

**BROWN BUILDING (originally ASCH BUILDING)**, 23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan.  
Built 1900-01; architect John Woolley.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 547, Lot 8.

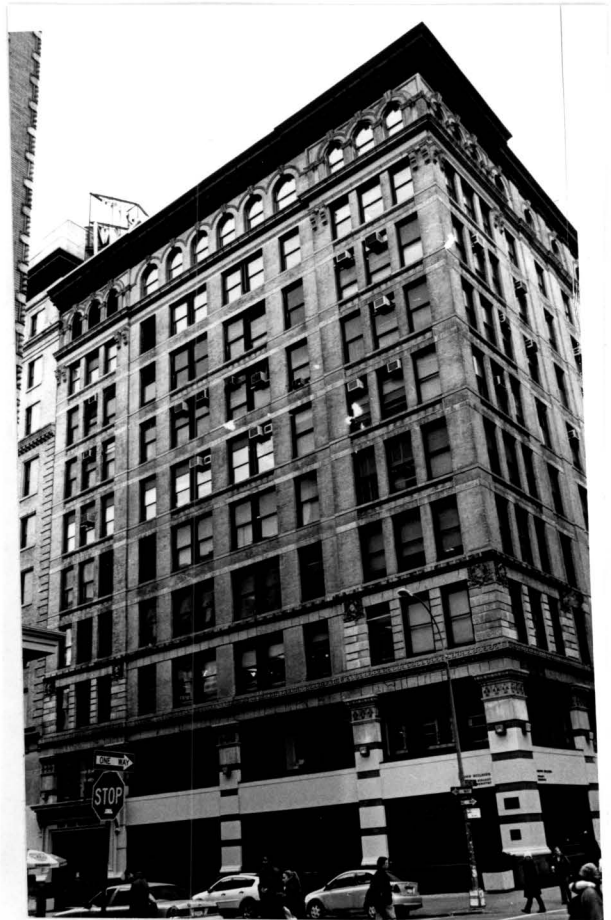
On November 19, 2002, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Brown Building (originally Asch Building) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. A total of thirteen witnesses, including representatives of New York University (the owner), Manhattan Community Board 2, the Historic Districts Council, Municipal Art Society, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, New York Labor History Association, and UNITE, spoke in favor of the designation. The Commission has also received several letters of support for the designation, including statements from State Senator Thomas Duane, Councilmember Alan J. Gerson, and the Peter Minuit Chapter of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

#### Summary

Now a New York University science building, this neo-Renaissance-style loft building was constructed in 1900-01 for investor Joseph J. Asch. On March 25, 1911, it was the site of one of the worst industrial disasters in American history, when a fire in the Triangle shirtwaist factory on the building's top three floors resulted in the death of 146 workers, most of them young women.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the garment industry was the largest employer in New York City, with the shirtwaist, a high-necked blouse, one of its most popular products. Working conditions at the Triangle Waist Company were typical of many garment industry shops during this period, with immigrant workers laboring in overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous conditions. Shirtwaist workers at a number of shops began to join the International Ladies Garment Workers Union to combat these conditions. In the autumn of 1909, Triangle fired 150 union sympathizers. This led to a strike by approximately 20,000 shirtwaist workers, 4/5 of them women, in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore-- the first large-scale strike of women workers in the country. After thirteen weeks the strike ended. While many employers signed favorable contracts with the ILGWU, Triangle workers received only small wage increases and did not receive union recognition and better safety conditions. A year later, fire erupted on the eighth floor of the Triangle factory and spread to the floors above; locked doors and inadequate fire escapes contributed to the deaths of 146 workers. The tragedy stunned the nation and became a catalyst for a broad range of reforms. In the next few years, New York City and New York State adopted a battery of new laws to protect the public from fires and ensure the health and safety of workers. The new laws were the most advanced and comprehensive in the country and served as models for other state and local ordinances and for the federal labor legislation of the New Deal era, twenty years later.

After the fire, the building was repaired and returned to industrial use. In 1916, New York University leased the eighth floor and eventually occupied the entire building. The building was donated to the university in 1929 by Frederick Brown and has been used continuously as an academic building. Starting with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire and each year since, the New York City Fire Department and the ILGWU (now UNITE), have marked the anniversary of the Triangle fire with a memorial ceremony in front of the building.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### The Redevelopment of NoHo in the 1880s and 1890s and the Asch Building<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-1880s, New York's rapidly expanding wholesale dry-goods trade had outgrown its traditional quarters in the downtown areas now known as Tribeca and SoHo and began moving northward along Broadway, up to around East 9<sup>th</sup> Street. The presence of thriving retail businesses and publishing houses on the blocks of Broadway above East 9<sup>th</sup> Street largely precluded the wholesale district's growth to the north and led wholesalers to seek sites on the side streets off Broadway. The *Record & Guide* pointed out that these were "nearly, if not quite, as central and ... far less expensive."<sup>2</sup>

The "pioneer" building in this development was the Cohnfeld Building (demolished) at the southeast corner of Bleeker and Greene Streets, erected in 1884-85 by developer Isadore Cohnfeld to the designs of architect Alfred Zucker.<sup>3</sup> This nine-story loft building, built to house a feather factory and several textile firms, incorporated the same design features, structural techniques, and amenities as contemporary office buildings such as George B. Post's Western Union Building (1872-75, demolished) and Richard Morris Hunt's Tribune Building (1873-75, demolished). Soon other investors began erecting six- and seven-story loft buildings on Bleeker, Greene, and Houston Streets incorporating the latest styles and amenities.<sup>4</sup> Fire insurance rates were also much lower in the new buildings, which were then regarded as fireproof or semi-fireproof.<sup>5</sup> This provided a strong incentive for dry-goods wholesalers to leave their old quarters on Broadway where they often found it impossible to obtain the insurance necessary to cover their stocks. Over the next decade, the new mercantile district expanded northward to about 10<sup>th</sup> Street and westward to about West Broadway/Fifth Avenue. Some of the older store-and-loft buildings on Broadway and in SoHo were replaced with larger, more modern structures. New loft buildings also began to go up on the cross streets east of Broadway, especially Bleeker and Bond Streets.<sup>6</sup>

By the early 1890s these changes had affected the Washington Square area and New York University, which since 1836 had been located in a Gothic Revival Building on Washington Square East between Washington Place and Waverly Place. The school began making plans to move its undergraduate divisions to Fordham Heights (later University Heights) in the Bronx.<sup>7</sup> The trustees intended to retain the old site and improve it with a new income-

producing loft building that would contain space for university classrooms on the top three floors. In 1894, the university signed a long-term lease with the American Book Company and retained Alfred Zucker to design a ten-story fire-proof building, now the university's Main Building, which opened in 1895.

Furrier Joseph J. Asch, who had a wholesale business on White Street, also speculated on the development potential of the neighborhood, acquiring a three-and-one-half-story Greek Revival rowhouse at 29 Washington Place, immediately to the east of the NYU building in 1890.<sup>8</sup> Seven years later, he purchased the matching house at 27 Washington Place that was the 1843 birthplace of author Henry James.<sup>9</sup> In November 1898, Asch also bought the four-story residence at 25 Washington Place.<sup>10</sup> However, his attempt to assemble a building site was thwarted in April 1899, when the corner property at 23 Washington Place was purchased by real estate speculators Abraham Boehm and Lewis Coon.<sup>11</sup> In June 1899, Boehm and Coon sold the corner lot to builder-developer Ole Olsen.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks after purchasing 23 Washington Place, Olsen had architect John Woolley file plans with the Department of Buildings to erect a ten-story loft building on the 25x100 foot site.<sup>13</sup> Soon afterwards, Olsen and Asch appear to have come to an agreement.

