

**CORBIN BUILDING**, 11 John Street (aka 1-13 John Street; 192 Broadway), Manhattan.  
Built 1888-89; Francis H. Kimball, architect

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 79, Lot 15 in part, consisting of the land underneath the described building.

On May 12, 2015, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Corbin Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four speakers testified in favor of the designation, including a representative of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, representatives of the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and Citizens for Downtown. There were no speakers in opposition to the designation. The Commission also received a letter in support of designation from Council Member Margaret S. Chin.

### Summary

The Corbin Building is a remarkable example of a transitional skyscraper building, constructed in 1888-89, during a time of tremendous growth and change in Lower Manhattan. When it was built, the eight-and-nine-story Corbin Building was considerably taller than most of its neighbors. It was constructed with cast-iron beams and bearing masonry walls, preceding the development of the full steel frame that enabled structures to rise significantly higher. The Corbin Building was designed by Francis H. Kimball, a prominent New York architect who pioneered early skyscraper development with the creation of “caisson” foundations and was notable for his innovative use of terra cotta. He is known for the design of numerous tall buildings in New York and elsewhere. Examples of his work include the Montauk Club (located within the Park Slope Historic District), the Empire Building, the Trinity and United States Realty Buildings, the J. W. Seligman & Company Building (all designated New York City Landmarks) and many others.

The Corbin Building was named for its owner, Austin Corbin, a wealthy businessman who founded banks and the Long Island Railroad and owned numerous properties in New York. The building is designed in an expressive Francois Premier style with brownstone and brick walls and round-arched openings ornamented with abundant Gothic details, primarily rendered in terra cotta. Projecting iron window bays with elaborate embossed designs are also prominent in the design, as are large window openings with continuous masonry piers between them. Kimball used a variety of styles on his many buildings, but often referred to the rationality of the French Gothic style that he was exposed to during the period he spent with William Burges in London. Many of his buildings display elements of Gothic styles, including skyscrapers as well as smaller structures.

The Corbin Building was built as a speculative office for rental as well as for housing Corbin’s bank and was located in the expanding business district of Lower Manhattan. The building remains substantially intact and is now part of the Fulton Transportation Center. Its ground level storefronts and entrances and its pyramidal tower roofs have been reconstructed as part of the recent renovations and restoration by the Metropolitan Transit Authority.



## BUILDING DESCRIPTION

### Description

The Corbin Building has a 20-foot-wide facade facing Broadway and extends for more than 162 feet along John Street. It is eight stories tall, with an extra story at the eastern and western ends and is slightly trapezoidal in plan. All windows have been replaced.

### **Broadway facade**

*Historic:* Nine stories facing Broadway; second-and-third story corner piers clad in alternating courses of Long Meadow brownstone and red English Rancorn stone; applied cast-iron ornament at top of third-story piers; fourth story and above clad in light-colored brick; elaborate terra-cotta window surrounds, sills and spandrel panels in upper stories; distinctive belt courses above first, second, third, fourth, and seventh stories; arcaded terra-cotta cornice above eighth story; narrow terra-cotta cornice above ninth story; cast-iron window surrounds and spandrel panels on second through fourth stories; windows paired or grouped with narrow piers and transom bars and projecting bays on second and third stories.

*Alterations:* Ground story recreated in sandstone with large entrance arch; metal-and-glass replacement door and surround with rounded, three-section transom set within arch; pyramidal roof replaced on tower section; cast iron painted; some terra cotta replaced in kind, all terra cotta painted.

### **John Street facade**

*Historic:* Cladding materials similar to Broadway facade; first bay on west and last bay on east have similar fenestration patterns to front facade with cast iron, projecting bays on second through third stories and terra-cotta surrounds on windows at floors above; end bays project slightly from rest of facade, creating idea of towers; eastern bay has original ornamented arch with wood and glass doors, transom, and side windows; and end bays have ninth story; second and third stories have smaller, paired windows with stone sills, transom bars and narrow piers; fourth story has paired windows with terra-cotta surrounds; triple-height windows with continuous terra-cotta surrounds, and cast-iron framing and spandrels at fifth, sixth and seventh stories; stone or terra-cotta string courses above first, third, fourth, and seventh stories; arcaded terra-cotta cornice above eighth story.

