was intended to attract the attention of passengers on the El. The return of the main facade with angled bay windows fronting on West 16th Street adds monumentality to the design and takes advantage of the corner site. The inventive sheet metal ornament, particularly the unusual cornice with its curving, baroque design, was obviously designed by the architect rather than chosen from the stock of a sheet-metal fabricator and reflects the late-nineteenth-century practice of creating architectural forms in modern materials that did not strictly adhere to the design of classical elements traditionally executed in masonry. Here, the elements found in a classical entablature and cornice were used idiosyncratically, although classical forms remained the basis for the design. Console brackets alternate with segmentally-arched window heads which fill the space below the cornice where an entablature would have been placed. A mannerist interpretation of the classical architectural language is seen also in the stylized forms in the sheet metal spandrels and in the suggestion of voussoirs executed in sheet metal.

Simeon B. Eisendrath⁸

Simeon B. Eisendrath (1867-1935) established his architectural practice in New York City in 1903, where he later developed a reputation as a designer of synagogues and theaters. Eisendrath's Plymouth Building (1899, 417 S. Dearborn Street) is the best known example of his work in Chicago where he had been appointed Commissioner of Buildings in 1894. He worked briefly in Pittsburgh, where perhaps he had executed work for Seleznick, immediately prior to his relocation to New York; the Knickerbocker Jewelry Store building and the loft building at 55 West 16th Street were among his first commissions in this city. Eisendrath worked with the New York architect and engineer Oscar Lowinson (1868-1946) on the design of the Criterion Club building at 683 Fifth Avenue in 1903-04 (demolished) and several alteration projects. In addition to commercial buildings in Manhattan, Eisendrath's known works include a residence at 526 Eighth Street, Brooklyn (1904-05, now within the Park Slope Historic District).

Eisendrath later worked in partnership with Bernard Horwitz (dates undetermined). The firm of Eisendrath & Horwitz was responsible for the design of the Temple Beth Elohim (1910, 277 Garfield Place, within the Park Slope Historic District), Temple Beth Emeth (1913, 83 Marlborough Road, in the Prospect Park South Historic District), Temple B'nai Israel (1917, Fourth Avenue and 54th Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn) and the Free Synagogue School (1923, 28-36 West 68th Street, in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District). The firm also designed several motion picture theaters in Manhattan, including the Ideal Theatre (now the Adonis Theater, 1915, 693 Eighth Avenue), and the Tivoli Theatre (1920-21, 839 Eighth Avenue), as well as the Village Theater at 115-119 Eighth Avenue (1916, demolished) and the Arena Theater at 623 Eighth Avenue (1915-16, demolished). The firm's work includes the Brooklyn Hebrew Home for the Aged and Temple Sharri Zidek, also in Brooklyn.

Description

The Knickerbocker Jewelry Company Store is a four-story building with two street facades at the northeast corner of Sixth Avenue and West 16th Street. The brick load-bearing structure with steel girders, which incorporates cast-iron columns and steel beams in the storefront area, has an open, cellular appearance created by wide window openings that are supported by iron lintels between brick piers. The western end bay of the West 16th Street facade is treated similarly to the Sixth Avenue facade; the remaining side bays are more simply detailed. The flat roof is edged with a prominent sheet-metal cornice.

The first story has been altered repeatedly and now has one storefront in the Sixth Avenue facade and small shopfronts in the West 16th Street facade.⁹ The original door openings remain in the eastern bay of the West 16th Street facade although the doors and shopfronts are modern replacements. The second-story/mezzanine windows of the Sixth Avenue facade and the western bay of the side facade have the original fixed and pivoting

wood sash with operable transom lights under a wide sheet metal cornice which extends around the corner across the western bay.

Rusticated brick piers between the upper-story windows in the front and western side bays are spanned by paneled sheet-metal spandrels between the third and fourth stories. The large windows at the third story have the original single-pane pivoting¹⁰ wood sash with multipane operable transoms above. The fourth-story windows have multipane operable transoms above paired four-pane wood replacement sash; segmentally-arched sheet-metal window heads are edged with moldings and accented by sheet-metal keystones and voussoirs. Three-sided bay windows with double-hung wood sash extend from the upper two stories of the western bay of the side facade.

