DESIGNATION REPORT

29th Street Towers

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Designation Report
29th Street Towers
August 12, 2025

Designation List 546
LP-2689

DESIGNATION REPORT

29th Street Towers

LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan
214-226 West 29th Street

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

The 29th Street Towers is a pair of connected 14- and 16-story tall Gothic Revival-style commercial buildings with unique terra-cotta decoration designed by Henry I. Oser in 1925 for the fur trade in New York City's Garment Center.

214-226 West 29th Street
2025

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29th Street Towers

214-226 West 29th Street, Manhattan

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Built: 1925
Architect: Henry I. Oser

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 778, Lot 48 and Lot 52
Building Identification Number (BIN): 1014267, 1014268

Calendared: April 22, 2025
Public Hearing: May 20, 2025
Designated: August 12, 2025

On May 20, 2025, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 29th Street Towers as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Four people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, the Art Deco Society, and Save Chelsea. No one spoke in opposition.

Summary

29th Street Towers

The 29th Street Towers consists of a 16-story tower at 214 (aka 214-220) and 14-story tower at 224 (aka 222-226) West 29th Street separated by a four-story linking building. Built under the same New Building permit, the towers were designed in 1925 by Henry Oser for two developers, the 220 W. 29th Street Corp., owners of 214-220 West 29th Street, and the Muloft Builing Co., owners of 222-226 West 29th Street, as a mixed-use commercial and manufacturing building housing offices, showrooms, and factories above a commercial ground floor.

Executed in variegated pink and tan brick, the buildings feature an unusual arrangement of setbacks, which provide ample light for each floor. The verticality of each of the taller towers is highlighted by wide piers and narrower mullions topped at the various rooflines by Gothic Revival decoration executed in terra cotta with a mottled glaze, evoking a marble like appearance. The structures are tied together by the same mottled terra cotta cladding across the entire first story that frames the arched entrance at 214 West 29th Street and the historic iron storefronts.

The towers were constructed as part of the "Fur District" within the garment center, and the lofts quickly filled up with manufacturing and sales tenants. The towers speak to the history of the fur industry, with sculptural grotesques featured at the entrance of the building. In an alternating pattern, a man is holding a beaver, appearing to feed it, and in the next he appears to be inspecting its pelt. The beaver is an iconic symbol of both the fur trade and of New York City.

The architect of 29th Street Towers, Henry I. Oser (c. 1864-1935) was born in Kyiv, then part of Russia, and immigrated to the United States as a young man. He attended Columbia University, where he studied civil engineering. He began his career as an engineer with the New York City Department of Buildings (1911-18) and during World War I was an engineer for the housing division of the Emergency Fleet Corporation directing construction of housing for workers in the shipyards. Beginning in 1919, Oser turned to architecture. In addition to the 29th Street Towers, Oser's commissions for the garment industry included the Fur Craft Building, 242-246 West 30th Street (1925). Oser's work is also represented in the incredibly ornate neo-Gothic 191 Joralemon Street, within the designated Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District.

During the years between the wars, garment manufacturing, selling, and its related trades became New York's largest industry. The fur trade, a subset of the garment industry with somewhat more specialized production methods, was centered to the south of the established Garment Center. Between 1920 and 1929 as furriers moved their businesses to the Fur District, zoned for "unrestricted use," purpose-built fur buildings were constructed rapidly to house this labor-intensive industry which employed highly skilled fur designers and production workers, their sales and design staff, as well as their suppliers. With its distinctive brick and terra cotta design and animal-related architectural decoration that refers to the industry housed within it, the 29th Street Towers is a particularly fine example of the manufacturing and commercial buildings built to house the fur trade in Midtown.

Building Description

29th Street Towers

The 29th Street Towers stands mid-block on West 29th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Though constructed together, the buildings were designed as two separate towers, the eastern 16-story tower, and the western 14-story tower, connected by a four-story linking building. The gap between the towers above the fourth floor appears to have been primarily meant to allow light and air to interior manufacturing spaces of two distinct buildings with separate owners, typical of Garment Center streetscapes of the period, rather than being a specifically designed feature. The Gothic-inspired 29th Street Towers showcase the style through its terra cotta ornamentation and the variegated pink and tan brick used to blend seamlessly with the bold terra cotta punctuating the building's entrance, windows, and setbacks. The setbacks, mandated by the 1916 zoning, create five dramatic angular forms that vary in width, starting at the eighth floor.

Primary (North) Facade

The building's first story has a mottled glazed terra cotta with one central main entrance. The main entrance is an elaborate Gothic three-bay entrance. The eastern door on the main entrance has "29th Street Towers" written in black and white mosaic on the threshold and there is a granite water table. The dividing pillars feature an alternating pattern of grotesques below imposts. Arcading sits above the arches of the entrances, with shield-like forms set between each arch. Above the central entrance, branched grape ornamentation surrounds a shield and knight's head. The base of the terra cotta facade is trimmed in a branched grape foliate band. Paired storefronts flank the main entrance, separated by red marble-clad piers, framed in decorative wrought iron and topped with metal cresting. The western two storefronts are divided by a terra cotta pier.

Above the first story terra cotta screen, the second story is nine bays wide with a mottled terra cotta lintel. From the third to the 16th and 14th story of the towers, the bays are divided, and each bay contains three windows, each window features a mottled terra cotta sill. At the third story, terra cotta corbels sit below thin dividing piers within the bays that run up the facade; these piers terminate at each setback with colonettes at a mottled terra cotta cornice, which is decorated with shields and Gothic tracery. The bays themselves are separated by wide brick piers which run vertically up the facade and terminate at the setbacks with towers sitting atop an empty aedicule.