*Alterations:* Replacement stone entrance arches on western “tower” bay at John Street facade, same as on Broadway; between arches, ground story has replacement store windows with metal bulkheads and metal and glass fill above; two mid-building entrances with rounded metal marquees; cast iron painted as on Broadway façade; security cameras added at top of ground story.

### **Northern facade**

Part of western tower visible next to Fulton Center entrance; most of northern facade faced with brick and no openings; top two stories separated from base by terra-cotta belt courses; two windows on each of top two floors; windows have terra-cotta surrounds; large brick chimney projects between top story windows; pyramidal roof over towers (originally terra cotta) was rebuilt in metal; some terra cotta replaced and all terra cotta painted.

## SITE HISTORY

The Corbin building is located on Broadway, just north of the Wall Street financial section and just south of the Civic Center. Lower Manhattan developed as the city's commercial center at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as residential areas moved to more northerly locales. After the Civil War the economy thrived; growing and changing businesses needed larger facilities creating a great need for new construction. New, up-to-date structures would project a prosperous image to the public and thus lower Broadway was rebuilt with many new buildings.

The first passenger elevator was used in the Equitable Building on Broadway and Cedar Street (1868-70, Gilman & Kendall and George B. Post, demolished). Although this building was only seven-and-a-half stories tall, the use of the elevator convinced developers that the upper stories of a building could be as desirable as lower ones and that tall structures could be economically feasible. As elevator use became standard, other technological advances, including "fire-proof" construction and iron floor beams were also used. Complete metal framing advanced technologically and was more widely used, and builders were able to attain even greater heights. Taller buildings were particularly well-suited to the narrow building sites of Manhattan.

The new transitional "skyscraper" buildings that appeared on or near Park Row, across from City Hall in the 1870s and 80s were some of the earliest of this type and exhibited a variety of styles. Many were built for newspapers, due to the area's proximity to city government, and their often flamboyant facades served as useful advertisements for their products. Prominent examples from this period include The New York Times building (now Pace University, 41 Park Row, 1888-89, George B. Post), the American Tract Society Building (150 Nassau Street, 1894-95, R. H. Robertson), the Potter Building (139 Nassau Street, 1883-86, N. G. Starkweather), and Temple Court (5 Beekman Street, 1881-83, Silliman & Farnsworth), all designated New York City Landmarks.

The Corbin Building was part of this early group. Its nine stories towered over its three-and four-story neighbors. The building included a passenger elevator and iron floor beams but it also had masonry bearing walls, so it could not be classified as a true skyscraper. Its facade incorporated many of the flamboyant designs of this type of building, with multiple facing materials and an abundance of ornament and window openings.

### The Corbin Building

The Corbin Building is located on part of the substantial land holdings of the Collegiate Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of New York.<sup>1</sup> In 1869, the Ministers, Elders and Deacons of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the City of New York leased the lot on the northeast corner of Broadway and John Street to the North American Fire Insurance Company. This group defaulted in 1872 and the lease was then assigned to several different people. In 1881, while the lot was developed with four small brick buildings, the lease was acquired by Austin Corbin. Corbin signed a new 21-year lease with the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886, agreeing to pay \$18,000 rent each year.<sup>2</sup>

Austin Corbin (1827-96), a successful businessman, began his career in Davenport, Iowa where he was a partner in the banking firm Macklot & Corbin.<sup>3</sup> He organized the First National Bank of Davenport in 1863, after a national banking system had been established. Corbin then moved to New York City where he established Austin Corbin & Company (later renamed the Corbin Banking Company). After visiting Coney Island with his sick son in the early 1870s, Corbin decided that this area would be a good place for development. He conceived the idea of creating a resort with hotels to attract wealthy New Yorkers to the seaside. He built the Manhattan Beach and the Oriental Hotels in the late 1870s, along with the Manhattan Beach Amphitheater (1885, Francis H. Kimball), to provide visitors with varied entertainment. To improve transportation for resort

guests, Corbin purchased and upgraded several local railroads. Buying and coordinating a number of different lines, he eventually established the Long Island Railroad system.

Corbin's lease on the property at Broadway and John streets reflected the excellent climate for business growth in this area of the city. Once he had secured the lease for the Broadway property, Corbin determined to build a new office building for his banking firm with extra space for income producing tenants. He hired Francis H. Kimball for the design of the new structure.