### The Asch Building: Financing, Design, and Construction

In November 1899, Joseph J. Asch lent Ole Olsen \$85,000 against a mortgage on 23 Washington Place.<sup>14</sup> In December, Asch borrowed \$280,000 against the three lots at 25, 27, and 29 Washington Place, then conveyed the mortgaged properties to Olsen together with a one-year construction loan of \$105,126.<sup>15</sup> Olsen commissioned Woolley to prepare plans for a ten-story building for the combined lots that together had a frontage of 101 feet on Washington Place and 100 feet on Greene Street. The plans were filed with the Department of Buildings on April 28, 1900.<sup>16</sup> Two days later, Olsen conveyed the four lots with "the building now being erected" to Asch for \$10,000 cash, subject to the existing mortgages.<sup>17</sup>

The building was to be a modern loft structure with a skeleton frame of iron and steel protected by terra-cotta fireproofing, passenger and freight elevators, and electric power for lights and machinery.<sup>18</sup> Because it was only to be 135 feet tall, it was allowed to have wood floors, wood window frames and trim, instead of the metal trim, metal

window frames, and stone or concrete floors that would have been required in a 150 feet tall building. Sprinklers were not required but there was to be a fire alarm system as well as a standpipe with hoses on all the floors connecting to a water tank on the roof. The plans called for two staircases, one located near the elevators off the lobby at the western end of the Washington Place side of the building and the other off the lobby at the northern corner of the Greene Street side of the building. The plans also included an external iron fire escape on the north wall of the narrow L-shaped light court that extended around a portion of the north and west sides of the building. On May 7, the Buildings Department issued an objection sheet, indicating that an additional line of fire stairs was required for the building's area of 10,000 square feet per floor. The examiner also objected to the rear fire escape, indicating that it "must lead to something more substantial than a skylight."<sup>19</sup> Woolley responded over the next two days, agreeing to correct the objections and requesting an exemption for the other stair, arguing that "the building has all open floors, the staircases are remote from one another, and as there is a fire escape in the court, it practically makes three staircases, which, in my opinion, is sufficient."<sup>20</sup> The exemption was granted and work commenced on the structure in early June. Excavations revealed unexpected structural problems-- the footings of the adjacent NYU Building projected onto the Asch Building lot. By late June, Asch had dismissed Woolley and turned the project over to the firm of Robert Maynicke, an architect-engineer who specialized in the erection of loft and office buildings. Julius Franke, Maynicke's head draftsman, seems to have been put in charge of the project.<sup>21</sup> Construction was completed in January 1901.<sup>22</sup>

The tan brick and terra-cotta exterior of the Asch Building was designed in the fashionable neo-Renaissance style. Its classically-inspired facades are organized in a tripartite composition in which three-bay-wide corner pavilions frame less elaborately decorated center bays. The stories are also grouped into a three-part design consisting of a two-story rusticated base, seven-story mid-section, and one-story arcaded cap. The design features an interesting interplay between the strong verticals of the piers and the horizontal accents provided by the sill and lintel courses that frame the windows. The facades are richly decorated with terra-cotta ornament that creates an attractive and impressive effect without the great cost associated with carved stonework. The terra-cotta decoration is exceptionally fine at the third story, where the pavilion bays are ornamented with

handsome wreathed cartouches that have a hint of the Art Nouveau in their design. Also noteworthy is the decorative treatment of the tenth story, where the arches are set off by molded archivolts and bracketed keystones with fluted Ionic pilasters enriching the outer bays. The building also retains much of its original decorative metalwork, including the cast-iron piers decorated with rinceau motifs and scroll brackets and the crowning galvanized iron cornice resting on console brackets.

#### Changes in the Ready-to-Wear Industry and the Development of the Loft Building Sweatshop at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century<sup>23</sup>

By 1880, technological innovations were making the manufacture of ready-made garments viable on a large scale. Rapid population growth, urbanization, and the development of the department store also contributed to the expansion of the ready-to-wear sector of the clothing industry. The women's wear segment alone grew from about 39,000 workers in 1889, to double that number ten years later, and exceeded 165,000 by 1919. Several factors helped to make New York City the principal center for the industry. Chief among these was its position as the main distribution point for the dry-goods trade, containing the warehouses and showrooms for the New England mills, importers of silks and woolens, button manufacturers, etc. The city's role as a cultural and media center and gateway for travel to Europe and the rest of the nation also created a fashion consciousness that gave an advantage to New York designers and manufacturers. Above all, as Roger Waldinger wrote in his history of the garment trade, "there was the massive tide of immigration that flowed into the city just at the time the demand for ready-to-wear began to surge" that provided a "labor force that was poor, industrious, and compelled by want of other skills to seek work in a clothing shop."<sup>24</sup>

In general, there were three kinds of garment factories during this period: the inside shop, in which the employees worked directly for the manufacturer; the home shop, where workers, often assisted by family members, assembled clothing in their tenement apartments from cut goods supplied by the manufacturer; and the outside shop, where a contractor acted as middleman receiving orders from the manufacturer, then hiring laborers to finish the garments either in their homes or in small workshops (sweatshops) provided by the contractors.<sup>25</sup> With the contractor taking responsibility for production, the manufacturer was able to specialize in designing and merchandising. Waldinger has observed that this

proved an advantage to the industry as a whole, "since the small size and limited staff of most garment firms made it difficult for them to perform all the different activities efficiently."<sup>26</sup>

This trend coincided with the increasing complaints of reformers and health inspectors about conditions in the sweatshops.<sup>27</sup> In 1892, the New York State Factory Act was established, creating a licensing procedure for tenement sweatshops. Among the law's requirements was a provision that each worker had to be provided with a minimum of 250 cubic feet of air. The 1901 Tenement House Act greatly strengthened the provisions against home production. With this legal impetus garment manufacturers began seeking quarters in the loft buildings of NoHo and the newly developing loft district in the shopping area known as Ladies Mile. Among the advantages of the new buildings were their high ceilings, which made it possible to meet the requirement for breathing space while actually providing less floor space per worker. The large windows in the new lofts provided considerable natural light, ensuring a large savings on the cost of artificial illumination in the wintertime. The new buildings were also wired for electricity, which made it possible for manufacturers to replace foot-powered sewing machines and gasoline-powered machinery with safer, more-cheaply-operated electric sewing machines and motors. Electric power also permitted manufacturers to install new types of equipment, including braiders, corders, seamers, binders, and improved cutting and pressing equipment. In addition, the savings on insurance that brought warehousemen into the new "fireproof" lofts was also available to manufacturers. Moreover, the new mercantile district was within walking distance of the Lower East Side tenements where most of the garment workers resided and was convenient for suppliers and buyers.

In order to take advantage of these technological advances without losing the production-related incentives of the contractor system, manufacturers began providing space in their modern lofts for contractors and their employees to work alongside the manufacturer's employees. Under this system, the contractor would bargain with the company for a rate on each style and then hire sewing-machine operators, usually young immigrant girls, to produce it. The workers never knew how much the company was paying the contractors and competition between contractors kept prices low. Since the company dealt only with the contractors, it felt no responsibility to the workers and often had no idea how many workers were on the premises. This was the system that Max

Blanck and Isaac Harris opted to use in their newly formed Triangle Waist Company.