The first setback at the eighth floor consists of the middle four bays on the 16-story tower and only the eastern bay on the 14-story tower. The bays that do not set back terminate in a raised corner element one story above the setback. Each successive set-back sets-back at an angle with mottled terra cotta panels similar to those on the eighth floor.

The fourth story building linking the two towers is identical up to the fourth story, where the linking building terminates. The parapet is complete with mottled terra cotta, arcading, a large central shield, and corbels with shields where the outermost shields feature more ornamentation.

Alterations

Window and storefront alterations occurred between 2009 and 2011; historic doors replaced; historic windows over main entrance replaced; historic storefront replaced; historic western storefront covered with rolltop gate; historic storefront doors replaced; historic windows over storefronts replaced; freight entrance door replaced; historic windows over westernmost storefront and freight entrance replaced;

third story historic pivot-and plate-glass windows replaced; between 2013-2016 from 3rd story to 16th and 14th story historic three-over-three double-hung windows replaced; five banner holders added to facade on the third floor; lockbox on western side of storefront; keypad inside western storefront entrance; utility pipe at entrance with fire department sign; lockbox west of entrance; plaque at entrance below grotesque; utility pipes at eastern side of entrance; utility pipe at eastern lot line with fire department sign; speaker at door; plaque at eastern facade lot line; security camera with utility connection.

Secondary (East and West) Facades

The partially visible east facade is red brick behind the reveal. The historic fenestration pattern remains, and a projecting chimney separates the final two bays.

The west facade of the 16-story tower is executed in tan brick. The facade retains its historic fenestration pattern. At the back of the gap between the two towers, the fire tower, which connects the two buildings, is visible. The fire tower is executed in tan brick and has historic six-over-six double-hung windows and a balcony connecting the two buildings at the 14th story.

The eastern facade of the 14-story tower is executed in tan brick. There has been partial replacement of the brick behind the reveal with a lighter colored brick, and the facade retains its historic fenestration pattern.

The western facade of the 14-story tower is executed in red brick. There has been partial replacement of the brick behind the reveal with a lighter colored brick. The central bay is historic six-over-six double-hung windows and the non-historic windows are similar to those on the side facades of the 16-story tower, still retaining their historic fenestration. The back of the facade has a projecting chimney and visible setbacks.

Alterations

On all secondary facades, there has been partial replacement of brick; historic three-over-three double hung windows replaced.

Furs and Early New York[1]

Furs were central to the settlement of the Dutch colony of New Netherland and its principal city, New Amsterdam. By the early 1600s, furs were prized European luxury goods, with beaver pelts especially valued for their softness, water resistance, and purported medicinal properties.

Although muskrat, mink, otter, and wildcat skins were harvested in the Dutch colony, beaver pelts were so highly valued that they figured prominently in the seals of both New Netherland and New Amsterdam before later being incorporated into the seal of the City of New York.[2]

By the early 19th century, New York City had a sizeable wholesale fur market dominated by John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant who had come to control much of the country's western fur trade. Astor used his gains from this business to invest in Manhattan real estate, which would make him the world's richest person. By the late 19th century, the city's fur business was centered on Broadway and Bleecker Streets, with many supporting businesses located on Mercer, Broome, Greene, and other nearby streets in the present-day South Village and SoHo. During the 1910s, the industry would begin moving to the blocks south of Pennsylvania Station, between Sixth and Eighth Avenues, within the southern portion of the then-burgeoning Garment Center.

The Historical Development of the Garment Center[3]

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the area that would become the Garment Center was part of a broader terrain inhabited by Indigenous Peoples known as the Munsee that spanned the lower Hudson to upper Delaware river valleys, and an Indigenous trail ran between what would become Eighth and Ninth Avenues and approximately from 14th to 42nd Streets, ending in a stream that ran into the Hudson River.[4] Following the nominal "sale" of Manhattan to the Dutch in 1626 the colonists drove the Munsee from Manhattan by the end of the eighteenth century.[5] Much of this western section of Manhattan, which today is the area from 25th to 42nd Streets and between Sixth and Ninth Avenues, became farmland during the eighteenth century and remained so until the early nineteenth century.[6]

Between the 1830s and 1860s the city surged northward above 14th Street and developers constructed numerous relatively affordable rowhouses in Midtown West, followed after the Civil War by theaters and hotels and a burgeoning entertainment district.[7] By the 1870s, thriving extra-legal economies reshaped the side streets and avenues in the vicinity of the new theater and hotel district and the area between Fifth and Seventh Avenues from 23rd to 42nd Streets became known as the Tenderloin.[8] The Tenderloin gained a reputation as a place of drinking, gambling, sex work, and graft. However, day to day life in the district was more varied than the sensational depictions of vice that circulated in the popular media. There were neighborhood churches, various spaces of manual labor, including factories and breweries, and the residences of low-income New Yorkers who worked in various occupations, such as dressmakers, clerks, and carpenters.[9] African American, Irish, German, and other immigrant families lived throughout the district in the residential fabric of subdivided brick and brownstone row houses and tenements.[10]

In this period, the Tenderloin was home to a substantial working-class African American population – who were concentrated in the lower

West 30s around Seventh Avenue, but lived throughout the area – and it was also one of few places in the city that offered a chance of social mobility to African Americans through its vibrant music scene, including at 47-55 West 28th Street Buildings, Tin Pan Alley, designated New York City Landmarks.[11]