A prominent sheet-metal cornice, of galvanized iron, extends along both street facades. Above the center bay of the Sixth Avenue facade and the western bay of the side facade, the otherwise simple molded edge extends upward into a curved pediment and falls forward into a scroll. The area is filled with a cabochon surrounded by scrolls and foliage. Large elongated console brackets support the cornice above the rusticated brick piers. The bay window is surmounted by sheet-metal voussoirs.

The design of the West 16th street facade is a simple expression of the structure of the building. The window openings of the center three bays have segmentally-arched heads, accentuated by curved sheet-metal moldings and metal keystones supporting a narrow sheet-metal cornice.¹¹ The windows at the third and fourth stories are similar to those at the Sixth Avenue facade and are separated by paneled brick spandrels; original wood sash remains on two windows at the third story. A molded sheet-metal cornice extends across the facade just above the fourth-story windows. The eastern end bay has pairs of window openings with flat arches at each story containing one-over-one double-hung wood sash. A fire escape with a square panel railing design extends across the two eastern bays of the West 16th Street facade.

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NOTES

1. On June 10, 1986, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 57-59 West 16th Street (aka 574 Sixth Avenue) Building (LP-1601, Item No. 22); the building was one of twenty-three buildings, from No. 3 to No. 59 West 16th Street, each being heard that day as an individual item. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including two witnesses who spoke specifically in regard to 57-59 West 16th Street, as well as to the related items. At that time the owner of the building questioned the effect that designation would have on his property, but did not oppose designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The Landmarks Preservation Commission received seventy-eight letters in support of the designation of the buildings on the north side of West 16th Street on the block between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, including one that mentioned specifically 57-59 West 16th Street (aka 574 Sixth Avenue).
2. This section is based on information in LPC, Ladies' Mile Historic District Designation Report.
3. This section is based on "Unique Jewelry Store" and New Building Application 90-1903 filed in the New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan.
4. This section was based on information in Weisman, Landau, Harboe, "Commercial Palaces," LPC, Ladies' Mile Historic District Report, and New Building Application 282-1902 for 557 Eighth Avenue filed in the New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan.
5. Winston Weisman, "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845-1875," Art Bulletin 34 (Dec., 1954), 285-302.
6. "Commercial Palaces," Architects' and Builders' Magazine 38 (Feb., 1906), 177-192.
7. The remodeling of 830 Sixth Avenue, a four-story dwelling converted for commercial use, included also decorative sheet-metal spandrels and exuberant Beaux-Arts ornament. LPC staff member Charles Savage called the author's attention to this cornice and the one at 557 Eighth Avenue.
8. This section was based on information in "Fifteen Theaters"; the Eisendrath and Lowinson obituaries; "New Home for Criterion Club"; New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Plans, Permits and Dockets; Withey; Randall; and LPC, Park Slope Historic District Designation Report and Prospect Park South Historic District Designation Report.

9. In 1913 projecting show windows on Sixth Avenue were removed. In 1925, when new shopfronts were inserted, interior alterations were made, including the removal of the gallery mezzanine.
10. It appears that the several types of replacement sash on this building are pivoting sash.
11. The cornice is missing from the two eastern bays of the center section; the keystone is missing from the eastern bay.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 574 Sixth Avenue Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