#### The Triangle Waist Company<sup>28</sup>

The shirtwaist, a high-necked blouse usually made of crisp, light, translucent cotton or sheer linen, came into fashion around 1890. Regularly featured by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson in his representations of the chic "Gibson Girl," it soon became one of the most popular products of the ready-to-wear industry. At the turn of the century some 40,000 workers, four of five of whom were women, were employed in the manufacture of shirtwaists.

Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, known as the "Shirtwaist Kings," were Russian-born Jewish immigrants who settled in New York City at the end of the nineteenth century. They established the Triangle Waist Company by 1900,<sup>29</sup> moving into a loft building on Wooster Street, just south of Houston Street. In August 1901, the partners signed a thirty-month lease for the eighth floor of the Asch Building.<sup>30</sup> Within a few years, the growing company also took over the ninth and tenth floors. By 1908 the partners' profit exceeded \$1,000,000 and they "were acknowledged as the leading shirtwaist makers of the city, perhaps the nation."<sup>31</sup> Blanck and Harris also purchased sole ownership or controlling interests in several other shirtwaist firms in New York City, Newark, and Philadelphia, although the Triangle Company was by far their most important firm. Harris was responsible for garment production, overseeing the machinery, and monitoring workflow. Blanck was in charge of sales.

Many workers considered Blanck and Harris among the worst employers in the industry. The partners were heedless of the numerous fire and safety fire hazards at their factory. They routinely ignored labor laws aimed at protecting women and children. Employees were expected to work until as late as nine o'clock at night during the busy season, without overtime pay or a supper break, and they were locked in to ensure they would not leave the building. Employees were required to submit their bags for inspection before leaving work and the doors were locked to make sure that everyone complied. Talking and singing were forbidden during working hours; bathroom breaks were monitored; there were fines for errors; and workers had to buy their own needles, thread, and other supplies.

#### The Shirtwaist Strike of 1909-10<sup>32</sup>

Prior to the economic downturn in 1903, relations between manufacturers and unions in the growing shirtwaist industry had been relatively amicable. As



economic conditions worsened, there was increasing unrest, including wildcat strikes. One such strike, involving two hundred garment workers at the Rosen Brothers shirtwaist factory during the summer of 1909, resulted in Local 25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) unionizing the factory and negotiating a first contract with a 20% wage increase. This emboldened other workers to organize. In September 1909, 100 workers from the Triangle factory held a meeting regarding conditions at Triangle with officials from Local 25 and the United Hebrew Trades Association.<sup>33</sup> Blanck and Harris got word of the meeting and immediately laid off 150 workers who had either attended the meeting or were suspected of union sympathies. When the company advertised for new workers the next day, the leadership of Local 25 felt it had no other alternative than to declare a lockout and strike the Triangle factory.<sup>34</sup> On November 22, the ILGWU held a meeting at Cooper Union to discuss the progress of the strike, which was attended by many leaders of the labor movement including AFL president Samuel Gompers. Clara Lemlich, a twenty-three-year-old striker who had been beaten by thugs while walking the picket line at Triangle, made a motion calling for a massive general strike which passed unanimously. The next day thousands of workers left their factories and marched to a rally in Union Square. Eventually some 20,000 to 30,000 shirtwaist workers (80% of them women) went on strike in New York City. Shirtwaist workers in Philadelphia and Baltimore also walked off the job in support. In New York City hundreds of picketers were arrested (723 during the first month of the strike alone).

The strikers received considerable support from the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a women's rights organization founded in 1903 by middle-class and upper-class reformers and labor activists to better the lives of working women by organizing them into trade unions.<sup>35</sup> League president Mary Dreier was arrested while picketing Triangle. Dreier, Alva Belmont, Anne Morgan, and Elisabeth Marbury were among the members of the WTUL who formed a committee to protect the strikers from unfair treatment by magistrates and police. Alva Belmont went so far as to pledge her house as security in bailing out four striking women at night court. While male union leaders were skeptical about the intentions of the "mink brigade," their participation helped to bring publicity and sympathy. Many reporters covering the strike were impressed with the steadfastness and militancy of the young women who led it and recognized that for the first time a large-

scale strike had been "run by women and for women, with a minimum of male intervention."<sup>36</sup>

The strike lasted thirteen weeks. When it ended in February 1910, 279 manufacturers employing 15,000 workers had agreed to sign a contract with Local 25 that raised salaries, established a 52-hour work week, and limited required overtime. Triangle and a number of the other large firms refused to recognize the union. Although they raised wages to match the pay-scale offered by the union shops, they refused to meet other demands put forth by the workers, including complaints about locked doors and requests for better fire escapes.

### The Triangle Fire<sup>37</sup>

On Saturday March 25, 1911, about ten minutes before closing time at 4:45 pm, a fire erupted in one of the huge piles of scraps stored beneath the cutting tables on the eighth floor of the Triangle factory.<sup>38</sup> The table, piled high with combustible fabric, began to burn. Tissue paper patterns suspended from a clothes line above the table ignited, spreading fire throughout the room. Several people threw buckets of water on the flames. A manager ran to the stairwell for a fire hose, only to realize that the hose had rotted and the water valve had rusted shut. Soon, the room was engulfed with flame and smoke. Most of the occupants of the eighth floor escaped. A few young panic-stricken women, who had not been able to fit into the elevator or reach the crowded fire stairs and fire escape, jumped out of the windows to their deaths.

Before she escaped the eighth floor, the company bookkeeper telephoned the executive offices on the tenth floor alerting them to the fire. Someone called the fire department, but no one contacted the 260 workers on the ninth floor. All but one of the seventy-some people who worked on the tenth floor managed to escape. Some crowded into the elevators. Most exited to the roof via the Greene Street staircase. Students from the neighboring NYU (Main) Building lowered ladders onto the roof of the Asch Building, where relay teams lifted people onto the roofs of the taller adjacent buildings. Only one woman, overcome by hysteria, panicked and jumped.

On the ninth floor, the closing bell sounded. Sewing machine operators, most young women in their teens and twenties, collected their pay envelopes and began putting on their coats in the cloakroom on the Washington Place side of the building, unaware of the growing fire on the floor beneath them. One of the few survivors recalled, "all of a sudden the fire was all around. The flames were coming in through many of the windows."<sup>39</sup> As the frightened workers tried to exit

down the Washington Place stairs, they found that the doorway was locked.<sup>40</sup> Unprepared for the fire since the company had never had a fire drill, workers began trying to cross the room to the Greene Street exit, threading their way in the smoke through a maze of work tables, chairs, and wicker baskets filled with fabric. Many tripped and fell, preventing escape. A few reached the stairs and safety on the roof. Then, a barrel of machine oil stored in the vestibule near the stairs exploded, cutting off the exit. Only a few workers knew there was a fire escape in the courtyard since the iron shutters on the courtyard windows were routinely closed. One woman succeeded in getting a pair of shutters open and several workers found their way onto the rickety seventeen-inch-wide iron fire escape. But, the drop ladder that would have brought them safely to the courtyard below had never been installed. As the workers crowded onto the fire escape, the heat of the fire and the weight of the fleeing workers made it buckle and collapse, sending a group of terrified women plunging to their deaths. Soon, the only means of escape were the two small (4'9" x 5'9") passenger elevators on the Washington Place side of the building. As the fire raged, some occupants slid down the cables or jumped on top of the elevator cabs. When the elevators became inoperable there were only two choices, jump or be burned.