#### Architect<sup>4</sup>

Francis Hatch Kimball (1845-1919) was born in Maine and learned about building construction when he was apprenticed to a builder at age 14. He joined the firm of Boston architect Louis P. Rogers in 1867 (later Rogers & Bryant) and served as supervising architect for their work in Hartford, Connecticut. Kimball was later appointed superintending architect for Trinity College, Hartford (1873-78) during which time he went to England to work with the English architect and theorist William Burges who designed the Trinity campus. Burges' High Victorian Gothic aesthetic and his interest in 13<sup>th</sup> century French Gothic architecture made a lasting impression on Kimball, as can be seen on many of the architect's later buildings. In 1879, Kimball moved to New York and formed a partnership with English-born architect Thomas Wisedell. They were active in theatre design and were responsible for the Moorish-style Casino Theater, 1400 Broadway (1881-82, demolished) and the Yonkers Opera House, among others. After Wisedell's death in 1884, Kimball practiced alone, designing many buildings in New York and elsewhere, including the Catholic Apostolic Church on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street, the neo-Gothic style Emanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn (both designated New York City Landmarks), the Venetian Gothic style Montauk Club (included in the Park Slope Historic District) and the Corbin Building. Many of these buildings were notable for their plentiful and well executed use of terra-cotta ornament. While working on the Fifth Avenue Theater (1891-92, demolished), Kimball created an early technique for caisson foundations that later developed into the standard foundation system for skyscraper construction. In 1892, Francis Kimball joined in partnership with George Kramer Thompson and fine terra-cotta work became a hallmark of their designs. The commissions of this firm included many tall office buildings in Lower Manhattan, including the Manhattan Life Insurance Company Building (64-66 Broadway, demolished) that is credited with being the first skyscraper with a full iron and steel frame set on pneumatic concrete caissons. Other projects of this firm were the Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion (1895-98), the Empire Building (1895-98), the Trinity and United States Realty Buildings (1904-7) and the J. & W. Seligman & Company Building (1906-7), all designated New York City Landmarks. Kimball's obituary in *The New York Times* called him "the father of the skyscraper"<sup>5</sup> due to his many technical innovations and his involvement with many early skyscrapers.

#### Terra Cotta<sup>6</sup>

Kimball became known for his use of terra cotta, following on his early work executed with Thomas Wisedell. He was noted for the fine effects he achieved, "at once agreeable and varied, and almost unattainable in any other material."<sup>7</sup> Terra cotta as a building material gained popularity in the 1870s in the United States for its unlimited possibilities for ornament at relatively low cost. Although this material had been used in Greek and Roman times, it had fallen out of favor until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was also promoted for its fireproofing qualities.

Terra cotta was first manufactured in the United States at the Chicago Terra Cotta Works in 1870. The demand for this fireproof material soared after the Chicago fire of 1871. This company supplied material for two buildings in New York, including the Morse Building at Nassau and Beekman Streets (1878, Silliman & Farnsworth, a designated New York City Landmark). In 1879 the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company was organized to create a more local supply source for the material. Other local manufacturing companies followed, including in 1886, the New York

Architectural Terra Cotta Company.<sup>8</sup> Their offices were established in the Potter Building, with a manufacturing facility in Long Island City, Queens.<sup>9</sup> Although this firm became a major source of architectural terra cotta, its use on the Corbin Building was one of the earliest commissions from this company.<sup>10</sup>

Terra cotta is burnt clay and it derives its particular color from the type of raw materials used, so that the results were different in different locales. Chicago terra cotta was usually grey, because of the limestone content of local soils. Terra cotta produced in the east became available in other colors, and the variety of colors became a design element demanded by local architects.<sup>11</sup> After mining, the clay was subjected to considerable processing, and finally was formed into the desired shapes by molds created after the architect's designs, allowing unlimited design possibilities. Compared to stone, terra cotta was lighter and easier to install, fine designs weathered better, and the material allowed for more varied and intricate designs.

Kimball had used terra cotta on his elaborate facade for the Casino Theater (demolished). Of Moorish design, this building showed how terra cotta could be used to create elaborate decoration at moderate cost. Other early works of Francis Kimball that show his ability to use terra cotta to enhance the design include the Catholic Apostolic Church on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street and the Montauk Club in Brooklyn.