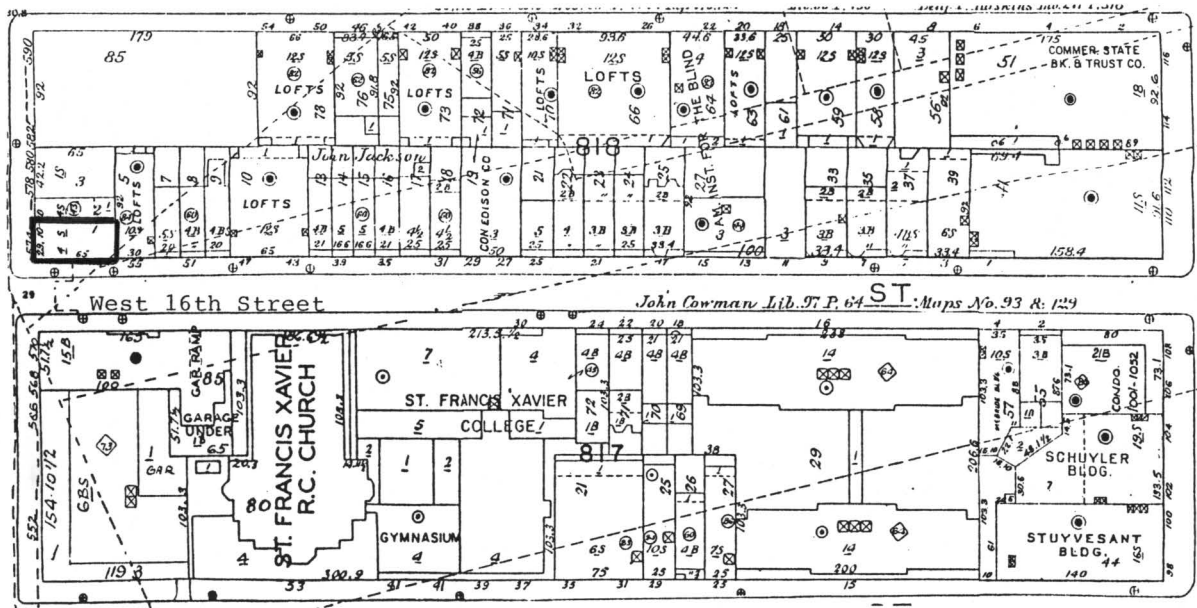
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 574 Sixth Avenue Building, constructed in 1903-04 as the Knickerbocker Jewelry Store building, is representative of the developmental history of Sixth Avenue in the Ladies' Mile area of Sixth Avenue during a resurgence of retail activity around the turn of the century; that, designed by Simeon D. Eisendrath who had worked previously in New York and Chicago, it was one of the architect's first commissions in New York City before he became known as a designer of synagogues and theaters as a principal in the firm Eisendrath & Horwitz; that the building, a small commercial palace, exhibits many features found in the design of larger commercial buildings of the period, including an overtly commercial base and mezzanine level and upper stories displaying a cellular wall treatment which emphasizes the structure of the brick building; that Eisendrath topped the rationally designed facades with a crowning exuberant cornice, which, combined with the large windows on the Sixth Avenue facade, seem to suggest a glittering jewel-box; that the monumentality of the design is furthered by the structural treatment and special aesthetic qualities of the facades, enhancing the presence of the small corner building in the streetscape; that the use of the flamboyant cornice and concentration of ornament on the upper two stories of the jewelry store building were in response to the location of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway in front of the building which obscured the lower stories from view and the crown of the building was intended to attract the attention of passengers on the El; and that the design of the inventive sheet-metal ornamentation, including the stylized classical forms of the cornice, spandrels and window heads, reflects a mannerist approach to the design of architectural elements in modern materials.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 574 Sixth Avenue Building, 574 Sixth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 818, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Sixth Avenue