Captain Dominick Henry of the Eighth Police Precinct saw "a scene I hope I never see again. Dozens of girls were hanging from the ledges. Others, their dresses on fire, were leaping from the windows."<sup>41</sup> The *Times* reported that the fire engines arriving at the scene had trouble getting near the building because of the bodies strewn on the street and sidewalk. "While more bodies crashed down among them they worked with desperation to run their ladders into position and spread their fire nets."<sup>42</sup> But the fire department's life nets were utterly useless to withstand the force of bodies falling from the ninth floor and their ladders were too short to reach the fire floors.

About twenty-five minutes after the first alarm sounded, the firemen had the blaze under control. One hundred-forty-six workers died in the blaze or succumbed to their injuries in the days that followed.<sup>43</sup>

#### Aftermath

The tragic events at the Triangle factory stunned the nation. On the day after the fire, prayer services were held in churches and synagogues throughout the city.<sup>44</sup> In the following week, "public-spirited citizens, community groups, and institutions met to seek the causes for the tragedy and to determine whether each,

even if only in a minor fashion, shared responsibility for it."<sup>45</sup> On April 5, an estimated 80,000 mourners marched up Fifth Avenue in a funeral procession for the remains of those individuals who were so badly burned as to be unidentifiable and therefore unclaimed. Sponsored by the WTUL and Local 25, the procession was both an act of mourning and a protest march. Hundreds of thousands of workers walked off the job that afternoon to stand along the parade route.

On April 11, in response to public outrage over the fire, the district attorney brought an indictment for manslaughter against Blanck and Harris, charging them with causing the death of a worker by locking the Washington Place door on the ninth floor of the factory in violation of New York State labor laws<sup>46</sup>. Their trial took place in December and ended in an acquittal, since the jury found it impossible to determine whether Blanck and Harris knew the door was locked at the time of the fire. On March 30, 1911, the partners reopened their business in a building on University Place and began an advertising campaign to restore their tarnished image. In July, they incorporated the business, presumably to insulate themselves from civil suits. They received a \$200,000 settlement from their insurers and remained in business until 1918. The victims' families received a week's pay from Blanck and Harris and, in March 1914, civil suits by twenty-three families against building owner Joseph J. Asch were settled at a rate of \$75 per lost life.

In the weeks after the fire, Local 25 was instrumental in raising money to assist the families of the victims.<sup>47</sup> The fire created a new militancy in the union and at the same time made the shirtwaist manufacturers sensitive about their public image. In 1912, there were talks between the Shirtwaist Manufacturer's Association and Local 25 about extending union recognition to the unorganized shops.<sup>48</sup> In January 1913, the union called a general strike that lasted only three days before the manufacturers capitulated, agreeing to an industry-wide collective agreement that provided "for new wage scales, a fifty-hour week, improved sanitary conditions, union recognition, and the establishment of arbitration board to deal with workers grievances."<sup>49</sup> This was one of a number of general strikes in early 1913 by workers in both the men's and women's garment industry in New York that brought the industry to a standstill and resulted in union victories.<sup>50</sup> By September 1913, more than 60,000 women in New York State had gained a shortened work week and at least a 20 percent increase in salary and had "reasonably stable unions to which they could turn for assistance."<sup>51</sup> The ILGWU, with its overwhelming

female membership, had grown to be the third largest affiliate in the AFL, and women began to take on leadership roles in their union.

#### The Factory Investigating Commission<sup>52</sup>

In addition to its impact on the garment industry, the Triangle fire was a catalyst for a broad range of reforms. Almost immediately after the fire, city and state enforcement of the existing building, tenement, and labor laws was stepped up, thanks, in part, to the prodding of the WTUL, which surveyed factory workers to identify fire traps and then barraged agency heads with lists of violations that were released to the newspapers. The Committee on Safety (a group of twenty-five prominent citizens formed in response to Triangle fire), the WTUL, the National Consumers League, the Fifth Avenue Association, unions, civic and professional groups, and public-spirited individuals began to agitate for additional legislation to remedy the conditions that had led to the Triangle tragedy. In October 1911, the New York City Board of Aldermen adopted the Sullivan-Hoey Act which established the Bureau of Fire Prevention. On June 30, 1911, the New York State Legislature established the Factory Investigating Commission. Headed by Senate majority leader Robert F. Wagner and vice-chaired by Assembly leader Alfred E. (Al) Smith, the commission was given unusually broad powers and scope. Between October 10, 1911, and December 21, 1912, it held fifty-nine public hearings and took testimony from 472 witnesses, including several people connected with the Triangle fire. Its staff investigated 3,385 workplaces in twenty industries. Frances Perkins, a social worker and reformer who had witnessed the Triangle fire, joined the staff as an investigator and organized field trips for the commissioners to sites throughout the state. She later wrote:

*We made sure that Robert Wagner personally crawled through the tiny hole in the wall that gave egress to a steep iron ladder covered with ice and ending twelve feet from the ground which was euphemistically labeled "Fire Escape" in many factories. We saw to it that the austere legislative members of the Commission ... saw, with their own eyes, the little children—not adolescents but five, six and seven-year-olds—snipping beans and shelling peas.*

Horried by what they witnessed, Wagner and Smith used their political power to shepherd thirty-six

new laws through the legislature. These included stringent requirements for fire escapes, exits, and fire-proof partitions, fire alarms, and fire drills in factory buildings; set standards for proper ventilation, lighting, elevator operation, and sanitation in the workplace; required employers to safeguard workers from industrial accidents; and introduced special regulations to protect women and children in the workplace. In order to insure compliance with the laws, the New York State Department of Labor was reorganized and the number of inspectors was doubled. Moreover, the Labor Department was given the power to enact new regulations on the recommendation of a five-member Industrial Board.<sup>53</sup> Finally, on the recommendation of the Investigating Commission, the New York City Building Code was revised in 1915-16.<sup>54</sup> For the first time in the United States, limits were set on the occupancy of buildings based on the means of emergency egress. The revised code also provided increased protection for workers and required that older buildings being used as factories be retrofitted to meet the new standards. The Buildings Department's powers were enlarged, giving it the right to inspect premises, to order repairs, and to impose fines. The New York City and New York State regulations were the most advanced and comprehensive in the country. They served as models for other state and local ordinances and for the federal labor legislation of the New Deal era, notably the federal minimum wage law and the National Labor Relations Act.<sup>55</sup> The latter bears the name of Senator Robert Wagner, who had gone on from state office to become a U.S. Senator and served as legislative whip for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Frances Perkins became the first woman to hold a cabinet post when she was appointed Secretary of Labor by Roosevelt. Years later she observed that "the stirring up of the public conscience and the act of the people in penitence [for the Triangle fire] brought about not only these laws which make New York State to this day the best state in relation to factory laws; it was also that stirring of conscience which brought about in 1932 the introduction of a new element into the life of the whole United States."<sup>56</sup> For her, "the New Deal began on March 25, 1911, the day the Triangle factory burned."<sup>57</sup>

#### The Post-fire Years and New York University

The newspaper reporters who wrote about the Triangle fire were struck by how little apparent damage there was to the exterior of the Asch Building.<sup>58</sup> Almost immediately after the fire, Joseph Asch had Maynicke & Franke correct some of the defects that had contributed to the loss of life in the Triangle fire.<sup>59</sup>

These included making the Washington Place staircase accessible to the roof, adding a new fire escape that extended across the full width of the light court, removing the iron shutters from the courtyard windows and installing wire glass windows in place of the old windows, and constructing two large water tanks on the roof. The following year a sprinkler system was installed. After the repairs were completed, the building was renamed the Greenwich Building. It continued to be used for manufacturing with stores on the first floor.

