

The proposed West Chelsea Historic District, located along the Hudson River waterfront in Manhattan, is a rare surviving example of New York City's rapidly disappearing industrial neighborhoods. During much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the area was home to some of the city's and the country's most prestigious industrial firms. The Otis Elevator Company, the Cornell Iron Works, the Jonathan Williams Bronze Foundry, and the Reynolds Metal Company all had operations in West Chelsea. The proposed district encompasses all or parts of seven blocks, approximately 30 structures in total dating from 1885 to 1930.

West Chelsea was first developed as an industrial area in the 1850s, due largely to the availability of cheap, unencumbered land and the presence of convenient transportation connections via both water and rail. Continuous turnover of the area's industrial tenants, however, left little physical evidence of this time. The proposed district is characterized primarily by factory and warehouse buildings erected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nearly all of the buildings, which vary in both scale and design, are brick-faced structures originally intended for industrial or commercial use. Important early examples of reinforced concrete construction and modern industrial design are also extant.

The earliest of West Chelsea's mid-sized factory structures featured simple brick facades with round-arch openings typical of American industrial architecture at the end of the nineteenth century. Such buildings include a group of structures erected for the Cornell Iron Works at 551-555 West 25th Street, built in 1891 to plans by George B. Cornell. The Berlin and Jones Envelope Company Building at 548 West 28th Street is another example of the type, designed in 1899-1900 by William Higginson, a prolific architect of industrial buildings whose designs include a substantial number of warehouses in the DUMBO Historic District as well as the vast Bush Terminal complex in Brooklyn.

Around 1910, improvement to waterfront and rail facilities induced a surge of development that brought another generation of industries to the area. The firms that located in West Chelsea at this time erected some of the neighborhood's most prominent buildings. The seven-story Otis Elevator Company Building, which occupies the entire block front east of Eleventh Avenue between West 26th and West 27th Streets, designed in 1911-12 by Clinton & Russell, features a buff brick facade and a massive overhanging cornice, and once housed offices and machine shops for the famous elevator manufacturer. The eleven-story Zinn Building at 210 Eleventh Avenue, erected in 1910-11, is one of the more ornamented structures within the proposed district. Featuring a brick and terra cotta facade designed by Shire & Kaufman and soaring arched piers spanned by geometric spandrels, this building was one of several in the area devoted, at least in part, to the trades of printing and lithography.

The proposed district also includes several early and significant examples of the use of reinforced concrete. Higginson, an early proponent of the use of reinforced concrete in the construction of industrial buildings, used the material in his design of the Wolff Building at 518 West 26th Street, erected in 1909-10. Like many early concrete

industrial buildings, the building offers little ornamentation, opting instead for a more straightforward expression of the material's strength. An annex to the building by Parker & Shaffer in 1926-27 features even fewer embellishments. A later example of reinforced concrete is evident in the R.C. Williams and Company Building at 259 Tenth Avenue, whose system of unbroken, soaring pilasters designed by Cass Gilbert, renowned designer of the Woolworth Building and the Customs House, give the building its distinctive vertical massing. This building, constructed 1927-28, was so located as to take advantage of the elevated freight track of the New York Central Rail Road, now known as the High Line, which would abut the building upon its opening in 1934.

The blocks situated to west of Eleventh Avenue were reclaimed from the Hudson at a later date than those to the east and were ideal for freight-related uses. Beginning in 1890, railroad companies vying for a piece of New York City's freight traffic began to acquire these properties for use as storage yards and warehouses. The oldest of these structure is the New York Terminal Warehouse Company's Central Stores, occupying the entire block between West 27th and West 28th Streets, west of Eleventh Avenue. This massive brick complex was constructed in 1890 according to the plans of George B. Mallory, and was enlarged in 1912-14 by Otto M. Beck. The building's owners were associated with the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad Company, whose tracks entered directly into the building through the massive round-arch entrance fronting Eleventh Avenue. In 1897 the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad purchased the block two streets to the south, and in 1912-14 erected an imposing new warehouse on the northeast portion of the lot, adjacent to its rail yards. Upon completion, the building was touted as the largest reinforced concrete building in New York City, and was also among the first to employ flat plate construction techniques. Like many concrete industrial buildings of the time, its facade is only minimally ornamented with abstracted classical details.

Standing between the two structures is the Starrett-Lehigh Building, a designated New York City Individual Landmark designed by Cory & Cory in 1930-31. This structure was erected in part for use by the Lehigh Valley Railroad, who had established their own freight yard in West Chelsea in 1900. The building endures as one of the great early Modernist buildings in the country, whose cantilevered floor slabs and continuous strips of windows represent changing trends in the exterior expression of industrial architecture.

In addition to mid-sized factories and large terminal structures, the proposed district also contains a number of other building types related to the area's industrial past. The district's oldest remaining building, a two-story, red-brick building located at 554 West 28th Street, was erected for Latimer E. Jones in 1885 and originally served as a stable. The brick structure at 555-559 West 27th Street, was erected in 1890 and was once owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad, while the modestly-sized, peaked roof structures at 537 to 547 West 26th Street, erected 1912-14, formerly served as automobile garages.

Together, the buildings within the proposed West Chelsea Historic District reflect important trends in the development of industrial architecture in the United States and in

New York City. They convey a well-defined sense of place and a distinct physical presence which sets the neighborhood apart from other parts of Midtown Manhattan. Despite a decline in industry and freight-related activity in West Chelsea during the mid-twentieth century, the proposed historic district still retains nearly all of its historic building stock, and represents a unique and enduring part of New York City's architectural and cultural heritage.