### Architectural Style

The development of tall buildings was a challenge to architects during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as they searched for an "appropriate" style. Early efforts included extending the height of the Italianate *palazzo*, while still maintaining heavy horizontal divisions by way of strong cornices and belt courses. As buildings were made taller, this precedent was over-taken by the use of Gothic detailing, influenced by the vertical emphasis in Gothic cathedrals. As architects experimented with ever-taller buildings, they expanded their search for inspiration to a wider variety of historical styles.

By the 1880s, cage construction allowed the height of buildings to rise to nine and ten stories. This construction method was explained in the *Real Estate Record & Guide* as

a frame work of iron or steel columns and girders which carry the floors only, and do not carry the outer walls. In the cage construction the outer walls are independent walls, from the foundation to the extreme top, sustaining themselves only, and therefore, the walls are made less in thickness than if they had to bear the floors as in ordinary buildings such walls would have to do.<sup>12</sup>

The Corbin Building was constructed during this period of experimentation and change in the development of the skyscraper, seen in the variety of building styles and construction techniques in lower Manhattan. Francis Kimball was in the forefront of this development. The Corbin Building was one of his earlier efforts in this area, and shows the ways talented architects were learning to accommodate these new technologies. The Corbin Building was built with cage construction, as described above. It has cast-iron columns and wrought-iron beams, as well as concrete, brick, tile and terra cotta for additional structural support and fire-proofing. The building uses Guastavino arches on the floors, ceiling and roof to increase its fire-proof qualities. This system was invented by Spanish-immigrant Rafael Guastavino and patented in 1885. The Corbin Building was described as the first use of this system in the publication *Architectural Era*.<sup>13</sup> In addition to their fire-proof capabilities, these arches also spanned a greater distance than traditional vaulting, decreasing the need for beams and columns. The building's ground floor originally housed a bank, for which an open plan was provided through the use of girders connected to metal columns that ran from the roof to the ceiling of the first floor.<sup>14</sup>

The highly decorative facades of the Corbin Building, with their multi-colored materials and variety of textures are similar to the variety of colors and shapes used on some other nearby buildings such as the Potter Building and the Temple Court Building. These buildings were intended to be artistic rather than solely utilitarian, combining a variety of decorative features on the facades. The Corbin Building has a horizontal emphasis on its long, John Street Facade, reinforced by several layers of different facing material separated by strongly articulated belt courses. Its ground story is faced by dark, Long Meadow brownstone, with alternating bands of brownstone and red Rancorn stone from England on the second and third stories. Above this, the walls are clad in a tawny brick, highlighted by reddish-brown terra cotta arches, belt courses, cornices, parapets and other elements. The influence of Kimball's early and deep exposure to the Gothic style during his stay in England can be readily seen here on the richly decorative terra-cotta window surrounds, spandrels and applied ornament. These details include intricate foliate designs, stylized fish heads and ogee arches capped by bouquets. The iron spandrel panels between the floors are covered by flaming urns and rinceaux. The vertical grouping of iron-framed bay windows derives from the François Premier style, developed in France and commonly used on the chateaus of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Loire Valley. The windows are set deeply in the stone facade, with projecting piers and transom bars, suggesting highly fortified medieval structures.

The building received considerable praise when it was opened, including from Montgomery Schulyer in the *Architectural Record*.<sup>15</sup> He noted that the "work is of a very high interest." While he did not like the horizontal divisions created by the different materials and belt courses, he did think the two end towers were quite successful. Also,

The stonework is austere plain, except in the entrance at the rear to the upper stories...[T]he greater plasticity of terra cotta is fully recognized and taken advantage of in the detail of the upper stories... We can scarcely see elsewhere in New York, except in Mr. Kimball's own work, so idiomatic and characteristic a treatment of terra cotta on so elaborate a scale. The upper story in particular, with its groups of segmental arches, the paneled pilasters...the shell frieze and the rich incrustated panels of the parapet, constitutes a model of design in baked clay.

This unique and important building has survived for more than one hundred years as nearby buildings were replaced by much larger structures. It has recently become part of the Fulton Transportation Center of the Metropolitan Transit Authority and has been restored and rehabilitated.

Report researched and written by  
Virginia Kurshan  
Research Department

## *NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> This information comes from the National Register Nomination Form for the Corbin Building, prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart, 2003, np.

<sup>2</sup> New York County Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 1104, page 640.

<sup>3</sup> Information about Austin Corbin comes from the National Register Nomination, Narrative Statement of Significance.

<sup>4</sup> The information in this section comes from Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Trinity Building Designation Report (LP-1557)* (New York: City of New York, 1988), prepared by Elisa Urbanelli; LPC, *Empire Building Designation Report (LP-1933)* (New York: City of New York, 1996), prepared by Jay Shockley; “The Works of Francis H. Kimball,” *Architectural Record* 7 (April-June, 1898), 479- 518; Record and Guide, “Francis H. Kimball,” in *A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture* (New York: Arno Press, 1967) reprint of 1898 edition, 698-9; and the Research Files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

<sup>5</sup> “Francis H. Kimball Buried,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 29, 1919, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Information on the process of forming architectural terra cotta can be found in the designation report LPC, *New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building (LP-1304)*(New York: City of New York, 1982) and LPC, *Potter Building Designation Report (LP-1948)* (New York: City of New York, 1996), prepared by Jay Shockley.

<sup>7</sup> *History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City*, 518-25.

<sup>8</sup> This company was established by real estate developer Orlando B. Potter with his son-in-law Walter Geer. Potter built the Potter Building on Park Row in 1883-86 (N.G. Starkweather, a designated New York City Landmark) using terra cotta from the Boston Terra Cotta Company. See designation report above.

<sup>9</sup> Francis H. Kimball designed a two-story office building for this firm (1892) that is the only surviving structure from this company and is now a New York City Landmark.

<sup>10</sup> National Register Nomination, np. Because Kimball used so much terra cotta on his buildings, he received the commission to design the company’s headquarters building in Long Island City, Queens.

<sup>11</sup> *History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture*, 520-25.

<sup>12</sup> *History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture*, 465.

<sup>13</sup> “The Corbin Building,” *Architectural Era* 3 (October 1889), 224-25.

<sup>14</sup> National Register Nomination, Narrative Statement of Significance.

<sup>15</sup> “The Works of Francis H. Kimball,” *Architectural Record* 7 (April/June, 1898), 501-2.

## 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 Corbin Building has a special character, and 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 Corbin Building was constructed in 1888-89 as a speculative office building by Austin Corbin; that Corbin was a successful banker and businessman who had developed Coney Island as a resort area; that Corbin hired Francis H. Kimball, who had previously worked for him on the Coney Island Amphitheater, to design an artistic skyscraper in Lower Manhattan resulting in this early, transitional-style structure; that, at eight and nine stories high, the Corbin Building was the tallest structure on the block when it was first built; that it was constructed using the cage technique, with cast-iron columns and wrought-iron beams and non-load bearing masonry walls, before true steel skeleton structures had been developed; that the flamboyant exterior, composed of a variety of materials, window shapes and decorative ornament belongs to the category of early, artistic skyscrapers that were built in New York City in the 1870s and 80s; that the architect was instrumental in the development of the skyscraper in his creation of caisson foundations and such early skyscrapers as the Empire and the Trinity buildings; that Kimball was also noted for his early and fine use of terra cotta, used prodigiously in the Corbin Building on window surrounds and cornices; that the Corbin Building was one of the first to have terra cotta produced by the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company, founded in 1886 and a major producer of this product on New York buildings; that the colorful stone and brick facades, the embossed iron window frames and spandrels, and the richly detailed terra-cotta window surrounds combine in the Corbin Building to produce a unique structure that has served the Lower Manhattan business community for more than 100 years and continues today as part of the Fulton Transportation Center.

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 Corbin Building, 11 John Street (aka 1-13 John Street; 192 Broadway), Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 79, Lot 15 in part, consisting of the land underneath the described building as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

Frederick Bland, Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, John Gustafsson,

Adi Shamir-Baron, Kim Vauss, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



**Corbin Building**

Borough of Manhattan

Tax Map Block: 79, Tax Lot: 15

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building, Broadway (West) Elevation**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building**

*Historic Photo c. 1910*

*Source: Museum of the City of New York*

*Photo: Irving Underhill*



**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation** (entrance detail)  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation (details)**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation** (entrance detail)  
*Photo: Christopher D. Braze (2015)*



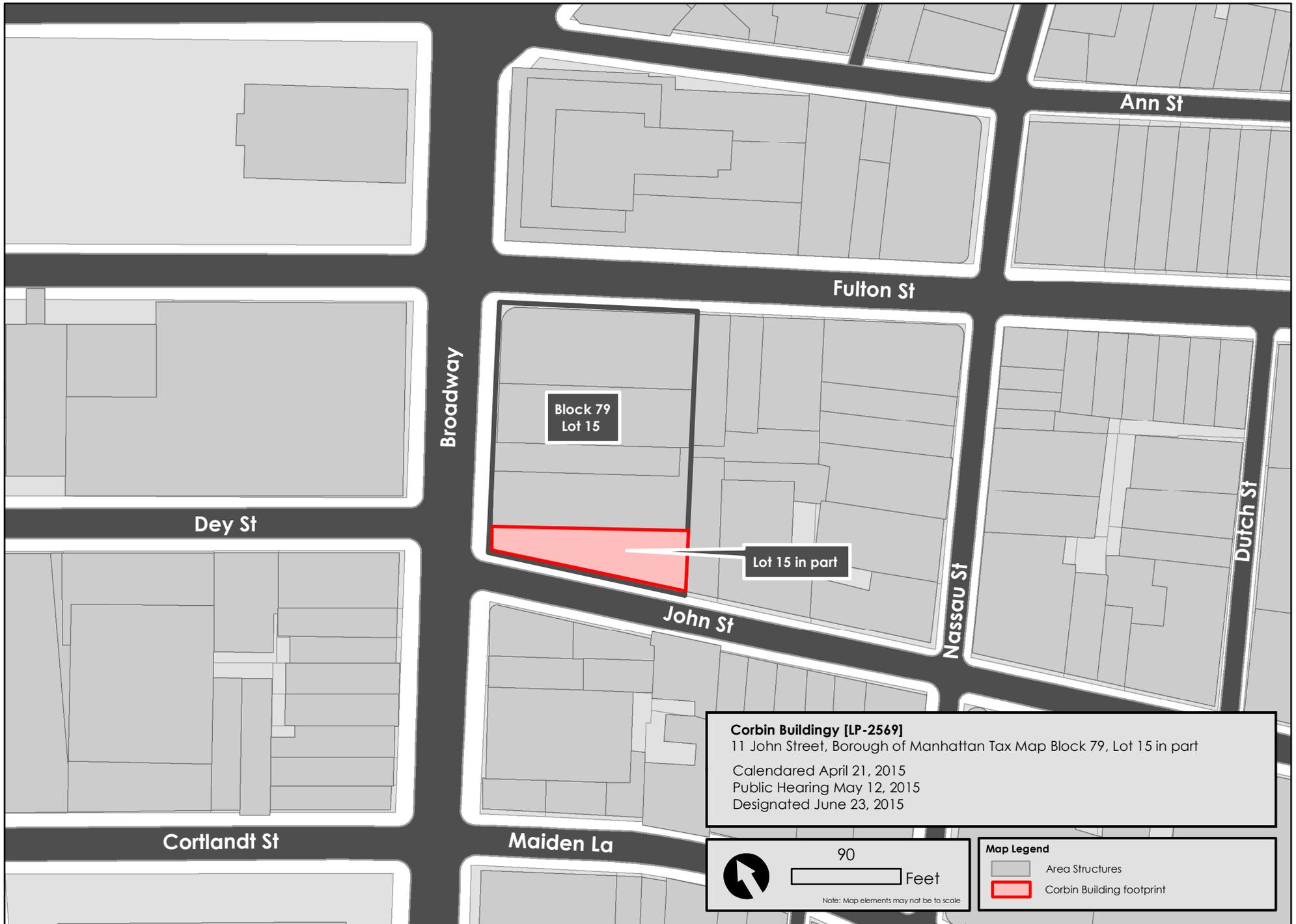
**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation (entrance detail)**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



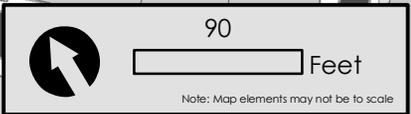
**Corbin Building, John Street (South) Elevation (looking west)**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building, Broadway (West) Elevation**  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2015)*



**Corbin Building [LP-2569]**  
11 John Street, Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 79, Lot 15 in part  
Calendared April 21, 2015  
Public Hearing May 12, 2015  
Designated June 23, 2015



**Map Legend**  
Area Structures  
Corbin Building footprint