At the close of 1915, New York University, which needed additional space for its Washington Square campus but was locked into a long-term lease with the American Book Company, arranged to rent the eighth floor of the Greenwich Building.<sup>60</sup> In February 1916, the University's architect, William S. Gregory of Cady & Gregory, filed plans to install the University library and classrooms on the eighth floor of the Greenwich Building and connect it to the eighth floor of the NYU Main Building. Two years later, in December 1918, the University trustees voted to lease and remodel the ninth floor of the Greenwich Building, noting that the school would be paying \$5,000 a year in rent but would realize \$30,000 a year in additional fees. In February 1919, the university's School of Commerce took over the tenth floor. In April 1920, the Greenwich Building was sold to Washington-Bleecker Properties, Inc., a real estate corporation headed by Aaron Rabinowitz and Maurice Spear, both of Spear & Co.<sup>61</sup> According to an article in the *New York Times*, Rabinowitz "purchased the property with NYU in view" and "he assured the university corporation that the building would never be sold except to college or to some one [sic] friendly to it."<sup>62</sup> As NYU increased its enrollment at the Washington Square Campus in the early 1920s, it gradually took over more floors in both the Main Building at 100 Washington Square East and the Greenwich Building at 23-29 Washington Place, having the buildings joined at each story. By 1926, NYU had taken over all of the floors in the Greenwich Building. Among the alterations were enlargement of the building's Washington Place and Greene Street staircases. In 1929, the building contained "twenty-three offices, fifteen classrooms, fourteen large chemical and physics laboratories, fourteen other rooms for special research work, a battery room, X-ray room, and several photographic darkrooms."<sup>63</sup> The first floor was entirely occupied by the University cafeteria. The laboratories for chemistry in the Greenwich Building were considered the most extensive of any university's in the country.

In early 1929, Percy S. Straus, president of Macy's Department Store and head of New York University's Centennial Fund, approached realtor Frederick Brown to solicit a \$1,000 contribution. He came away with a promise that Brown would acquire the Greenwich Building on the university's behalf. Brown was a German-born immigrant who came to this country in the early 1900s, found work with a dry-goods firm in Lower Manhattan, then branched out into real estate. He was adept at identifying and assembling sites for redevelopment, although he usually left the redevelopment to builder-developers. Among the buildings erected on sites he assembled during the 1920s were Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue, the Sherry-Netherland and Savoy-Plaza Hotels, Lincoln Building, and Eldorado Apartments. Brown was a noted philanthropist who had made major donations to the Federation for the Support of Jewish Societies and the Hospital for Joint Diseases. He was also very active in the American Arbitration Association and received the Association's Gold Medal for promoting Commercial Peace in March 1930.

Brown purchased the Greenwich Building from Bleecker-Washington Properties, Inc., on February 28, 1929. The same day, he and his wife signed the building over to New York University.<sup>64</sup> The gift saved the university \$92,000 per year in rent, the yearly income from approximately \$2,000,000 in its endowment fund. At the suggestion of Percy Straus, the building was renamed the Frederick Brown Building in the donor's honor. A ceremony was held in the University Council Room on April 22, 1929, to mark the presentation of the deed and unveil a bronze tablet commemorating the dedication that was installed in the building's lobby.

The Brown Building continued to serve as a classroom and laboratory building for NYU. During World War II, the eighth floor was also used for training for war needs, including instruction for public health nurses. At the close of the war, the university began a series of alterations to modernize the building including replacing the elevators. At that time, a penthouse research laboratory was constructed on part of the roof. The building also had extensive interior alterations in 1962 when some of the windows were blocked with louvers as a precaution against explosion. The building was again renovated in the early 1970s as a center for the life sciences through a grant from the Charles Hayden Foundation. It continues to house the university's chemistry and biology departments.

In 1961, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Triangle fire, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' installed a plaque dedicated to the memory of



the fire victims on the corner pier at the intersection of Washington Place and Greene Streets. The dedication was attended by elderly survivors of the fire including Pauline Newman, who became the first woman organizer for the ILGWU, and Rose Schneiderman, who led the commemorative funeral procession after the fire and later became president of the WTUL. Also present were Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, ILGWU President David Dubinsky, and New York City Fire Commissioner Edward F. Cavanaugh, Jr. Since then, the ILGWU (and later UNITE, the union resulting from the merger of the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers) and the New York City Fire Department have continued to mark the anniversary of the Triangle fire with a memorial ceremony in front of the building. In 1991, the National Park Service designated the "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Building (Asch Building)," now the Brown Building, as a National Historic Landmark.

#### Description<sup>65</sup>

The Brown Building is located on a rectangular lot that extends 101 feet along Washington Place and 100 feet along Greene Street. The ten-story plus penthouse building occupies almost the entire site except for a narrow L-shaped light court that runs along part of the west and north sides of the lot. A steel-framed structure, the Brown Building has a granite and limestone base and tan brick upper stories enriched with terra-cotta detailing. The design of this neo-Renaissance style building employs a tripartite arrangement of stories with a two-story base, a seven-story mid-section, and a one-story top. The Washington Place facade is organized into twelve bays with windows grouped in a 3-1-2-2-1-3 pattern between heavy piers. On Greene Street the similarly decorated but somewhat less elaborate facade is arranged into a 3-1-1-1-1-3 pattern. Original cast iron mullions survive at the second story and in the center bays at the third through ninth stories of the Washington Place facade. All of the original double-hung wood window sash and frames were replaced before 1930 with galvanized-steel sash and frames. About sixty percent of these windows have been replaced with aluminum sash and their frames and brick molds have been covered with aluminum panning. In some openings non-historic metal louvers have been installed in place of windows. The second-story windows retain their historic wood vertical-pivoting single lights, except where louvers have been installed on the Washington Place facade. On both Washington Place and Greene Street, the entrances

retain their original decorative terra-cotta and masonry surrounds and cast iron mullions and transom bars but the infill in the entrance bays is non-historic. All of the original cast-iron storefronts have been removed and replaced with non-historic infill. On the easternmost pier of the Washington Place facade, two bronze plaques commemorate the building's historic significance as the site of the Triangle fire.

Constructed in 1946-47, the stucco-covered masonry penthouse is set back from the roofline. The rooftop mechanical systems occupy most of the available space on the roof, with some equipment projecting up to thirty-five feet above the building. The exhaust ducts at the southwest and northeast corners of the roof are visible from across the street but the addition is screened from view by the prominent galvanized-iron crowning cornice above the tenth story. The penthouses, mechanical equipment, and the many metal exhaust ducts on the roof are highly visible from the east, south, and southwest from about a block away.

**Washington Place facade.** The two-story base is articulated by five massive piers that are treated as banded pilasters. These rest on high bases with polished granite facings, have shafts composed of painted limestone blocks and recessed polished granite bands, and are capped by terra-cotta capitals enriched with fleurs-de-lis and egg-and-dart moldings. The easternmost pier has a bronze plaque on the second large block from the National Park Service and a plaque from the ILGWU on third large block. [See photo for text].

The wide entrance is set off by rectangular enframing that is enriched with bead-and-reel and egg-and-dart moldings and capped by a swagged frieze and a terra-cotta cornice resting on scroll brackets. Raised metal letters on the frieze above the door read "NEW YORK UNIVERSITY." The entrance retains its original cast iron piers, which are arranged to create a wide central doorway and narrower side lights, all topped by cast-iron transom bars. The metal-and-glass double-doors in the entry are non-historic. The sidelights retain their original paneled cast-iron bulkheads. The original glazing in the sidelights has been replaced by non-historic tile and glass blocks. The transoms contain non-historic corrugated metal panels. The center panel has raised metal lettering that reads "BROWN BUILDING, BIOLOGY, CHEMISTRY, 29."

The storefront openings between the piers have non-historic polished granite bulkheads and louvered metal panels installed in 1947; the tile-and-glass-block

infill above was installed in the 1970s. The signboard over the storefronts is non-historic; it is not known whether the original cast iron lintels are preserved beneath it. Raised metal letters near the east end of the signboard read "BROWN BUILDING, BIOLOGY, CHEMISTRY."

On the second story each of the four major bays is divided into three window bays by cast-iron mullions. The windows retain their original molded frames and have historic single-pane vertical-pivoting wood sash in all but the second triplet group of windows (reading west to east), where the windows have been replaced by louvers. Non-historic light fixtures have been installed on all five piers at the second story level. The terra-cotta frieze capping the second-story windows has numerous cracks that have been repaired with dark mortar. The terra-cotta cornice above the frieze is ornamented with a fret pattern.

The third story is articulated as a transitional story between the base and mid-section. The corner pavilions are enriched with banded rustication and by terra-cotta cartouches. The joints and cracks in the frieze above the third story windows have been patched with dark mortar. The cornice above the third story is ornamented with a leaf-and-dart molding and paterae. The windows in the center bays are separated by fluted Corinthian cast iron columns. All of the windows on this story contain non-historic one-over-one sash. The second and third window bays (reading west to east) have metal louvers.

From the fourth to the ninth stories the tan brick facade is accented by stone sill and lintel courses. In the pavilions the spandrels beneath the windows are ornamented with recessed brick panels which are bordered by terra-cotta egg-and-dart moldings. This decorative motif is also employed in the center bays on the spandrels between the fifth and sixth and seventh and eighth stories. The windows in the center bays are separated by fluted Corinthian cast iron columns. Most of the windows on this story contain non-historic one-over-one sash. Metal louvers have been inserted into window openings in the second and third window bays (reading west to east) at the third and fourth stories and the third and fourth bays at the fifth story. In addition, the upper portions of the windows in the third and fourth bays, and the entire window in the fourth bay at the ninth story contain metal louvers. Capping the mid-section is a full entablature with paired scrolled brackets accenting the pavilions at the ninth-story.

The tenth-story arcades are set off by molded archivolts and bracketed keystones with fluted Ionic

pilasters and recessed spandrels edged with egg-and-dart moldings further enriching the outer bays. The window openings retain their historic metal brick molds but the windows have been replaced with non-historic one-over-one aluminum sash. Bays one to three (reading east to west) contain louvered metal panels. The tenth story is surmounted by a strongly projecting bracketed galvanized-iron crowning cornice. The eleventh story penthouse and ducts are visible from Greene Street. The penthouse walls are supported by masonry buttresses. It is lit by rectangular windows and has a flat roof that is edged by a metal railing. There are numerous metal flues on the roof that are related to the scientific functions of the building. A number of high chimneys braced by a metal framework are located on a small penthouse near the western end of the facade and are visible from Washington Place.

**Greene Street facade.** The design of the Greene Street facade is similar to that of the Washington Place facade except that the middle section is treated as a series of single bays and the detailing is somewhat simpler. At the base, the facade is articulated by seven massive piers. The two piers at either end of the facade match the piers on Washington Place; the piers in middle of the facade are brick. All of the piers have non-historic light fixtures at the second story level. The entrance in the northernmost bay employs the same rectangular framing device as the Washington Place entry but has simpler moldings and lacks the swag motif on the frieze over the door. The entry retains its original iron piers and transom bars. The double doors and metal frieze in the center bay and the tile-and-glass-block infill in the sidelights and the metal panels in the transom are non-historic. There is a non-historic metal alarm box on the metal panel over the door. The original transoms are enclosed with corrugated metal panels. The middle bay over the entry has raised metal numbers reading "245." The storefront bays contain non-historic bulkheads and window infill that match the elements used on the Washington Place facade. The signboard over the storefronts is non-historic; it is not known whether the original cast iron lintels are preserved beneath it. Raised metal letters near the south end of the signboard read "BROWN BUILDING, BIOLOGY, CHEMISTRY." The second story window openings retain their original molded frames and have historic single-pane vertical-pivoting wood sash. There is a non-historic flagpole with an NYU banner projecting from the frieze above the second-story windows on the north pavilion. The

terra-cotta frieze capping the second-story windows has numerous cracks that have been repaired with dark mortar. The terra-cotta cornice above the frieze is ornamented with a fret pattern.

The decorative detailing of the end bays on the third through ninth floors is identical to that of the Washington Place facade. As on Washington Place the terra-cotta frieze above the third story in the pavilions has numerous cracks and visible joints which have been patched with dark mortar. In the middle bays, there is strong vertical emphasis due to the use of projecting piers and elimination of the cornice over the third-story windows. The third story windows are emphasized by scrolled brackets. Almost all of the windows on the mid-section have non-historic one-over-one aluminum sash except for the windows in the ninth and tenth bays of the fourth and sixth stories, the tenth bay of the fifth story, and the ninth bay of the ninth story (reading south to north) where the windows

have been sealed with brick infill. The upper half of the window in the fifth bay of the seventh story has been replaced by a louvered vent. A limited number of smaller louvered vents have been installed in various windows including the third, fourth, and eighth bays at the sixth story.

The articulation of the tenth story is identical to that of the Washington Place facade except that the piers between the arched bays in central section of facade are articulated with pilasters. All of the tenth-story windows have non-historic one-over-one aluminum sash.

Report prepared by  
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#### Notes

1. This section on the redevelopment of NoHo is based on "The New Mercantile District," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, October 25, 1890, p. 6.
2. Because most of the side streets only extended for a few blocks, they had relatively little traffic, making it more convenient for warehousemen to load and unload goods than on Broadway. While the *Record & Guide* observed that the signs of these firms would not be seen by as many people as on the main thoroughfare, it argued that wholesale houses did not "need such displays and the change is in nearly every other way advantageous." "The New Mercantile District," p. 6.
3. Contemporary sources credit Zucker, who was just then establishing his own architectural practice in New York, with selecting the site and convincing Cohnfeld to risk erecting a commercial building in a residential area. For this building see "The New Mercantile District," pp. 6-7.
4. Designed in the fashionable styles of the day (primarily the Richardsonian Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles) and equipped with modern improvements such as passenger and freight elevators, steam heat, sanitary plumbing, and electric lights, these buildings were regarded as vastly superior to the five-story store-and-loft buildings that had gone up in SoHo and on Broadway in the preceding decade. According to the *Record & Guide*, "there was a cheerful appearance about the new buildings, that made them attractive to customers." "The New Mercantile District," p. 13.
5. Ibid, p. 24. For a discussion of fireproofing in buildings of this period see Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condit, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1864-1913* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 139-142, 160-162; *Record and Guide, A History of Real Estate, Building & Architecture in New York* (1898; rpt. New York: Arno, 1967), 377-390.
6. Louis Sullivan's Bayard-Condict Building, 65-67 Bleecker Street, 1897-99, a designated New York City Landmark, was one of the loft buildings constructed during this development phase.
7. New York University chancellor Henry McKracken believed that the growth of commerce in the Washington Square area was antithetical to the advancement of education and that the undergraduate divisions of the school

- should be moved to an undeveloped area within easy reach of Washington Square. For the New York University Main Building see Sarah Bradford Landau, "Greek and Gothic Side by Side," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 79-81; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Gould Memorial Library Designation Report*, prepared by Andrew Dolkart (LP-1087) (New York: City of New York, 1981).
8. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 2340, p. 360; Liber 2364, p. 216.
  9. Conveyances Liber, Sec. 2, Liber 50, p. 221. For this house see Denis Donoghue, "The Jamesian House of Fiction," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, 302-07.
  10. Conveyances Liber, Sec. 2, Liber 63, p. 311; "Conveyances," *Record & Guide*, November 12, 1898, p. 712.
  11. New legislation adopted in 1899 limited lot coverage on mid-block sites making it extremely important for Asch to acquire the corner lot. On these changes to the building law see Landau and Condit, p. 188.
  12. Conveyances Liber, Sec 2, Liber 72, p. 181.
  13. New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building Docket, 1024-1899, listed in "Projected Buildings," *Record & Guide*, July 15, 1899, p. 102. John Woolley was born in Red Bank, New Jersey, and educated in New York City. He established an architectural practice in New York by 1892. Woolley's work is represented by two neo-Renaissance style apartment buildings in the Riverside-West End Historic District, by store-and-loft buildings in the Tribeca North and Greenwich Village Historic Districts, and by the neo-Federal 15 Sheridan Square apartment building in the Greenwich Village Historic District, for which he was architect-developer.
  14. Conveyances Liber, Sec.2, Liber 72, p. 494; "Conveyances," *Record & Guide*, December 2, 1899, p. 849.
  15. Conveyances Liber, Sec. 2, Liber 75, p. 120; "In the Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, December 28, 1899, 10.
  16. New Building Application [NB] 382-1899.
  17. Conveyances Liber, Sec. 2, Liber 80, p. 33.
  18. NB 382-1900 in the New York City, Department of Buildings, Block and Lot folder, Block 547, lot 8, at the New York City Municipal Archives. On the construction of the Asch Building see also Sara Wermeil, "Building Codes and Life Safety," *Building Renovation* (Winter 1994), 43-46; Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott, 1962), 22-29.
  19. NB 382-1900.
  20. Ibid.
  21. Franke signed the amendments which appeared under Maynicke's letterhead in July, 1900. In 1901, when Franke was working independently, but still in some way associated with Maynicke, Asch commissioned Franke to alter the basement and ground story of the Asch Building for its first tenant. See NB 382-1900 and Alteration Application [Alt] 2460-1901.
  22. The cover sheet for the New Building application indicates that several drawings were submitted in late June. While it is conceivable that Franke may have modified Woolley's design for the exterior of the building, it seems likely that the new firm would have changed as little as possible in order to keep costs low.
  23. This section on the growth of the ready-to-wear industry is based on Roger D. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 50-54; Florence S. Richards, *The Ready-to-Wear Industry: 1900-1950* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1951), 7-13; Nancy L. Green, "Sweatshop Migrations: The Garment Industry Between Home and Shop," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City 1900-1940*, eds. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 213-215, 220-221; Stein, 159-162; Robert D. Parmet, "Garments," *Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant*



*Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 242-248; Frances B. Jensen, *The Triangle Fire and the Limits of Progressivism*, (Ph. D. diss., Univ. of Mass., Amherst, 1996), (UMI, 9638974), 14-37. The author wishes to thank Erin Rulli of Higgins & Quasebarth for informing her that a copy of Jensen's dissertation is available at the Tamiment Institute Library, Bobst Library, New York University.

24. Waldinger, 51.
25. The contractor system was especially well-suited to periods of high immigration since the contractor was usually an immigrant who recruited newly-arrived workers from his hometown. This eliminated the language-barrier. Also, personal connections made it easier for the contractor to retain his labor force during the garment industry's seasonal fluctuations. The increasing division of labor during this period made it possible for contractors to hire relatively unskilled workers, who with close supervision could be taught to produce clothing quickly and accurately.
26. Waldinger, 52.
27. Tenement home work was especially criticized as potentially hazardous to both consumers, who might be exposed to vermin and contagion through garments manufactured in tenement apartments, and to workers, who might expose themselves and their families to foul air and dangerous conditions in their apartment-workshops.
28. This section on the Triangle Waist Company is primarily based on Jensen, 49-53; Stein 158-165. Cornell University's Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives and UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, have a website on the Triangle factory and fire which contains much primary material. See <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>. See also the vertical files on the garment industry and the Triangle factory fire at the Tamiment Library.
29. Although a number of sources give 1901 as the date for founding of the Triangle Waist Company, Triangle was the first firm in New York County to register its trade name when it became legally possible in 1900. New York County, Office of the County Clerk, Records Division, 60 Centre Street, Trade Names file 00001-1900.
30. Conveyances, Sec. 2, Liber 92, p. 346.
31. Jensen, 49.
32. This section on the Shirtwaistmakers' strike is based on Stein, 163-168; Jensen, 99-141; Deborah Bernhardt, "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Site is NHL," <http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/17-1/17>; Joan Dash, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1996); Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1982), 133-151; Susan Lehrer, *Origins of Protective Labor Legislation for Women* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1987), 148-150; Philip Kahn, Jr., *A Stitch in Time: The Four Seasons of Baltimore's Needle Trades* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1989), 122-123.
33. The United Hebrew Trades Association was a labor organization that had provided crucial support to the Rosen Brothers strikers.
34. Concurrent with the strike at Triangle was a strike at the Leiserson shirtwaist factory on East 17<sup>th</sup> Street where 150 women walked off the job protesting inadequate pay and physical brutality by one of the foremen.
35. This section on the WTUL is based on Lehrer, 115-118; Dash, 37-51; Annelise Orleck, "New York Women's Trade Union League," *Encyclopedia of New York*, 849-50.
36. Lehrer, 118.
37. This section on the Triangle fire is based on Stein, 30-72; Jensen, 144-145; Richard A. Greenwald, "The Burning Building at 23 Washington Place: The Triangle Fire, Workers and Reformers in Progressive Era New York," *New York History*, 83 (Winter 2002), 55-91; Zachary Kent, *The Story of the Triangle Fire* (Chicago: Children's Press, 1989); "The Asch Building Fire, March 25, 1911," <http://www.nycfiremuseum.org/inner/history/asch-building.htm>;

Robert W. Whalen, "The Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: Tragedy and Meaning in Sweatshop New York," paper presented at the Gotham History Festival, New York, NY October 5-11, 2001, text available at <http://www.gothamcenter.org/festival/2001/confpapers/whalen.pdf>.