The block of the 29th Street Towers were home primarily to African Americans and European immigrants during 1910s and 1920s. The Macedonian Baptist Church, demolished to make way for the Towers, was an active and vibrant church up until the sale of the building to developers. After its sale, the pastor gave sermons at various churches across Harlem and the Bronx, before the congregation constructed a permanent church in Harlem.[12]

Real estate development and the reform efforts of middle- and upper-class white New Yorkers forced African Americans and other working-class residents to leave the neighborhood. In the early 1900s, the Tenderloin became the site of large-scale demolition to make way for the new Pennsylvania Station (1904-1910). The Pennsylvania Railroad Company chose the area in part because of the neighborhood's sensationalized reputation as a crime-ridden district of working-class residents that included a large Black population. As the historian Hilary Ballon put it, "marked by vice, by race, and by class, the Tenderloin was deemed expendable."[13]

Similarly, when garment industry leaders sought a new area for the Garment Center in the late 1910s, the stretch north from 25th to 42nd Streets and west from Sixth to Ninth Avenues was an efficient choice. Relatively cheap land and a working-class population with little political power to resist redevelopment made Midtown West an appealing candidate. By the 1920s, widespread demolition of rowhouses and tenements was underway and in their place was a landscape of showrooms, factories, and offices for the garment industry.

The Architectural Development of the Garment Center[14]

Nearly all the structures in what is known as the "Garment District" or "Garment Center" were built in a single decade, reflecting the success of the "Shall We Save New York?" movement, which opposed the presence of factories in the vicinity of the Fifth Avenue shopping district, as well as the subsequent passage of the 1916 zoning ordinance, which organized Manhattan into specific use districts.[15]

New York City's garment industry had originated south of Canal Street in the 1850s. Manufacturers of men's and women's clothing gradually moved north after the Civil War, occupying workspaces that were close to department and specialty stores that congregated near Union Square and Ladies' Mile. At the start of the 20th century, Fifth Avenue became an important commercial corridor. The first fashionable retailer to locate here was B. Altman & Company (a New York City Landmark), which opened at Fifth Avenue and 35th Street in 1906, followed by Lord & Taylor (1914, a New York City Landmark) and Arnold Constable & Company (1915).

At this time, factories began to simultaneously pack the area, crowding the avenue and adjacent streets with immigrant workers, particularly around lunchtime.[16] Bemoaned as a "factory invasion" and a "menace to trade," in March 1916 the Fifth Avenue Association placed advertisements in local newspapers asking: "Shall We Save New York?" Signed by merchants, banks and hotels, the campaign called for "cooperative action."[17]

Four months later, in July 1916, the Board of Estimate passed a "Building Zone Resolution" to regulate the height and bulk of new buildings

throughout New York City, as well as "the location of trades and industries and the location of buildings designed for specific uses."[18] The garment industry, which promised to leave the Fifth Avenue shopping corridor quickly, supported the districting scheme, anticipating lower rents and the convenience of consolidation.[19]

Plans to create a "permanent home" for the garment industry were announced in December 1919, and the first two structures were completed in 1921. Containing offices, showrooms and factory space, these fireproof, sprinkled lofts had flexible open floors with large windows, as well as distinct banks of elevators to separate freight and workers from management and buyers.[20] What followed was an extraordinary building boom. Approximately 100 building were erected in the West 30s over the next decade, peaking in 1924-25. Aside from a small group of low-rise structures that owners preserved to protect tenant views and light, the east-west blocks contain rows of 12 to 16-story setback structures, while the Broadway, Seventh and Eighth Avenues have towers that rise 20 or more stories.

The exterior cladding of most of the buildings was fairly conventional and uniform. Many have light-colored stone bases, with tan and beige brick elevations that incorporate complementary terra cotta or cast-stone details. The first wave of buildings displayed varied ornamentation, such as classical or medieval style, while the structures erected later in the decade lean toward stripped or "modern" Gothic and, finally, Art Deco.

New York's Fur District[21]

New York City's Fur District, bounded by West 25th and West 30th Streets, and by Sixth and Eighth Avenues, paralleled the development of the greater Garment Center.

During World War I, New York gained a substantial share of the fur market after disruptions to the London fur auction. As the war continued raging in Europe in 1916, the New York International Fur Market claimed "the largest raw fur market, the most successful raw fur merchants, the greatest number of raw fur dealers, the largest number of fur manufacturers."[22] The success of the fur markets proved the Fur Center was now rightfully in Manhattan.[23]

In July of 1917, the *New York Times* noted the recent movement of the fur industry to the blocks adjoining Seventh Avenue between West 23rd and 32nd Streets.[24] The rapid growth of New York's Fur District was fueled by aggressive rhetoric from trade groups like the New York Fur Sales Corporation, which proclaimed in 1920: "Let the fur merchants of America support New York … not to ennoble a city but to aggrandize an industry: to hold in the United States what naturally belongs here, the fur dominance of the world."[25]

About 85% of the country's fur garments were manufactured in the Fur District, which contained thousands of companies engaged in all aspects of the business, including importing and exporting, fur handling, pelt preparation, wholesaling, storage, and garment manufacture. New York's Fur District was so productive that it was said to be capable, within one week's notice of providing every person in America with a garment of fur. Processing 27 million pelts per year, the fur business was one of the city's largest industries.[26]

During the 1920s, the fur industry drew criticism. Chief among them were animal advocates, who were especially disturbed by its trapping practices. At the time, the overwhelming majority of animals used in fur garments were caught in steel traps that, advocates argued, essentially tortured them to death.[27] Although these cruelty charges apparently did little to reduce Americans' desire for furs, industry advocates felt compelled to respond to them with defenses of the business in both trade

publications and in the comprehensive 1921 historical overview *The Fur Trade of America*.[28] Animal advocates campaigned for a shift from fur trapping to farming, which would allow animals to be raised humanely and killed without pain.[29] As humane advocates scorned the industry's trapping practices, conservation advocates denounced its seemingly unsustainable harvesting of fur-bearing animals. In 1921, the director of the New York Zoological Society, William T. Hornaday, castigated the fur "craze," warning of its potential for exterminating most of the country's fur-bearing animal species.[30]

Labor in New York's Fur Industry[31]

New York's fur industry had a rich labor history predating the development of the Fur District and continuing through its boom years. There are two main processes in transforming raw pelts into finished garments: the preparation of pelts through dressing and dyeing, and the cutting and sewing of these skins into garments. Cutting and sewing are particularly skilled tasks, and the high level of craft required of so much fur work provided substantial leverage to its workers and their unions. By the 1920s, fur workers would be known for being among the most militant in the city, and by the 1950s, among the most prosperous.

While the industry was still fairly small, in the 1880s, German Americans held the most-skilled positions in the industry. By the 1890s, many of the cutters were Jewish men, and most of the finishers, who added buttons, pockets, and linings to garments, were German girls and women. By 1912, there were 10,000 furriers working in New York, 7,000 thousand of whom were Jewish, the rest were from Germany, Greece, France, Italy, England, and other eastern European countries. Of the estimated 10,000 workers, about 3,000 were women.[32]

Fur work was debilitating, with most workshops generally consisting of "one or two airless rooms, with 15 to 20 workers. The rooms, the steps, and the halls were strewn all over with the chunks and remnants of fur."[33] Following the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, a state commission investigating the health and safety of factory workers found that 40% of fur workers had tuberculosis or asthma, with others suffering from a variety of ailments, including bronchitis, chronic colds, and skin disorders.

Beginning as early as 1892, furriers began to unionize, seeking fair pay, better working conditions, and shorter hours, gains were made but neither the gains nor the unions lasted.[34] Groups started making lasting gains in 1911 and in 1913, The International Fur Workers Union of the United States and Canada, organized successfully.[35]

In 1926, following employers walking back on contract, the furriers went on what would be the largest strike for the furrier's union, 12,000 workers went on a successful 17-week-long strike. Their gains were a "40-hour week…; increases in the minimum wages scales; abolition of the sub-contracting system;" And other important points, including unionizing open shops.[36] Strikers clashed with police, who were censured for illegally detaining them.[37]

By 1939, over 90% of fur workers were unionized; in that year, the furriers joined with leather workers to form the International Fur and Leather Workers' Union.[38] In 1950, practically all of New York's fur workers were unionized and were reported to be "the highest paid group of industrial employees in the United States."[39] At that time, there were approximately 16,000 men and women employed in the industry in New York City.[40]

Henry I. Oser[41]

The designer of the 29th Street Towers, Henry I. Oser, was born around 1864 in Kyiv, Ukraine (then

part of the Russian Empire) and immigrated to the United States in 1881. He earned a civil engineering degree from Columbia University in 1889, but also passed the bar examination and practiced law until around 1905 when he switched his profession to civil engineer. From 1911 to 1918 he served as assistant engineer for the New York City Department of Buildings, and during World War I oversaw the construction of housing for shipbuilding workers for the Emergency Fleet Corporation.

By 1920, Oser was working independently as a consulting engineer, with an office within the rapidly growing Garment Center at 1400 Broadway. Like many developers in the Fur and Garment Centers, Oser was Jewish, and between 1922 and 1928 he designed at least 18 large loft buildings within these areas. In addition to the Furcraft Building and 29th Street Towers, Oser designed the neo-Gothic-style Central Building at 191 Joralemon Street (within the Brooklyn Skyscraper Historic District) in 1925. He was a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Oser's practice appears to have slowed during the Depression, and he retired around 1932. He died in 1935 and is buried with his wife Ophelia in Mount Carmel Cemetery in Glendale, Queens.

Planning and Construction of the 29th Street Towers[42]

The land for the 29th Street Towers was acquired in stages, by two different companies, the Muloft Construction Company and the 220 West 29th Street Realty Corp. The first purchase occurred in 1921, and the last in 1925, just before construction began. The 220 West 29th Street Realty Corp purchased 214-220 West 29th Street, which consisted of 3 lofts and 2 brick dwellings. The Muloft Construction Company purchased 222-226 West 29th Street which consisted of one church, one brick dwelling, and one loft. Each company engaged Henry I. Oser to design a 16- and 14-story fireproof loft building, respectively. Filed under one New Building number, the two lofts were designed and constructed as one building. 214-220 West 29th Street, the larger of the two was referred to as building "A" while 222-226 West 29th Street was referred to as building "B." Through an agreement evident in the conveyances, the 220 West 29th Street Realty Corp agreed to a construct a fireproof tower connecting the buildings at the back for egress.

The building was set on a hard rock with concrete and stone foundations. The demolition of the previous buildings on the site began on May 4, 1925, eight months later, on January 19, 1926, a Certificate of Occupancy was issued. An eight-month lead time from demolition to occupancy is a remarkable feat, it showed a desire to get the building completed while the fur market was growing rapidly, and furriers were looking to find a permanent location in the fur center.[43]

Representative of the mixed employment in the garment industry, the New Building application notes a relatively even number of men to women in building "A", the larger of the two, while building "B" notes significantly more men intended for the floors than women, indicating that larger firms tended to employe men and women at equal rates while smaller firms more readily employed men. Floors 2-7 have dressing rooms included in their designs, indicating these floors were intended for customer shopping, and the higher floors, 8-16, where the setbacks are, were for manufacturing.

To complete his designs, Oser deemed it necessary for the windows on the first three floors to be larger than the labor law permitted. He appealed twice for the building's windows to exceed 720 square inches in area. Oser's designs stated, "the front windows of the first three stories are to be used for the display of merchandise; to subdivide them into small sections would defeat this purpose."[44]

Oser's appeals were granted allowing larger windows without panes so long as they were ¼ inch thick, had a metal frame, and a sash.

Design of 29th Street Towers

The 1916 Zoning Resolution greatly impacted the designs of the buildings in the Fur District.[45] New buildings were required to taper at specific heights, determined by their location and street width. Bulk was regulated and diminished in stages, encouraging stepped silhouettes in which the uppermost floors would cover 25 percent of the lot. The setbacks, though mandated, are a key element of the Tower's design. The setbacks allowed more light and air into the factory floors, a necessary function in the highly polluted air caused by fur manufacturing. The gap between the tower buildings above the fourth floor also appears to have been primarily meant to allow light and air to interior manufacturing spaces of two distinct buildings with separate owners, typical of Garment Center streetscapes of the period, rather than a specifically designed feature.

Oser's designs for the towers were dictated by two rules, one, the 1916 zoning and two, the relation of form and finance. As architect Walter Kilham Jr. wrote "The frame of [a] building should not be designed from the point of view of the most practical engineering, but from the standpoint of what the space it encloses is to be used for."[46] Oser, an engineer, used the demands of both the zoning and the fur industry to shape the towers, using the setbacks and windows to provide as much light and air as possible. Oser translated the industry-specific design of his building from the outside through to the inside, down to designing the location of dressing rooms, making the Towers beneficial for both the manufacturing and sale of fur goods.

As the Towers were designed to house stores on the first floors, with offices, showrooms, and manufacturing on the upper floors, common in fur buildings, they needed to be functional with light, air, and large manufacturing space, while also remaining attractive for prospective buyers and investors. Oser struck this balance well, by employing mottled terra cotta decoration for the entrance, and eye-catching elements on the facade as it rose and setback, the terra cotta was interlaid with variegated pink and tan roman brick, blending with the mottled terra cotta. The verticality of each of the taller towers is highlighted by wide piers and narrower mullions topped at the various rooflines by Gothic inspired decoration executed in in the same terra cotta. The setbacks, which begin at the 8th story, setback at different bays with different widths and angles as the building rises, creating a dynamic geometric facade that looks to the forthcoming style of Art Deco but remains decidedly Gothic inspired.

The entranceway, which has remained remarkably intact, highlights the Gothic style most and signifies the importance of the fur trade. Under imposts in a ABAB format surrounding the main entrance doorways grotesques showcase the historic use of the building. The first grotesques are holding what appears to be a beaver, and feeding him, the second are inspecting the beaver's pelt. The beaver, instrumental to the growth of both the fur trade and larger development in New York, is a crucial piece of New York's history. Its use in the grotesque is both symbolic of the work done in this building, and the larger movement of the fur industry to this neighborhood.

The knight head placed above the entrance and the repeating patterns of shields across the entire facade may have been influenced by a publication the year of construction *The Epic of the Fur Trade* in which the author John Ely Briggs writes "In the whole history of heroic exploits of strong men there is nothing comparable to the story of the American fur trade. For sheer courage, for indomitable determination, for elemental manhood, the hardy

gathers of peltries would put to utter shame the armored knights of old."[47] In this story, Briggs compares the American fur trade to the epic of the knight's journey. In this tale Briggs notes there is no epic without a King to command the forces and for the Fur trade the American Fur Company was the realm and its king was John Jacob Astor. If influenced by the parallels between the crusades of the furriers and the knights, Oser might have used the Gothic inspired style on the towers to further speak to this period.

Tenants and Later History

Opening in 1925, the 29th Street Towers joined the block during the boom of development of the Fur District. As one of the most highly designed purpose-built buildings for the fur industry, the building was attractive to furriers. Large windows for advertising, plenty of light and air, large rooms for both manufacturing, and sales attracted tenants before the opening of the building.

One of the first tenants Jacob Kestenbaum, of the Kestenbaum Brothers, acquired a lease before the building was occupiable. Jacob, a Polish immigrant, established the New York office of his father's fur company in 1914, his brother David, remained in Germany until World War II when he came to New York, and their other brother Yisrael, ran their London office. Jacob and David, according to the *American Jewish Yearbook*, "helped save Jews from Nazi persecution." The brothers filed affidavits bringing "extended family, friends, and total strangers" who were Jewish and facing Nazi persecution to America. During this time, refugees needed American sponsors to take financial responsibly for them, which the Kestenbaum's did by extending their family tree by hundreds of "cousins." In all, the Kestenbaum's filed approximately 358 affidavits claiming asylum and saving hundreds of Jewish people from the war. The Kestenbaum's continued to be active leaders in their community.[48] Their company remained in business until 1957 when Jacob retired.[49]

The furriers in the building, engaging in both manufacturing and sales, sold various kinds of furs. One of the largest retailers during the 1920s in this building, Kaufman & Newhouse primarily sold Japanese furs, which was considered a cheaper alternative to American fur.[50] Another prominent firm Louis Kohn, sold mink and ermine. Mink notably is expensive and one of the highest regarded furs in the industry, and though perhaps less widely known today, ermine, was of equal value. It was "the most celebrated fur in history" used typically for royalty and today it is still use in ceremonial regalia.[51] The diversity in furs manufactured and distributed within the building at the same time showed the prosperity of the fur industry, where companies of luxury and accessible ranges could operate in the same spaces.[52]

The workers of these furriers were centered in the 1926 furrier strike, one of the largest fur strikes in the union's history. On March 13, 1926, five hundred furrier workers gathered in front of the 29th Street Towers to strike.[53] On April 7, 1925, two furriers, Moe Bassman, a manufacturer in the Towers, and his employee Charles Arms, were brought before Jefferson Market Courthouse (a designated New York City Landmark) being charged with "felonious assault, and simple assault." Additionally, nine furriers, including three women, were held for "disorderly conduct" at the 29th Street Towers. The strike resulted in the 40-hour work week and set wages amongst other monumental wins for the union.[54]

While fur was still fashionable into the 1980s, shearling became more popular and was a big part of the business for the tenants of the 29th Street Towers. Into the 1990s and early 2000s, furriers were still part of the 29th Street Towers tenants. In 2012,

the building was converted into a commercial office space to accommodate the shift of needs in Midtown.

Conclusion

The 29th Street Towers are a remarkably intact example of the booming fur industry within New York's Garment Center. The Gothic-inspired Towers, constructed by Henry I. Oser, were purpose built for the fur industry, accommodating the needs of the expanding industry, and remain one of the most highly designed examples of fur buildings in New York City.

Endnotes

[1] Sources for this section include Elaine S. Abelson and Cathy Matson, "Furs," in Kenneth T. Jackson, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City, Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 487-88; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11-23; and "Astor, John Jacob," in Allen Johnson, Ed., *Dictionary of American Biography, Volume I* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 397-98.

[2] John B. Pine, Ed., *Seal and Flag of the City of New York* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 27.

[3] This section is adapted from text written by Jessica Fletcher for LPC, *Lefcourt Clothing Center Designation Report (LP-2691)* (New York: City of New York, 2025).

[4] *Archaeological Documentary Study No. 7 Line Extension/Hudson Yard Rezoning* (New York: New York City Transit and New York City Department of City Planning, 2004), III A-5. Robert S. Grumet notes the difficulty of assigning names to Indigenous groups because these names have been historically unstable. He uses the term Munsee to refer to the Delaware-speaking people who lived in this region and notes that the term "Munsee" refers to the specific dialect they spoke and was only introduced to refer to this group after 1727 in a period of mass dislocation from their ancestral lands by colonists. Robert S. Grumet, *The Munsee Indians: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009) 3-4 and 13-14.

[5] *Archaeological Documentary Study 44th Street and Eleventh Avenue* (New York: New York City Transit and New York City Department of City Planning, 2008), 7.

[6] *Archaeological Documentary Study No. 7 Line Extension/Hudson Yard Rezoning* (New York: New York City Transit and New York City Department of City Planning, 2004), III C-1-3. An 1815 map shows the division of this farmland and the presence of a few estates throughout the future Garment District, *Maps of Farms Commonly Called the Blue Book, 1815: Drawn From the Original on File in the Street Commissioner's Office in the City of New York* (New York: City of New York, 1868), plate 5. Although colonists forcibly dislocated the Munsee from the area, present-day descendants live among the Federally and State Recognized Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, the Delaware Nation, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, the Shinnecock Nation, and the Unkechaug Nation

[7] Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 203-4.

[8] The Tenderloin's boundaries of this district expanded over time west to Eight Avenue and north to Central Park, Landmarks Preservation Commission, *51 West 28th Street Building, Tin Pan Alley Designation Report (LP-2628)*, prepared by Sarah Moses (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2019), 13.

[9] Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 206-7, 1880 United States Census, New York, Manhattan, Enumeration District 404, and 1900 United States Census, New York, Manhattan, Enumeration District 306.

[10] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 12, and Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 452 and 811.

[11] Within this broad category of working-class, African American residents of the Tenderloin had varying degrees of financial stability, and some lived in poverty. The historian Cheryl D. Hicks uses the terms working-class and impoverished when describing Black Tenderloin residents, see Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 56. Mike Wallace notes the concentration of the Black population around Seventh Avenue in the lower West 30s, Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, 269.

[12] "Macedonia Church B.Y.P.U Holds a Coronation Service," *New York Age,* March 17, 1923, 2; "Macedonia Building New Church Uptown," *New York Age*, 10.

[13] Hilary Ballon, *New York's Pennsylvania Stations* (New York: Norton, 2002), 35.

[14] This section is adapted from text written by Matthew A. Postal for the *Fashion Tower Designation Report (LP-2688)* (New York: City of New York, 2025).

[15] This section is primarily based on Anthony Robins, National Register Nomination for Garment Center Historic District (2008), Andrew S. Dolkart, Fabric of New York City's Garment District, *Buildings & Landscapes* (Spring 2011) and "Urban Fabric: Building New York's Garment District," virtual exhibit, Skyscraper

Museum (2012-13), curated by Dolkart.

[16] In 1914 there were as many as 654 factories within a block of Fifth Avenue. See "Forcing Factories From Fifth Avenue," *The Sun*, April 1914.

[17] Advertisement, *The New York Times*, March 5, 1916.

[18] Building Zone Resolution, 1916, see: https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/about/city-planning-history/zr1916.pdf.

[19] Various areas for new garment factories were discussed, in the former shopping district along Sixth Avenue, in Long Island City and the Bronx. See *Women's Wear*.

[20] "Create Garment Center of America," *Women's Wear*, December 8, 1919, 2-3.

[21] Sources for this section include "War Hits Fur Trade," *New York Times*, May 30, 1915; "Suggest Renaming Seventh Avenue," *New York Times*, July 8, 1917; A. L. Belden, *The Fur Trade of America and Some of the Men Who Made and Maintain It* (New York: Peltries Publishing Company, 1917); Agnes C. Laut, *The Fur Trade of America* (New York: Macmillan, 1921); and Richard Price Buckmaster, "New York Fur Centre of the World," *The American Furrier* (October 1922), 32-33.

[22] Father Knickerbocker ad, 1916 [need citation]

[23] "Moving the Fur Center Across the Ocean," the city's largest furrier, H. Jaeckel & Sons, which occupied lavish showrooms amongst other luxury apparel retailers just off Fifth Avenue, proclaimed that "New York has become the new fur center…. Most important to the American woman, the fashion center has moved with the fur center—moved so decisively that there is no longer any question about *the real home of fur fashion*."Advertisement, *Harper's Bazaar* (November 1916).

[24] "Suggest Renaming Seventh Avenue," *New York Times*, July 8, 1917.

[25] *Fur Weekly*, January 8, 1920, 6.

[26] "The Fifth Largest Industry in New York," *Fur Trade Review*, July 1922, 80; "New York, a Fur Centre," *Edison Monthly*, January 1922, 4-6.

[27] See, for example, Sydney H. Coleman, "Shall American Boys Be Taught to Torture and Kill?" *National Humane Review* (February 1920), 23-24.

[28] See, for example, "Mills Challenges Fur-Anti in Newspaper Correspondence," *Fur Age Monthly* (June 1924), 17-18. The foreword of Laut's *The Fur Trade of America* begins with the question, "Is fur trading founded on cruelty?" before concluding, "It is not."

[29] "Fur Farming as a Substitute for Trapping," *National Humane Review* (March 1920), 47.; Despite initial resistance to farming in the industry, there were at least 60 fox and other fur farms in the United States, and more than 1,000 fur farms in Canada, by the early 1920s.

[30] "William T. Hornaday Berates the Fur Trade," *Fur Trade Review*, 1921, 149.

[31] Sources for this section include Jack Hardy, *The Clothing Workers* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 116-48; Robert D. Leiter, "The Fur Workers Union," *ILR Review* (January 1950), 163-86; and Bernard Weinstein, *The Jewish Unions in America* (Cambridge, UK: OpenBook Publishers, 2018), 253-65.

[32] Weinstein, *Jewish Unions in America*, 256.

[33] Weinstein, 255.

[34] In 1892, the Jewish labor organization United Hebrew Trades organized fur workers to win an eight-hour workday, but this was lost, and their union disbanded, following the Panic of 1893. In 1904, Jewish workers founded the International Fur Workers' Union of New York, and seven separate locals, including one in New York, formed the International Association of Fur Workers of the United States and Canada. Following a failed 1907 strike, both were disbanded and working conditions eroded.

[35] The downturn in the economy caused the fur industry to shift to be largely a seasonal business with three "seasons." September and October were the busiest times of the year, the winter, November through March were the quietest with only 10% of the work force being engaged during this time. Spring picked up again and stayed busy through the summer. The uncertainty of work throughout the year was a crucial point for the unions moving forward in their negotiations: "Fur and the Fur Workers", *Labor and Age*, May 1924, 8-9.

[36] Hardy, 122.

[37] "Fur Strike Pickets Upheld by Court," *New York Times*, May 25, 1926, 10.

[38] Leiter, 175.

[39] Leiter, 163.

[40] Victor R. Fuchs, *The Economics of the Fur Industry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

[41] "Manhattan New Building Database, 1900-1986," Office for Metropolitan History, online:

MetroHistory.com, accessed July 27, 2001; Catalogue of Officers and Graduates of Columbia University (New York, 1916), 702; Obituary, New York Times (March 21, 1935), 23; LPC, Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District Designation Report (LP-2449), Report by Christopher D. Brazee, 52; United States Census (1910 and 1920) and New York State Census (1905, 1915, and 1925); New York City Directories, 1900-1923.

[42] Block and Lot folders, Municipal Archives, Accessed March 21, 2025

[43] "Miscellaneous Notes," *New York Evening Post*, May 3, 1927.

[44] *Board of Standards and Appeals*, City of New York, 745-25-S, March 20, 1926, Municipal Archives.

[45]"Building Zone Resolution," view text at https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/downloads/pdf/zoning/zoning-nyc/1960_zoning_resolution.pdf

[46] Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 81.

[47] "The Epic of the Fur Trade," *The Palimpsest*, Volume 6, 1925.

[48] Rochel Licht, "The Kestenbaum Rescue Efforts: An Analysis." Jewish Action, https://jewishaction.com/holocaust/the-kestenbaum-rescue-efforts-an-analysis/; Susie Garber, "A Discovery Sheds Light on Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust." Jewish Action, https://jewishaction.com/holocaust/a-discovery-sheds-light-on-rescue-efforts-during-the-holocaust/

[49] *Directories, American Jewish Yearbook* (American Jewish Committee, 1982), 368; "Jacob Kestenbaum, Fur Merchant and a Jewish Leader in New York," New York Times, January 18, 1980, 29.

[50] George W Pauli, *Dictionary of Furs: A Summary of the Fur Industry;Written Especially for the Consumer and Above All to Give Authentic Listing of True Fur Names, Giving Thought to the Universal Trend for Truthfulness in Selling* (United States: Paw-Lee Jeffries Company, Educational Publicity Service, 1925) 13-14.

[51] Anna Bird Steward, "The Fur Book of Knowledge: Written for Selbert, Ltd." (United States: Selbert, Limited, 1926), 43-44.

[52] "Fur Manufacturers," *The Fur Journal*, 1929, 44-48.;

[53] *Daily News*, March 13, 1926, 27.

[54] "Fur Merchant, 14 Strikers Are Held by Magistrate," *Daily News*, April 13, 1926, 6.

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 29th Street Towers 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, state, and the nation.

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 29th Street Towers and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 778 Lot 48 and Lot 52, as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.

29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street
Sarah Eccles, August 2025

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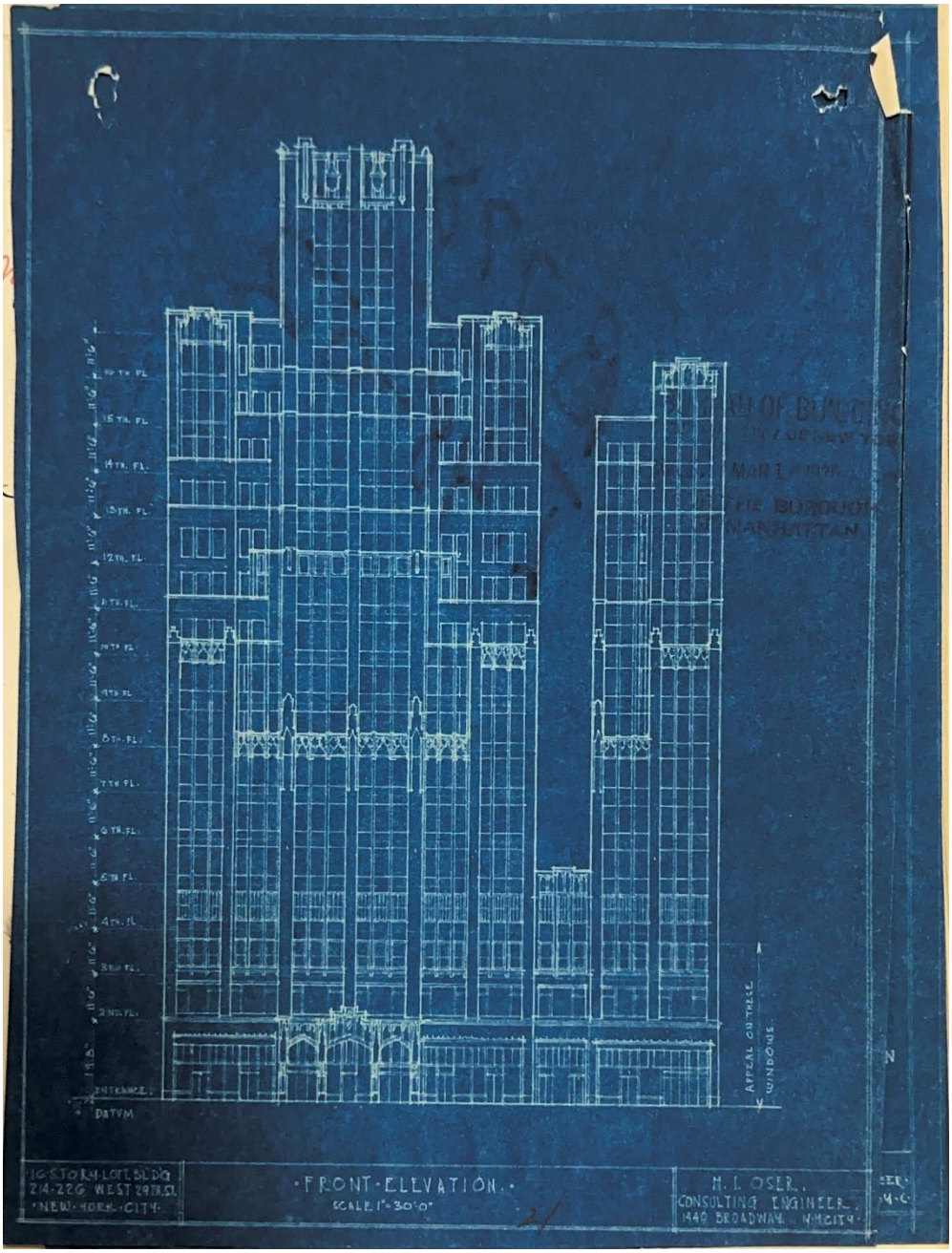
Sarah Eccles, August 2025

29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street
Sarah Eccles, August 2025

29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street
Sarah Eccles, August 2025



Henry I. Oser, 29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street, 1925,
New York City Municipal Archives

29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street, c. 1940
New York City Municipal Archives

29th Street Towers, 214-226 West 29th Street, c. 1940
New York City Municipal Archives

29th Street Towers | LP-2689
W 29 St
W 28 St
Legend
Proposed Landmark Site
Building Footprints
NYC Tax Lots
Address: 214-226 West 29th Street
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 778, Lot(s) 48, 52
Calendared: April 22, 2025
Public Hearing: May 20, 2025
Designated: August 12, 2025
0.01
Miles
Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22v1; Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, SE; Date: 03.20.2024