574 Sixth Avenue Building Landmark Site

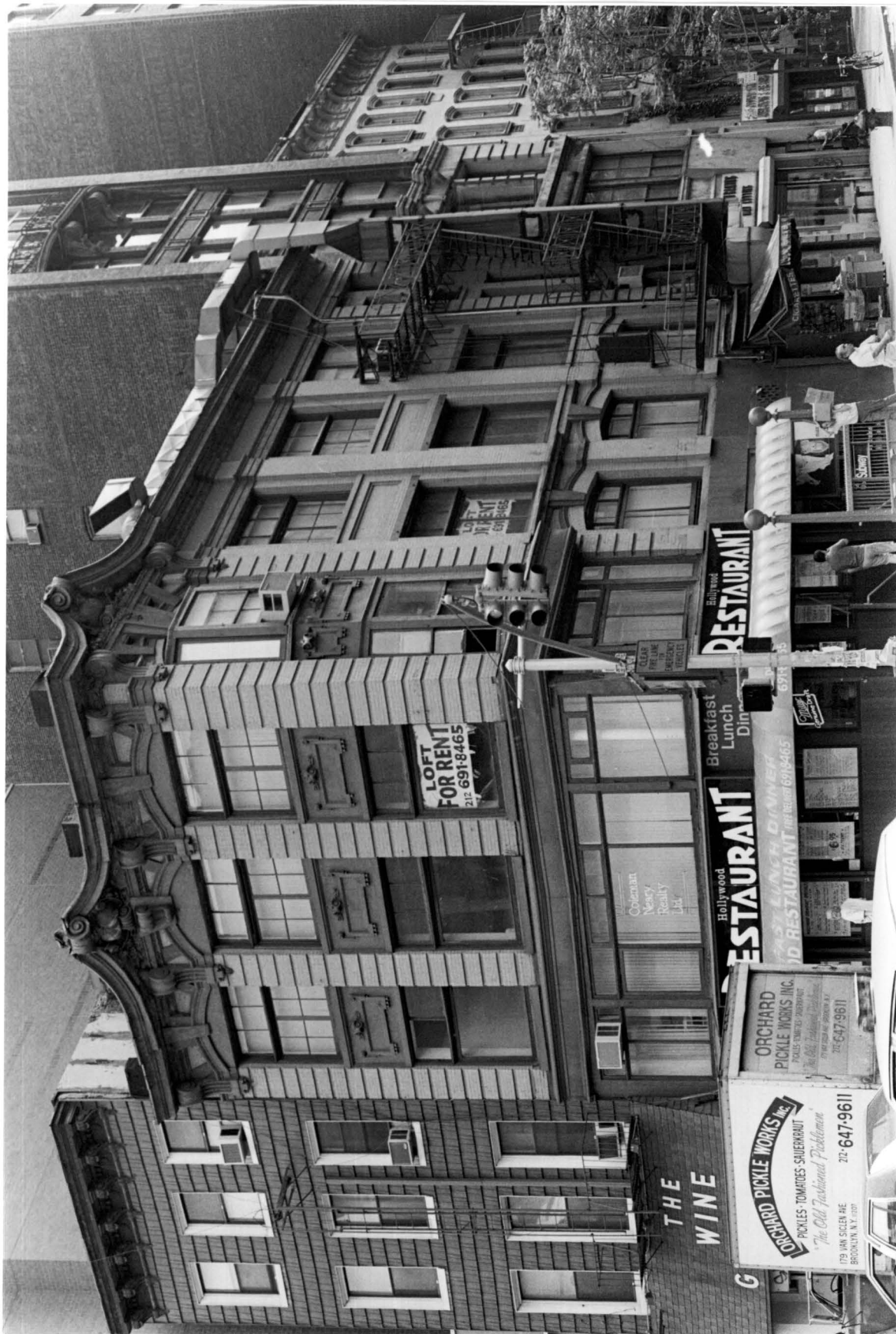
Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book
1988-89



The 574 Sixth Avenue Building, Manhattan.
1903-04; architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath. Photo Credit: New York City
Department of Taxes Photograph Collection, c. 1940



The 574 Sixth Avenue Building, Manhattan. Sixth Avenue facade.
 1903-04; architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath. Photo credit: Kevin McHugh



The 574 Sixth Avenue Building, Manhattan.
1903-04; architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath. Photo credit: Kevin McHugh



The 574 Sixth Avenue Building, Manhattan. West 16th Street facade.
1903-04; architect, Simeon B. Eisendrath. Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh