

JOSEPH LOTH & COMPANY SILK RIBBON MILL

1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue, a/k/a 491-497 West 150th Street and 500 West 151st Street.
Built 1885-86; architect Hugo Kafka.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2082, Lot 28.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Factory and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 27). Eight additional speakers were in favor of the designation of this and the other items on the calendar at the hearing but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Numerous letters have been received expressing the same sentiments. Prior to the hearing, a representative of the owner of the building requested that the item be continued. The hearing was continued to October 29, 1991 (Item No. 10). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At that time, two people spoke in favor of designation and a representative of Community Board 9 took no position in the matter.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, which stands out among American textile mill buildings due to its exceptional architectural character and unusual design, was commissioned in 1885 by the Loth family of silk manufacturers -- probably Bernard Loth, the technical expert -- and designed by the Austro-Hungarian emigré architect Hugo Kafka, noted for his commercial and residential work in New York City. The building was occupied by Joseph Loth & Company, a prominent firm that was in operation in New York City from about 1875 to 1902 and produced silk ribbon marketed under the trademark "Fair and Square." The plan of the mill -- a reversed K with the upright along Amsterdam Avenue -- is original in concept and is an ingenious and practical solution that allowed for large, well-lighted spaces unobstructed by columns. This plan reflected the requirements and strictures of the New York City building code -- more so than the "slow-burning construction" standards recommended by the fire insurance "mutuals" which were applied to most mills constructed in this country. Certain features of the mill design were characteristic of mill buildings of the era, particularly the central tower (burned 1916) and exterior brick walls consisting of narrow bays defined by pilasters and filled with windows. The hand of the architect is apparent in the carefully detailed facades which are organized with central and end pavilions, above which panels at the parapets identify the firm and its product. These facades are enlivened with rock-faced sandstone, ornamental pressed brick elements, and corbelled brick features. The chimney rising between wings of the mill is a reminder that the facility had coal-fired steam boilers that drove the belts and line shafting for the power looms and ran the generator for the electric lights, still relatively novel in the mid-1880s. Built during an interim between periods of residential development, the mill was one of the few industries to locate in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan. This architecturally-distinguished mill building, which was altered and enlarged in 1904 while retaining its distinctive K-plan and architectural character, has long played a vital role in the commercial life of the community, housing neighborhood businesses and light-manufacturing operations.

The Transformation of the Carmansville portion of Washington Heights¹

A large area of northern Manhattan has long been known as Washington Heights in recognition of Fort Washington, the fortification erected in 1776 by the colonists and named for their general, which was located near present-day West 183rd Street. The portion of Washington Heights in which the Joseph Loth & Company Ribbon Mill is located was known during the second half of the nineteenth century as Carmansville.² Richard F. Carman began purchasing farm land near what is now West 152nd Street as early as the mid-1830s and in 1842 he sold to Trinity Church the land between West 154 and West 155th Streets that became Trinity Cemetery. In the 1840s Carman built a summer residence at Fort Washington and then established a village named after himself to the south. The Hudson River Railroad Station at West 152nd Street was familiarly known as Carmansville. In 1841 the naturalist and artist John James Audubon had purchased a large tract along the Hudson River near present-day West 156th Street where he built a country house. By the mid-1860s Audubon's widow had subdivided her property into an enclave of freestanding houses known as Audubon Park, which was generally considered part of Carmansville. During the late nineteenth century, the commercial area for the village was located along Tenth Avenue (known as Amsterdam Avenue after 1890), from West 152nd Street to West 162nd Street. A hotel, known in the 1880s as Riverside House, was located near the railroad station and several churches were built near the cemetery, including the Washington Heights Methodist Episcopal Church (1869) and the adjacent Church of St. Catherine of Genoa (1889) on West 153rd Street near Amsterdam Avenue. Several institutional buildings were located in the Carmansville portion of Washington Heights and some of the residents were associated with them. In 1853 the New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb acquired Fanwood, the country seat of James Monroe near West 165th Street at the northern limits of the village, where it developed a campus. The Union Home and School for the Maintenance and Instruction of the Children of Our Volunteer Soldiers and Sailors (also known as the Home School for Sailors' Children) relocated in 1868 to the former Field

mansion on The Boulevard (as that portion of what was Eleventh Avenue, later Boulevard Lafayette and now Broadway, was known) between West 150th and 151st Streets.³

A group of dwellings on West 152nd Street, which appears to have been the premier residential street in Carmansville and near the southern boundary of the village, was the major existing development in the area where the Loth mill would be built. Prior to the construction of the mill, long-time residents of these houses included dry goods merchant James O. West; Thomas Dunlap, sheriff and later collector at the County Court House; and Isaac I. Stillings, a saddler. During the late 1880s, after the silk mill had been constructed, the appeal of the street to the upper middle class did not seem to diminish noticeably. In 1886, the publisher Patrick O'Shea, and William Kramer, who was involved with the entertainment business, acquired houses on West 152nd Street which they owned and occupied for several years. Other residents of West 152nd Street during the 1880s were the former district attorney and orator, John R. Fellows, and banker Thomas O. Buch. Two dwellings were converted for use as schools, a use that may suggest a change in the character of the neighborhood. The Misses Eliza and Lucy Audubon, granddaughters of the naturalist, operated a "School for Young Ladies" in one of the houses on West 152nd Street from the 1870s to the mid-1890s. St. Catherine's Academy was located in the former Dunlap house, No. 548 West 152nd Street, from about 1889 to 1902, when a new building was erected for the school on the north side of West 152nd Street.⁴ Since 1864 a police precinct station house had been situated near the dwellings at the corner of Tenth Avenue and West 152nd Street; a larger building for the precinct, the former 30th Precinct Station House (1871-72, a designated New York City Landmark) was designed by Nathaniel D. Bush.

By the late 1880s many of the cross streets had not been cut through between Tenth (Amsterdam) and Eleventh Avenues south of West 152nd Street. A photograph of the area⁵ taken from the south in 1887 (figure 1), indicates that the undeveloped area south of West 150th Street was used for truck farming and that large areas were covered by cold frames. The property acquired by Joseph Loth

and his sons, Bernard Loth and Henry A. Loth, in 1885 for the silk mill was on the southern edge of Carmansville, between West 150th and West 151st Streets. The entire block had been part of the farm of John Watkins prior to 1816, and passed through several owners to Hickson W. Field, Jr., who like Carman had extensive land holdings in the area.⁶

The Loth company was among the first industries to locate in Washington Heights since a sugar refinery had been built at the foot of West 159th Street in 1852,⁷ and would remain one of the very few industrial operations on Manhattan's west side north of Harlem. The mill was built during an interim period between waves of residential development in the area: many years after Carman first erected the houses of Carmansville and fifteen years before intensive urbanization would occur around the turn of the century. Suggesting the more expected type of development, the *American Silk Journal* noted that the construction of the building was so solid that there was "sentiment in that section of the city that the new building is not to be a silk mill at all, but rather a penitentiary of some sort."⁸ An interest on the part of the Loths that their new building not detract from the appearance of the area is suggested in another contemporary description which noted that the structure was "in appearance more like a public building than a factory" and that "good taste and a degree of public spirit were shown by the firm in so designing the outward aspect of their establishment as to avoid the prosiness of business and keep in harmony with the surroundings."⁹

Although both the *Real Estate Record & Guide* and the *American Silk Journal* predicted that a number of small houses and tenements would be built near the Loth silk mill to enable its employees to live nearby, such development did not take place.¹⁰ The mill operatives apparently traveled on street car lines and elevated railroads which would have brought them from working-class neighborhoods on the west side to the mill. The area around the Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill did not change significantly for a decade. In 1897 rowhouses were developed on the portion of the block west of the mill that the Loth family had acquired in 1886. Joseph Loth relocated to one of those dwellings, No. 519 West

150th Street.¹¹ Around that time similar small rowhouses were built on the south side of West 150th Street, and flats were built on the west side of Amsterdam Avenue between West 150th and 151st Streets.¹² The old freestanding dwellings on West 152nd Street were replaced with multiple dwellings in 1904 and 1905. As the Washington Heights area was developed during the first years of the twentieth century, Amsterdam Avenue between West 145th and 150th Streets emerged as an important commercial district.¹³ The Loth building occupied an entire blockfront at the edge of that area, and after the ribbon mill no longer occupied the structure, it was converted for commercial use (see Subsequent History).

The Silk Ribbon Industry and Joseph Loth & Company

Silk ribbons enjoyed a long period of popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century, and tens of millions of yards of silk ribbons were needed annually for the decoration of hats, clothing, and furnishings.¹⁴ Silk was the preferred fiber for ribbons because the fine threads could be dyed in rich colors and woven into extremely intricate patterns. Prior to the Civil War, the American silk industry -- from the beginning dominated by the large number of firms located in Paterson, New Jersey -- produced silk threads and trimmings. The imposition of a high protective tariff on foreign silks by the Tariff Act of 1861, and the subsequent increases in the tariff until a sixty percent duty was imposed on imported manufactured silks in 1864, encouraged silk weaving in the United States. The expansion of the American industry coincided with a decline of the silk industry in England as a result of the Cobden Treaty between Great Britain and France. The Americans -- many of whom were recent immigrants -- utilized English and European design and technology by acquiring second-hand machinery and looms, employing other newcomers to operate them, and imitating European products.

By the early 1870s, American firms were producing both of the two main classes of silk goods: broad silks for dresses and home furnishings and ribbon goods, all woven silks twelve inches or less in width. Some of the larger firms produced both broad silks and ribbons, but most concerns specialized in one type of goods, as did Joseph Loth & Company. The silk industry

was not vertically integrated and weaving firms usually purchased spun yarn, dyed to order, from concerns specializing in silk throwing (spinning) and dyeing. Silk ribbon producers like Joseph Loth & Company offered an amazing array of ribbons in fifteen widths, 200 shades of color, and from eighty to ninety types during the 1890s and worked hard to maintain a standard of high quality in broad ranges of products to assure acceptance of the American products. By 1901 the Loth firm's novelty line included "printed ribbons, printed warp effects and taffeta combinations."¹⁵ The American silk ribbon industry relied on power looms, including Jacquard looms used to weave patterned ribbons, which were known as "gang looms" since they required five or six attendants to fix broken threads and to advance the warp as the weaving of as many as twenty-eight ribbons simultaneously progressed. During the mid-1870s American manufacturers improved ribbon looms through the introduction of the "stop-motion" mechanism which halted the machine as soon as one thread broke. This invention cut the need for loom operatives by as much as fifty percent and significantly increased productivity. Ribbon weaving, predominantly a female occupation, was a profession distinct from broad goods weaving and was higher paying to compensate for the periods of unemployment when the looms were dressed with a new warp.¹⁶

Joseph Loth began producing ribbons around 1875 and his silk ribbon mill was one of many such operations begun during the 1870s and 1880s. New York State was second to New Jersey in the number of silk mills at that time, and there were several firms located in Manhattan, including those of John N. Stearns (established in 1865) and Jacob New (in operation by 1876).¹⁷ As did most silk firms in New York and New Jersey that began with limited capital, Loth rented space during the first years of production; his ribbon mill was located in the loft buildings at 517-523 West 45th Street during the early 1880s. In 1882 the mill was expanded with the addition of twenty looms and the business office and show rooms were moved from 458 Broome Street to 65 Greene Street, where the Loth firm occupied the ground floor for many years. Around this time Joseph Loth became a member of the board of directors of the Silk Association of America, a position that

Bernard Loth would later hold. By the time the Loths were planning the construction of their own mill building in 1885, the firm had 400 to 500 employees and a solid reputation. After the firm moved into its new mill during the late summer of 1886, it continued to be one of the larger silk weaving operations in New York and New Jersey; its work force increased to 600 operatives, "mostly girls" as was common in the industry. Like many of its competitors, the Loth company weathered the "Great Strike" in 1884. A strike in 1890 was finally terminated by the National Silk Workers Association after six months and the weavers were told to return to their looms at the old salary rate.¹⁸

As American silk ribbons came to be recognized as being of equal quality to those previously imported from Europe, many firms began to use distinctive trademarks or brand names to assist with product recognition, and the Loth company had adopted the "Fair & Square" trademark not long after it began to produce ribbon. Joseph Loth & Company advertisements in trade journals used the phrases "Fair and Square" and "Fine Silk Ribbons" (figure 2); around the turn of the century the firm's notices relied on the slogan "Fair and Square -- the name of the best ribbons produced" and did not mention the Loth firm by name.¹⁹

The 1890s brought changes to the ribbon weaving industry as well as to the Loth firm. By 1890 the popularity of silk ribbons had stimulated intense price competition, and the introduction of less-expensive "weighted silks" allowed for the production of silk ribbons of cheaper quality; in fact, the ribbon market expanded to offer products in a range of qualities but ceased to expand as rapidly as it had in overall value of production. The high-speed automatic ribbon looms introduced in 1889, on which the warp was advanced from the beam automatically, produced a more uniform product at a greater speed. Double-decked ribbon looms were introduced to increase volume and save space. By this time, an operative often tended two looms, each of which wove forty ribbons at a time.

In December, 1896, Joseph Loth retired from the business which was continued by his sons, Bernard, who assumed the presidency of the firm,

and Henry A. Loth. The sons divided the assets of the firm in 1902 and Bernard Loth acquired the mill building. Henry A. Loth moved "100 narrow looms" to a mill in Norwalk, Connecticut, where the Joseph Loth & Company continued to produce ribbons, tie silks, and woven silk labels.²⁰

An Unusual Textile Mill Building

The Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill is an unusual example of a late nineteenth-century mill, a building type which was a carefully engineered component of the textile manufacturing process.²¹ Most textile mills were designed by engineers who specialized in working out solutions for the planning of mills, power transmission, and placement of machinery. While mill engineers were concerned primarily with the efficiency of the mill operation, fire protection, and construction costs, they also were responsible for -- but often gave little attention to -- the aesthetic aspects of the mill structures. Mill engineer Charles J.H. Woodbury noted in 1888 that "utility is the fundamental element in design" and that the design of mills should suggest stability and convenience.²² Certainly, mill engineers produced many mills that are architecturally pleasing and some that are quite handsomely detailed. However, the textile mills constructed both in New England and southern states during the late nineteenth century are most obviously structures that reflect a utilitarian aesthetic and the construction standards developed by fire insurance companies -- known as the "manufacturers' mutual insurance companies" or simply "the mutuals." By the mid-1880s, mills were becoming increasingly longer and wider -- by 1890 up to 100 feet in width and often 300 to 400 feet long -- and the larger floor areas gave the manufacturer greater flexibility in the positioning of machinery. Mill engineers were recommending that mills be limited to three or four stories and were exploring the practicality of one-story structures. Admitting enough daylight into the larger mills was a concern, but as mills got wider the use of pilaster-stiffened walls allowed for the insertion of increasingly larger windows that allowed more light to penetrate to the interiors than did the smaller windows in the narrower mills.

In New York City, however, the role of the mill engineer who based his work on the "slow-

burning construction" standards recommended by the mutuals, was supplanted by the architect familiar with the city building code. Not many nineteenth-century textile mills were designed by architects; the rarity of an architect's involvement in mill design is underscored by the fact that the mills in Paterson, New Jersey, so close to New York City, have the reputation of being built by millwrights without the involvement of architect or mill engineer.²³ Consequently, a textile mill in New York City, designed by an architect to meet a building code different from the one that most mills constructed in this country attempted to meet, would probably differ somewhat in form and construction.

The goals of the mutuals and the New York City Buildings Department were similar in regards to limiting the spread of fire, yet the approaches to the problem differed. Recognizing that there was no genuinely "fireproof" construction method that manufacturers were willing to use, the mutuals, instead, attempted to control the cost of rebuilding a mill after a fire. The slow-burning construction methods advocated by the mutuals consisted of wood internal structural members, used in a manner to slow the spread of fire and to fall away from the masonry exterior walls. Buildings were so constructed in New York City yet there was also widespread use of cast-iron columns (which were not considered fireproof) to support pine beams and girders in store and loft and warehouse buildings used for manufacturing. To minimize the threat of fire, the New York City building code prescribed masonry construction and fireproof -- or at least less-combustible -- materials for cornices, gutters, and roofing materials, as well as brick fire walls to divide larger buildings and iron shutters on windows to retard the spread of fire. Very few industrial and commercial buildings constructed in New York City during the late nineteenth century used complete fireproof construction because few buildings of those types were tall enough that the requirement for fireproof construction -- adopted in 1887 for buildings over seventy-five feet in height -- applied, and because many manufacturers, like those elsewhere in the country, found that the iron and brick type of construction favored by the British was too expensive to be cost efficient. The isolation of stairs, hoists, and power transmission systems in towers that extended

beyond the rectangular mass of the mill, as recommended by the mutuels, was less economically feasible in densely-developed urban areas where the high cost of building sites encouraged extensive coverage of the lot. In the city, the fire hazard of shafts, placed on the interior of buildings, was reduced by the code requirement for trap doors and doors to close them off when not in use.

The Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill stands out among American textile mill buildings of the period due to its unusual plan. The plan -- a reversed K-shaped form (figure 3) with the upright of the K as the principal wing along Amsterdam Avenue and two wings angled to the western corners of the lot -- is original in concept. The site acquired for the mill, a 100-foot by 200-foot plot across the end of a block, would have been suitable for a 200-foot long, rather wide, mill, as might be expected due to the trend toward wider and longer mills. However, the plan for the mill was practical and, in fact, ingenious in working within the requirements and strictures of the city building code.²⁴ The width of the wings, at less than thirty feet, required neither interior columns that would limit the placement of looms, nor fire walls which would have interfered with the transmission of power through a drive shaft system; however, if the wings had been more than thirty feet wide, both interior columns and fire walls would have been required. The Amsterdam Avenue wing -- just under thirty feet in width -- and the slightly narrower angled wings each enclosed long, narrow rooms, unobstructed by columns and well-lighted by windows on both sides. It seems likely that the main drive shaft was centrally located near the juncture of the wings, and perhaps the small extension between the angled wings housed a belt tower. Notwithstanding the practicality of the plan of the Loth mill, the solution does not appear to have been replicated by other textile manufacturers.

The Loth Ribbon Mill (figure 4) was in other respects characteristic of mills of the period, although it had considerably more architectural character, probably because it was commissioned by clients with a great deal of pride in their new facility and designed by architect Hugo Kafka for an urban setting.²⁵ As it originally appeared, a tower -- a nearly requisite element for a mill

building -- that had clock faces on all four sides and a terminating pyramidal roof rose above the long Amsterdam Avenue facade. Pilasters and windows established a lively rhythm for the brick facades; rather than stretching endlessly along Amsterdam Avenue and the side streets -- as was typical in mill buildings -- the facades were organized by rusticated pilasters that define the corners of the building and the central and end pavilions of the Amsterdam Avenue facade where additional ornament was concentrated. As was common in mills, there was no grand entrance and the several doorways into the building were arched openings that were minimal variations of the narrow pilaster-defined bays. Parapets above the pavilions of the main wing and the terminations of the western wings, left no doubt as to the purpose of the building, proclaiming "Joseph Loth & Co." and "Silk Ribbons." A fenced areaway allowed light to enter the basement along Amsterdam Avenue. A two-story stable (no longer standing) which had a gabled roof with dormers spanned the wings along West 150th Street and a shed was located at the western edge of the lot.

The Loth Silk Ribbon Mill was built with its own steam plant to power the machinery and provide electric lighting.²⁶ The power house (no longer standing) was located on the north side, near the brick chimney which rises adjacent to the juncture of the northern wing and the Amsterdam Avenue wing. By the 1880s, steam was a commonly used alternative to water power in the textile industry. Where coal could be transported and delivered economically, such as at port cities, steam engines were widely used to drive belts and line shafting for power looms and other machinery. Steam was also often employed as a supplementary power source and to ensure year-round production where water power was still used. During the early 1880s electric lighting was adopted in textile mills and other factories where steady illumination was needed for precision work and there was a danger of fire; facilities usually had their own Edison "isolated plant" generators.

The Loth Family and Hugo Kafka

The principals of Joseph Loth & Company were Joseph Loth (c.1827-1910) and his two sons, Bernard (1858-1921) and Henry A. (1861-1941).²⁷ Joseph Loth established a fancy goods and notions business in New York City around

1858 and relocated his residence from Hartford, Connecticut, to the city around 1862. As a ribbon and fancy goods merchant, Loth would have been well aware of the changes in duties on imported silks, and soon joined in the new American industry of silk ribbon production which then dominated his business. Little is known about the role of Henry A. Loth in the firm other than that in 1902 he moved the silk ribbon business to Connecticut where it continued.

The older Loth son, Bernard, had interests that ranged from the technology of the silk industry to the development of the Washington Heights area. After attending City College and Columbia University, Bernard Loth practiced law in Utah for a few years. He returned to New York City during the early 1880s, perhaps bringing the enthusiasm, capital, and interest in the technical aspects of the business that prompted the expansion of the firm soon thereafter. Bernard Loth's interest in technology led to several trips abroad to study developments in the silk industry. Such travel and study by an industrialist in preparation of an expansion of his facility was a common means of transfer of industrial information in the nineteenth century. Bernard Loth was also interested in the development of the Washington Heights area. He was an officer of both the Washington Heights Taxpayers and the Fort Washington Ridge Associations and actively supported legislation to fund the construction of public infrastructure and amenities in the area. It seems likely that Bernard Loth would have been involved with the mill construction project and may have implemented aspects of textile mill building design he observed in Europe; with his knowledge of technical aspects of the silk ribbon weaving business, he could have provided the expertise usually brought to such a project by a mill engineer. The fact that he acquired the building when the assets of the business were divided suggests that he had a role in its development.

Hugo Kafka (1843-1915), a native of Austria-Hungary, studied under Gottfried Semper at the *Polytechnikum* in Zurich, and received the Medal of Art from the Vienna International Exposition in 1873.²⁸ After immigrating to Philadelphia to pursue his profession, Kafka was associated with Herman Schwarzmann, the architect-in-chief of the

Centennial Exposition of 1876. His work on that project earned a prize medal. As early as 1878 Kafka had established his architectural practice in New York City, where in the course of his career he received numerous commissions for apartment buildings and houses. Kafka's commercial work included the Loth Ribbon Mill, a major addition to the Stern Brothers Store on West 22nd Street (1886, within the Ladies' Mile Historic District), and the store and loft building at 181-183 Franklin Street (1891-92, in what is now the Tribeca West Historic District).

During his career Kafka formed several partnerships, the first of which was a brief association established in 1882 with Alfred B. Mullet, former Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department. In 1887-88 Kafka was associated with William Schickel & Co. and from 1893 to 1896 he worked with Charles T. Mott. Kafka provided plans to the developers Isaac and Samuel Untermeyer for a single-family residence at 11 East 92nd Street (within the proposed Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District). The Kafka & Mott firm was responsible for two groups of rowhouses on West 75th and West 76th Streets (in what is now the West End-Collegiate Historic District). In 1904 Kafka established the firm of Hugo Kafka & Sons with Hugo, Jr., and Fred P. Kafka, the latter a structural engineer; about that time Kafka senior retired due to ill health.

Subsequent History

In 1904, soon after assuming possession of the vacated silk mill, Bernard Loth enlarged the building and altered it for commercial use. Plans were provided by the architectural firm of Buchman & Fox to construct a new, more impressive, front entrance on Amsterdam Avenue, a large extension to the west that filled the space between the angled wings, and one-story additions along the side streets between the angled wings and the Amsterdam Avenue wings. The first story was altered with the insertion of cast-iron-framed storefronts; large retail spaces were created at both the north and south ends of the building, and a number of smaller stores occupied the central portion. A fire in July, 1916, destroyed the distinctive tower and damaged the upper portion of the building, which at that time was used by the Uneda Storage and Van Company. The walls and

fenestration pattern of the second and third stories along Amsterdam Avenue were altered in 1925 with the construction of wider bays with paired windows.²⁹ Despite these changes, the building has retained its distinctive K-plan and its architectural character.

Over the years, the building has housed many retail and light manufacturing businesses. A two-story space with a balcony in the upper portion of the large western wing was used as a movie theater and later as a skating rink and dance hall; this space last housed a picture-framing business and has long been vacant. A billiard room and bowling alley were located in the basement, and perhaps the mosaic panel reading "Washington Heights Idle Hour" dates from that use.³⁰ The building's tenants included such neighborhood services as a laundry, a delicatessen, a shoe store, and, for many years, the S.H. Ball dry goods store. During the late 1920s, a bakery, a floor covering store, a jeweler, a dental laboratory, a gasket manufacturing company, and a theater scenery firm were located in the Loth Building. The former mill currently houses a number of garment manufacturing businesses, a recording studio, and several storefront businesses.

Description

The Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill occupies the west side of Amsterdam Avenue between West 150th and West 151st Streets. The three-story red brick mill, K-shaped in plan with later modifications, has angled wings that project from the center of the principal wing of the building on Amsterdam Avenue and that conceal from view a large addition made to the rear of the mill in 1904. The storefronts flanking the new central entrance on Amsterdam Avenue and one-story structures spanning the wings along the side streets also date from that time. A brick chimney, from which a decorative cap has been removed, stands at the angle of the north wing and the main wing above the structure now covered entirely by a flat roof; stepped parapets rise above the roofline to separate the angled wings from the western wing. On the interior, the unusual plan remains intact and small light courts separate the various wings.

On the Amsterdam Avenue wing, the end pavilions on the avenue and side streets, and the

central pavilion indicate the richness of the Kafka design. Pilasters divide narrow bays nearly filled with window openings -- square-headed on the second story and segmentally-arched on the third. Rusticated pilasters define the end pavilions and building corners; intermediate pilasters are terminated by ornamental pressed brick panels with medallions. Rock-faced sandstone lintels, patterned brickwork, and ornamental pressed brick panels enliven the bays which are terminated with a corbel table. A corbelled brick cornice with a staggered pattern supports a sheet-metal cornice; sheet-metal work also forms the pediments above the rusticated pilasters and the narrow pent-roofs below the corner parapets. The paneled parapets feature raised brick lettering; though most panels are now covered with sheet metal, the one on the West 151st Street facade still reads "Joseph Loth & Co." The mid-sections of the Amsterdam Avenue facade, altered in 1925, consist of wider bays with paired windows in square-headed openings. Many of the windows retain multi-pane double-hung wood sash; those in arched openings also have transoms. Around 1990 the brick facade was painted white and the window trim and metal elements were painted apple green.

At the central entrance on Amsterdam Avenue, added in 1904, four polished granite columns stand on a granite stoop and support the entablature of a shallow porch. Individual letters spelling "Loth Building" have been removed from the frieze. The wider, central entrance bay leads to the lobby of the building; the central bay on the second story is enriched with a pedimented surround and the flanking bays have decorative lintels (this bay and the flanking ones are partially obscured by a fire escape). The storefronts in the Amsterdam Avenue wing, first installed in 1904, have seen numerous alterations; however, what appears to be the sheet-metal cornice from that alteration remains partially intact and the stylized design with rondels is visible along West 150th Street.

The western facade of the Amsterdam Avenue wing and the eastern facades of the angled wings are also articulated with pilasters that rise through the corbelled brick cornices. The narrow bays are filled with segmentally-arched window openings on the second and third stories. The three-bay wide terminations of the angled wings on West 150th and West 151st Streets, framed by rusticated

pilasters, are similar to the end bays of the Amsterdam Avenue wing, although continuous sill bands underscore the third-story windows. Sheet metal covers the panel of the parapet on the West 150th Street facade; the one on the West 151st Street facade reads "Silk Ribbon." At the first story of each wing, a pair of arched openings with animal-head keystones is flanked by piers terminated by scrolls. The entrances are secured with roll-down security gates. The windows have double-hung sash of various configurations still painted the historic dark-green color; a number of windows facing West 151st Street also have grilles. On the western side of the West 150th Street angled wing remains a painted sign which features the "Fair and Square" circular trademark.

The one-story addition on West 150th Street appears to be the remodeled first-story of the stable which had alternating, slightly projecting bays; it is terminated with a sheet-metal cornice. The similar one-story addition on West 151st Street has a facade divided by pilasters; the walls are corbelled to meet the pilaster depth just under the sheet-metal cornice, a portion of which survives. Small window openings are set high in the central five bays.

*Report prepared by
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NOTES

1. This section draws on LPC, *Former 30th Police Precinct Station House Designation Report* (LP-1389), report prepared by Nancy Goeschel (New York, 1986) and Reginald Pelham Bolton, *Washington Heights Manhattan -- Its Eventful Past* (New York: the author, 1924), 107-108, for information on Carmansville. Residents of Carmansville were found in property conveyances, city directories, and E. Idell Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1899), 638.
2. Although sources like *Appleton's Dictionary of New York and Its Vicinity* (New York: D.Appleton & Co., 1886) define Carmansville as extending from West 135th to West 160th streets, between Manhattanville and Fort Washington, most development occurred north of West 152nd Street.
3. Rev. J.F. Richmond, *New York and its Institutions 1609-1871* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1871), 281-286 and 449-451. The Home School for Sailors' Children for was owned by the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society of New York from 1886 to 1912.
4. See Gracie Brainerd Krum, "In Grandfather's House - Reminiscences of a Girlhood in Washington Heights Section of New York City, 1874-1897" (Detroit, 1950-51), typescript at the New-York Historical Society for descriptions of the area and the Audubon School for Young Ladies; notices for that school and St. Catherine's Academy appeared in the *Washington Heights Gazette* in 1895.
5. "View from Lorenzo N. Fowler's Real Estate Office, 1887," plate 184, in Mary Black, *Old New York in Early Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976).
6. Field held the entire block until 1881 and individual lots were first sold in 1883; the Loths purchased the east end of the block from three owners; their extensive purchases the following year suggest that they could have acquired a parcel of any desired configuration in the undeveloped block.
7. The New Congress Sugar Refinery, built by Dennis Harris, was in operation for only about five years; the building, which was later used by the fire department, was razed around 1896, according to Bolton, 114-115.
8. *American Silk Journal (ASJ)*, 4 (Sept., 1885), 131.
9. Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York* (Boston, 1893), 974.
10. *Real Estate Record & Guide* (Jan. 16, 1886), 65; and *ASJ* 5 (Aug., 1886), 118.

11. In 1897 Loth sold several lots to Caroline F. Brownell, with whom he recorded a party-wall agreement that year. In 1898 Brownell sold Nos. 519, 521, and 523 West 152nd Street to Henry Loth. New York County, Office of the Registrar, Liber Deeds and Conveyances. Section 7, Liber 45, page 160, Liber 45, page 164, and Liber 56, page 76. Bernard Loth later lived at 408 West 150th Street.
12. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets. New Building Permits 1893-1895, 232-1897, 237-1897, and 480-1897.
13. "Views of Washington Heights..." Oct. 2, 1904, and "Builders Fast Developing Washington Heights Land," *New York Herald*, Apr. 30, 1905, in Washington Heights vertical file, New York Public Library Local History Division.
14. See Morris William Garber, "The Silk Industry of Paterson, New Jersey, 1840-1913: Technology and the Origins, Development, and the Changes in an Industry." (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, the State University, 1968), 130-137 and 184-190, and the essays by Philip B. Scranton, Richard D. Margrave and Patricia O'Donnell in Philip B. Scranton, ed., *Silk City: Studies on the Paterson Silk Industry, 1860-1940* (Newark: New Jersey Historical Society, 1985). Also consulted were several of those authors' primary sources: Linus Pierpont Brockett, *Silk Industry in America -- A History* (Silk Association of America, 1876), and William C. Wyckoff's several narratives in the Silk Association of America's *Annual Reports*.
15. *King's Handbook* (1893) describes the firm's product line at that time and the *ASJ* 20 (April, 1901), 48, ran a notice of the novelty line. The history of Loth firm was traced in *NYT*, Aug. 18, 1885, p. 5; city directories and the directories of members in the Silk Association of America's *Annual Reports*; and entries in the "Gotham Gleanings" column of the *ASJ* 3 (Mar., 1884), 59; 4 (June, 1885), 83, (Sept., 1885), 131, (Nov., 1885), 158; 5 (Jan., 1886), 11, (Apr., 1886), 64, (May, 1886), 88, (Aug., 1886), 128, (Sept., 1886), 144; 9 (Feb., 1890), 37, (Dec., 1890), 293; 16 (Jan., 1897), 33; 20 (Apr., 1901), 48; 21 (Oct., 1902), 47; 23 (Jan., 1904) and *Fabrics, Fancy Goods & Notions* 20 (Jan., 1886), 10, (Oct., 1886), 10, (Nov., 1886), 10.
16. See Garber, the Scranton and Margrave essays in *Silk City*, and R.H. Bowker, "A Silk Dress," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 71 (Jan. - Mar., 1885), 258.
17. These firms are mentioned by Brockett and Wyckoff. *Manufacturers of the United States for Domestic and Foreign Trade* (New York: Armstrong & Knauer Publishing Company, 1887), 356, lists the Loth firm and ten others as manufacturers of silk ribbons.
18. *ASJ* 9 (Feb., 1890), 37.
19. The Silk Association of America *Annual Report* (New York, 1879) features the "Fair and Square" trademark; the *ASJ* 20 (Oct., 1902), 47, noted that Joseph Loth and the famous trademark "Fair & Square" had been linked since 1875. The firm's advertisements appeared regularly in the *ASJ* and *Fabrics, Fancy Goods & Notions* and, no doubt, other trade journals.
20. *Official American Textile Directory* (Textile World Directory, 1909-10), 111.
21. See Betsy W. Bahr, "New England Mill Engineering: Rationalization and Reform in Textile Mill Design, 1790-1920," (Ph.D. diss., Wilmington: University of Delaware, 1987) for a description of both the role of the mill engineer and the evolution of the textile mill. Charles J.H. Woodbury, "The Evolution of the Modern Mill" *Scientific American Supplement* 1888, Nos. 647, pp. 10329-10330, and 648, pp. 10346-10347, quoted by Bahr, and Edward Atkinson, "Slow Burning Construction," reprint from *Century Magazine* (Feb., 1889), 309-335 in *The Industrial Progress of the Nation* (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890) note contemporary concerns in mill construction.
22. Woodbury, 10329.
23. Toni Ristau, in "Mill Architecture in Paterson, N.J.: A Culmination of the Empirical Tradition in Construction," *Northeast Historical Archaeology* 4 (Spring, 1975), 63.

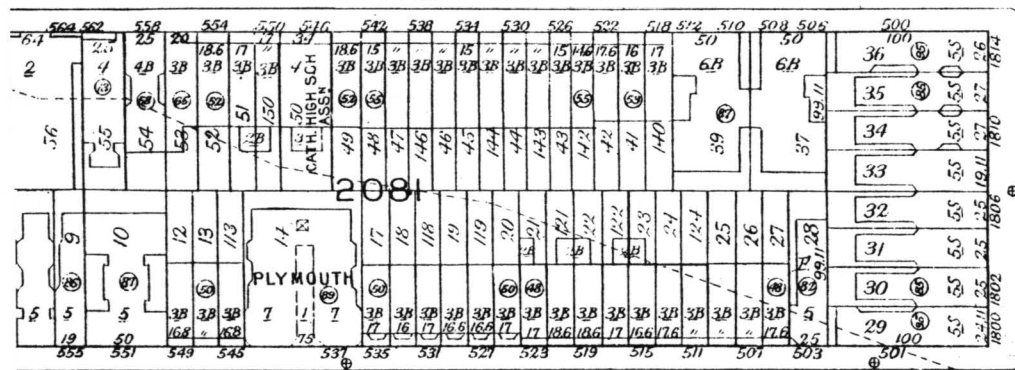
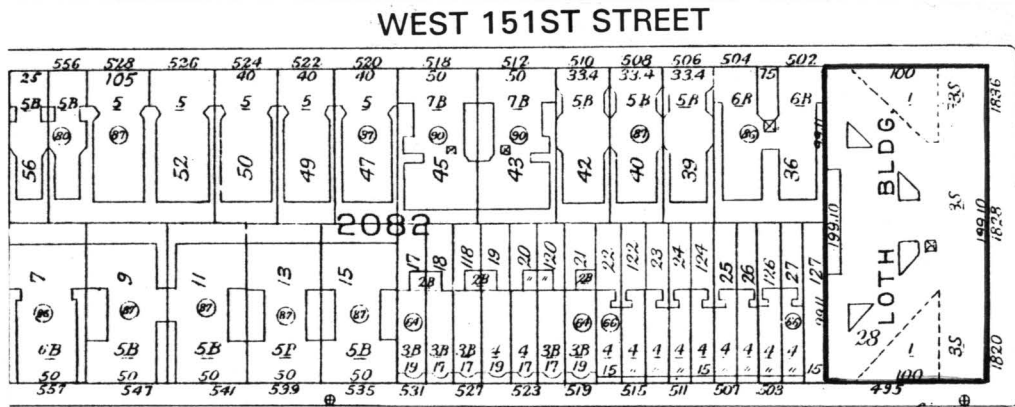
24. The New York City Building Code of 1882 (Chapter 410 of the *Laws of New York*) was in effect at the time the Loth building was designed.
25. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets. Docket Entry for New Building Permit 1047-1885. Unfortunately, the application form is missing from the Department of Buildings records and therefore any correspondence between the Department of Buildings and the architect concerning the plan of the building and construction specifications are unavailable.
26. *ASJ* 5 (Sept., 1886), 144. "Joseph Loth & Co. have removed all their machinery from their former location on West 45th to their new elegant mill ... where an electric light system is being introduced; in other respects, everything is about completed and the mill is in good running order." See David E. Nye, Chapter 5, "The Flexible Factory," *Electrifying America -- Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 185-237 for the introduction of electric lights and motors in American industry.
27. Joseph Loth is pictured in Moses King, *Notable New Yorkers of 1896-1899* (New York and Boston, 1899), 505. "Bernard Loth," *Who's Who in New York City and State* (New York: L.R. Hamersly & Co., 1904, 1907, 1911, and 1924) and *Biographical Directory of the State of New York* (New York: Biographical Directory Company, 1900), 276. Henry Loth obituary, *NYT*, Dec. 9, 1941.
28. This section is based on entries for Hugo Kafka in LPC, Architects' Appendices in the *Upper West Side - Central Park West Historic District Designation Report*, the *West End-Collegiate Historic District Designation Report* and the *Tribeca West Historic District Designation Report*, and Hugo Kafka obituary, *American Institute of Architects Journal* 3 (1915), 305.
29. NYC, Department of Buildings, Alteration Application 354-1904, Buchman & Fox, architects. *NYT*, July 28, 1916, p. 1; according to the Alteration Application 3229-1916 flat roofs were put on the entire building after the fire. Alteration application 838-1922 describes conversion of the building to a public school for vocational training; that use has not been confirmed. Alteration application 2341-1925; architect, Arthur J. Stever.
30. Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes: The Loth Silk Factory -- A Ghost Coming to Life in Washington Heights," *NYT*, Aug. 6, 1989. Other tenants were listed in Buildings Department applications and the *Manhattan Address Telephone Directory*, 1929.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill 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 Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, commissioned in 1885 by the Loth family of silk manufacturers -- probably Bernard Loth, the technical expert -- and designed by the Austro-Hungarian emigré architect Hugo Kafka, noted for his commercial and residential work in New York City, stands out among American textile mill buildings due to its exceptional architectural character and unusual design; that the building was occupied by Joseph Loth & Company, a prominent firm that was in operation in New York City from around 1875 to 1902 and produced silk ribbon marketed under the trademark "Fair and Square"; that the plan of the mill -- a reversed K with the upright along Amsterdam Avenue -- is original in concept and is an ingenious and practical solution that allowed for large, well-lighted spaces unobstructed by columns; that this plan reflected the requirements and strictures of the New York City building code -- more so than the "slow-burning construction" standards recommended by the fire insurance "mutuals" which were applied to most mills constructed in this country; that certain features of the mill design were characteristic of mill buildings of the era, particularly the central tower (burned 1916) and exterior brick walls consisting of narrow bays defined by pilasters and filled with windows; that the hand of the architect is apparent in the carefully detailed facades which are organized with central and end pavilions, above which panels at the parapets identify the firm and its product; that these facades are enlivened with rock-faced sandstone, ornamental pressed brick elements, and corbelled brick features; that the chimney rising between wings of the mill is a reminder that the facility had coal-fired steam boilers that drove the belts and line shafting for the power looms and ran the generator for the electric lights, still relatively novel in the mid-1880s; that, built during an interim between periods of residential development, the mill was one of the few industries to locate in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan; and that this architecturally-distinguished mill building, which was altered and enlarged in 1904 while retaining its distinctive K-plan and architectural character, has long played a vital role in the commercial life of the community, housing neighborhood businesses and light-manufacturing operations.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue, a/k/a 491-497 West 150th Street and 500 West 151st Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 2082, Lot 28, as its Landmark Site.



Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill
 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue
 (491-497 West 150th Street and 500 West 151st Street)
 Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 2082, Lot 28.

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1991-92 ed., Plate 157.



Figure 1. "View from Lorenzo N. Fowler's Real Estate Office, 1887," plate 184, *Old New York in Early Photographs*. Loth Silk Mill facing Amsterdam Avenue at right side of photograph.



Figure 2. Joseph Loth & Company advertisement from the *American Silk Journal*, 1880s.

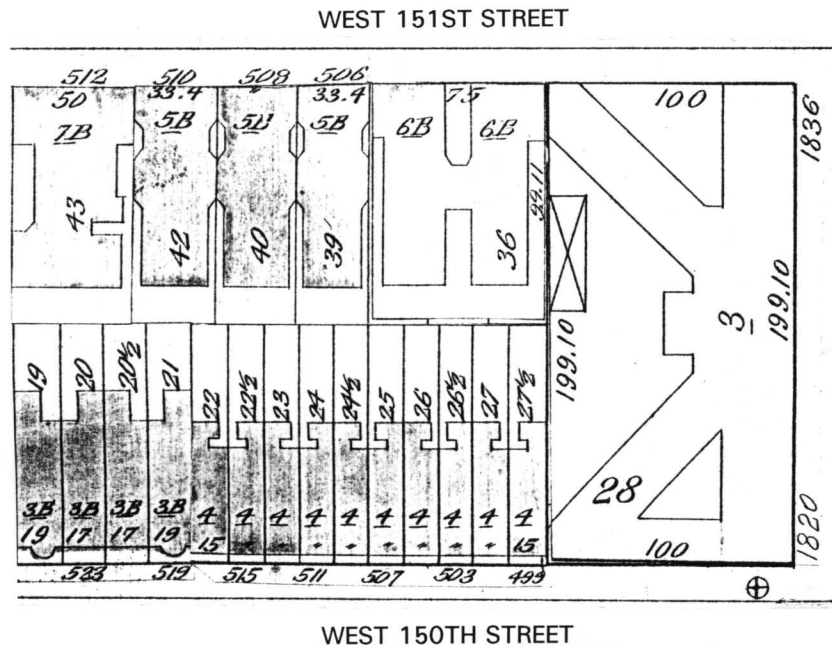


Figure 3. Loth mill, original plan, at right.
Atlas of the City of New York (G.W. Bromley & Co., 1898), Vol. 5, Plate 3.

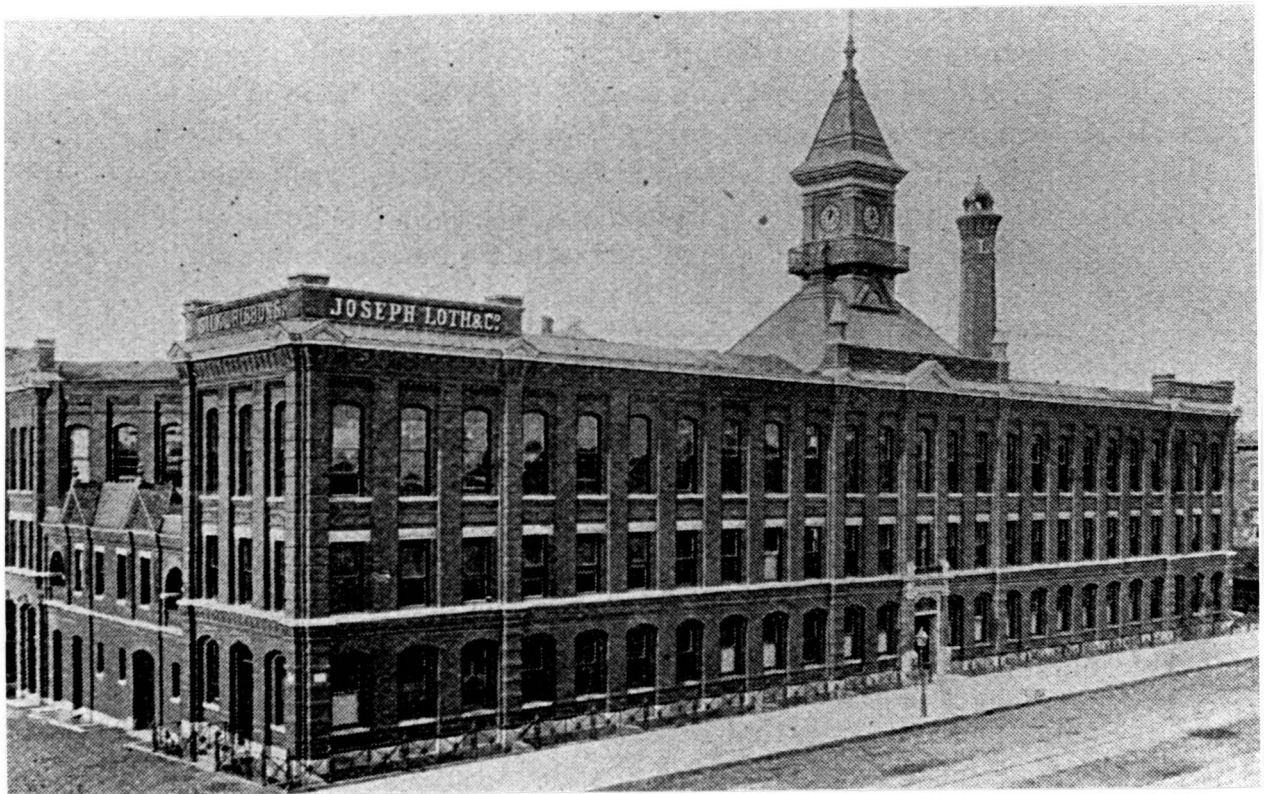


Figure 4. "Joseph Loth & Co., "Fair and Square" Ribbon Manufactory,"
King's Handbook of New York City, 974.



Figure 5. Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue. Amsterdam Avenue facade.

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Figure 6. Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue.
West 150th Street facade.

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Figure 7. Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue.
West 151st Street facade.

Photo credit: Carl Forster

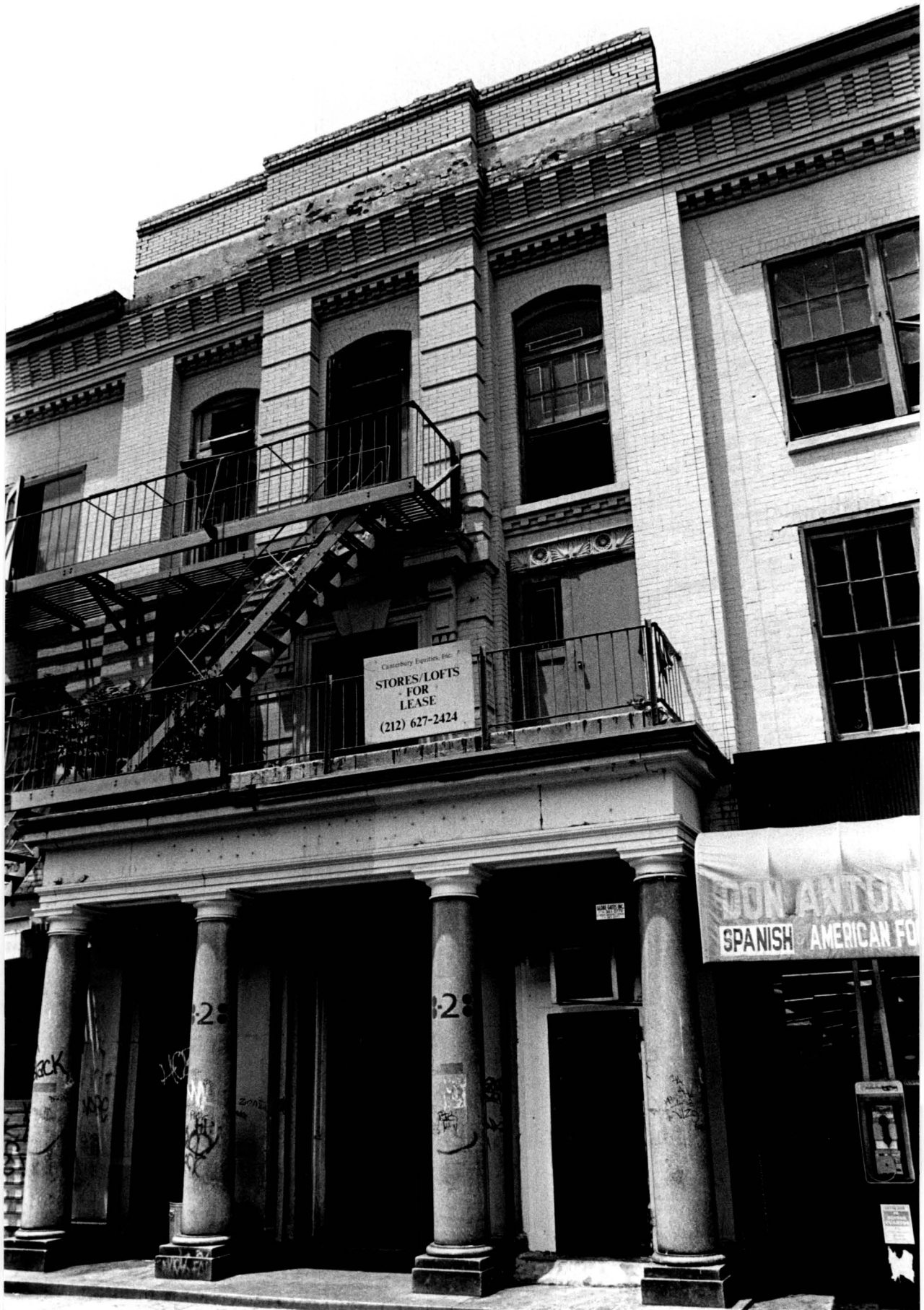


Figure 8. Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue.
Main entrance on Amsterdam Avenue.

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Figure 9. Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue.
Parapet panel on West 151st Street. Photo credit: Carl Forster



Figure 10.

Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill, 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue.
Detail, West 150th Street facade.

Photo credit: Carl Forster