38. It seems likely that there was as much as a ton of fabric remnants stored on the eighth floor awaiting pick up by a scrap cloth dealer.
39. Rose Glantz, quoted in Stein, 54.
40. Probably the door was locked to ensure that the employees exited on the Greene Street side of the building, where they were required to present their bags for inspection. Some former employees claimed that the doors were locked to keep union organizers out of the factory.
41. Stein, 15.
42. "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire," *New York Times*, March 26, 1911, p. 1.
43. Although the number of fire victims is usually given as 146, some historians attributed 147 deaths to the fire, and more recently some scholars have suggested that there might have been as many as 155 victims. At Cornell's Kheel Center, historians have compiled a list of victims based primarily on the accounts of the fire in Stein and the *New York Times*, but they do not consider it final and solicit additional information. See Whalen, 21 and <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>.
44. On this period of public mourning and the funeral procession see Greenwald, 64-67, 75-79; Stein, 134-157.
45. Stein, 135.
46. On the trial and its outcome see Jensen 148-150, 169; Greenwald, 87-88; Stein 177-203; Bertha Rembaugh, "The Triangle Fire: The Court's Decision," *Life and Labor*, 2 (April 1912), 117-119; "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial: Building and Safety Laws: New York State Labor Laws (Article 6, Section 80)," <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglecodes.html>.
47. For the ILGWU's efforts to help its members see Greenwald, 68-70.
48. For these events see Jensen, 169, 181-185; Foner, 169-170.
49. Foner, 181.
50. For the 1913 garment workers strikes see Foner, 181-183; Jensen, 182-185.
51. Foner, 182.
52. This section on the legislative reforms growing out of the Triangle fire is based on Jensen, 186-228; US Dept. of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, History, 7, "The New York Factory Investigating Commission," [www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history](http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history); New York State Archives, Research Room, Business and Labor Record, Working Lives, "A History of the Factory Investigating Commission," [www.Archives.nysed.gov/a/researchroom/IT](http://www.Archives.nysed.gov/a/researchroom/IT).
53. In 1919 the Industrial Board was replaced by the Industrial Commission which was given authority to administer the labor law and establish a statewide workman's compensation fund.
54. New York City, *Code of Ordinances, Chapter 5, Building Code* (New York: City of New York, 1916); Wermeil, 46.
55. Although New York State failed to enact a minimum wage law, the data gathered by the Factory Investigating Commission and the experience gained by its proponents were vital to the successful passage of the federal standard. See Thomas J. Kerr, "The New York Factory Investigating Commission and the Minimum Wage Movement," *Labor History*, 12, no. 3 (1971), 373-91.

56. Stein, 212.
57. Frances Perkins, quoted in Ric Burns and James Sanders, *New York: The Power and the People*, Episode 4 (Documentary Film: Steeplechase Films, Warner Home Video, 1999).
58. "141 Girls Die," p. 1.
59. For these changes see Alt 1157-1911, Alt 529-1912
60. This section is based on the "Frederick Brown Building, Washington Square," Building Collection file, 5-1, NYU 1, series 10 in the New York University Archives, Bobst Library; Alt 534-1916; Alt 2792-1917; Alt 2915-1921; Alt 1424-1924; Alt 937-1925; Alt 1602-1926; Alt 1303-1928; Alt 1338-1929; Alt 1140-1942; Alt 54-1944; Alt 1316-1945; Alt 1406-1947; Alt 460-1948; Alt 677-1948; Alt 1352-1960; Alt 342-1962; "Browns Give N.Y.U. A \$700,000 Building," *New York Times*, February 11, 1929, p. 23.
61. The Arrow Holding Company purchased the building from Joseph Asch on April 27, 1920 (Conveyances Liber 3148, p. 279) and sold it to Bleeker-Washington Properties on May 1, 1920 (Conveyances Liber 3147, p. 403).
62. "Browns Give NYU," p. 23.
63. Ibid.
64. When Brown purchased the building from Bleeker-Washington Properties, it was already subject to a mortgage for \$280,000. He borrowed an additional \$120,000 on the day he acquired the building. He transferred it to the university subject to the outstanding mortgages, with the understanding that he would make the payments. By early 1932, he was in financial difficulties, and the university was forced to refinance the mortgages from its funds. Apparently, he never resumed payments. See the Brown Building file at the NYU archives; Conveyances Liber 3686, pp. 453, 455; Mortgages Liber 3953, pp. 207, 214; Mortgages Liber 3958, p. 62; Mortgages Liber 3961, p. 311; Mortgages Liber 4117, p. 457.
65. On the building's present appearance and alteration history see Higgins & Quasebarth, "The Brown Building, New York University, New York City: Historic Background Report," prepared by Erin Rulli, March 2003; United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Registration Form*, prepared by Page Putnam Miller, 1989.

## 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 Brown Building (originally Asch Building) has a special character and a 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 Brown Building (originally Asch Building), a loft building constructed for Joseph J. Asch in 1900-01 which housed the Triangle shirtwaist factory on its top three stories, is significant for women's and labor history as the site of the Shirtwaistmaker's Strike of 1909, the first large-scale strike of women workers in the country, and the Triangle Fire of 1911, one of the worst industrial disasters in American history; that it is a reminder of the period at the beginning of the twentieth century when the garment industry was the largest employer in New York City, with the shirtwaist, a high-necked blouse, one of its most popular products; that working conditions at the Triangle Waist Company, the largest manufacturer of shirtwaists in the city, were typical of most garment industry shops during this period, with horrible working conditions and numerous fire hazards; that when workers tried to organize to combat these conditions, Triangle fired 150 union sympathizers in the autumn of 1909, leading to a thirteen-week general strike by approximately 20,000 shirtwaist workers, 4/5 of them women, in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore; that on March 25, 1911, when a fire erupted on the eighth floor of the Triangle factory and spread to the floors above, locked doors and inadequate fire escapes contributed to the deaths of 146 workers, many of whom leapt to their deaths; that this tragedy stunned the nation and became a catalyst for a broad range of reforms; that over the next few years, New York City and New York State adopted a battery of new laws to protect the public from fires and ensure the health and safety of workers; that the new laws were the most advanced and comprehensive in the country and served as models for other state and local ordinances and for the federal labor legislation of the New Deal era; that, after the fire, the building's neo-Renaissance facade remained largely intact; that New York University began leasing the building's eighth floor in 1916, eventually occupying the entire structure, and that for over eighty years it has served as an academic facility for the university.

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 Brown Building (originally Asch Building), 23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 547, Lot 8, as its Landmark Site.





Brown Building (originally Asch Building)  
23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan,  
View from the southeast showing the Washington Place and Greene Street facades  
Photo: Carl Forster



Brown Building (originally Asch Building)  
23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan,  
View from the southeast showing the Washington Place facade

Photo: Carl Forster



Greene Street facade  
Photo: Carl Forster



Decorative detailing, sixth to tenth stories  
Photo: Carl Forster





Details of the Washington Place entrance and tenth-story arcade and crowning cornice  
 Photos: Carl Forster



Details of the second and third stories and Greene Street entrance  
Photos: Carl Forster



Commemorative plaques at the east corner of the Washington Place facade  
Photos: Carl Forster

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Brown Building (originally Asch Building)  
 23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan,  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 547, Lot 8  
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map



Maps No. 107, 158, 223, 237, 310, 311, 351, 405, 424 & 464

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Brown Building (originally Asch Building)  
23-29 Washington Place (aka 245 Greene Street), Manhattan  
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 547, Lot 8  
Source: *Sanborn Manhattan Landbook*, 2001