

144 WEST 14TH STREET (aka 138-146 West 14th Street), Manhattan.
Built 1895-96; Brunner & Tryon, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 609, Lot 1101, 1102.

On October 28, 2008, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of a Landmark of 144 West 14th Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provision of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including the President of Pratt Institute Thomas F. Schutte, representatives of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Municipal Art Society of New York, and the Metropolitan chapter of the Victorian Society in America. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission also received letters in support of designation from New York City Council Member Christine C. Quinn, New York State Senator Thomas K. Duane, and Community Board No. 2.

Summary

144 West 14th Street is a grandly-proportioned Renaissance Revival-style loft building.¹ Faced with limestone, tan brick and terra cotta, it was designed by the architects Brunner & Tryon in 1895-96. Seven stories tall, the street facade is articulated through a series of monumental arches, embellished with handsome classical details. Brunner, who began his career in the office of the noted architect George B. Post, designed many institutional structures in Manhattan, including synagogues and hospitals, as well as buildings on the campuses of Barnard, Columbia, and City College. During the mid-1890s, the firm designed a series of commercial buildings in Manhattan, reflecting the influence of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the rise of the City Beautiful movement. 144 West 14th Street was built for the real estate developer Joseph L. Bittenwieser, who sold it in 1897 to Frederick Hill Meserve, an early collector of fine art photography, who conveyed it to his uncle, Seth M. Milliken, of the textile firm Deering, Milliken & Company, in 1899. Since its completion, many commercial tenants have occupied various floors, including R. H. Macy's, which produced flags and silk underwear here, the silversmith Graff, Washbourne & Dunn, as well as Epiphone, a leading manufacturer of stringed instruments. In 1941, the noted American jazz guitarist Les Paul assembled a "solid-body" electric guitar in the company's workshop; it became the prototype for many electric guitars played today. 144 West 14th Street was acquired by Pratt Institute in 1999. Restored by Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects, it now serves as the school's Manhattan campus.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Development of West 14th Street

144 West 14th Street is located on the south side of 14th Street, midway between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Among the various streets envisioned by the Commissioner's Plan of 1811, 14th Street was one of the most southerly. Opened between the Bowery and the Hudson River in 1828, it developed into a mostly residential thoroughfare, lined with fine private homes. At 146 West 14th Street originally stood the home of merchant Richard P. Dana, constructed in 1854.² Immediately to the west was the Church of the Annunciation (1846) where the exhumed body of United States President James Monroe (1758-1831) lay in state in 1858 before its final reburial in Virginia.

West 14th Street became increasingly commercial during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. An elevated railway began service along Sixth Avenue in 1880, and various stores clustered where it intersected with 14th Street, such as the R. H. Macy's and B. Altman Dry Goods Stores. Streetcars also served the area, including a cross-town line that delivered passengers to the Hudson River waterfront and the Upper (Hoboken) Ferry. These transit routes made West 14th Street an ideal location for both retail stores and manufacturing.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, New York City became a leading distribution center for the dry-goods trade, attracting numerous warehouses, factories, and showrooms. Passage of the New York State Factory Act in 1892 made home production more difficult, leading to the creation of larger workshops and the need for new structures to house these operations. With few lots available for development in lower Manhattan, manufacturers looked north and a new loft district took shape in midtown, chiefly between 14th and 42nd Streets. Close to suppliers and public transit, these facilities were typically built with freight elevators, open and flexible floor plans, high ceilings, and large windows.³

Joseph L. Bittenwieser

In early 1895 the church and the adjoining Dana house were acquired by Joseph L. Bittenwieser (1865-1938).⁴ Born in Philadelphia to Lemmmlein and Leah Heller Bittenwieser, the family moved to New York City in 1873. His German-born father was a professor of languages, who taught in the public school system until 1886. Joseph received his bachelor of arts degree from City College in 1883, and a law degree from New York Law School in 1887. He began his fifty-year career as a "real estate operator" in the late 1880s, focusing his activity on property transactions and construction in midtown and lower Manhattan. A major philanthropist, he supported the Citizen's Union, the Hebrew Technical Institute, and the Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies. Many of these activities involved architectural projects; as a member of the Associated Alumni of City College he helped raise funds to erect a new library, and as a trustee of the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society he oversaw construction of the society's buildings in Pleasantville, New York.⁵

Brunner & Tryon, Architects

To develop his West 14th Street property, Bittenwieser hired the architects Brunner & Tryon. During the early 1890s, this firm designed many buildings for Jewish institutions and it is likely that they were introduced to Bittenwieser in the context of one of these projects. Brunner & Tryon were partners for eleven years, from 1886 to 1897. Born in New York City to German-Jewish parents, Arnold W[illiam] Brunner (1857-1925) attended public schools and received his architectural

training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Following graduation in 1879 he joined the office of George B. Post in New York City and worked as a draftsman for five years. Brunner was a founding member of the Architectural League of New York in 1881 and would later become its president. He edited *Cottages or Hints on Economical Building*, an 1884 book containing twenty-four house designs by various New York City architects. Thomas Tryon (1859-1920) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Little is known about his architectural training and his earliest known project was a group of bath houses at Long Beach, New York, in 1884. He and Brunner also collaborated on the book *Interior Decoration*, published in 1887.⁶

Two of the firm's earliest buildings began construction in 1889: a dispensary for Mt. Sinai Hospital (with Buchman & Deisler) on East 67th Street, and the Downtown Hebrew Institute (later the Educational Alliance) at 197 East Broadway.⁷ In terms of style and patronage, these commissions anticipate much of Brunner & Tryon's subsequent production. Designed for Jewish institutions, a hospital and settlement house, these buildings share decorative elements inspired by Renaissance and medieval sources. Subsequent commissions included three important Manhattan synagogues: Temple Beth El (1890-93, demolished), Congregation Shaaray Tefila (1893-95) on West 82nd Street, and Temple Shearith Israel (also called the Spanish and Portugese Synagogue, 1896-97). While the style of the first two synagogues had a distinctly Middle Eastern character, the last was a monumental neo-classical design, reflecting the emergence of the City Beautiful movement. Buttenwieser was a member of Temple Shearith Israel and plans for the synagogue were filed with the Department of Buildings during construction of 144 West 14th Street.⁸

Both architects were active in civic organizations that promoted the classical ideal; including the Architectural League, the American Institute of Architects, the Municipal Art Society, and the American Fine Art Society. The impact of the City Beautiful movement, consequently, is expressed in the evolution of the firm's commercial work. While 508 LaGuardia Place (1891) and 661 Broadway (1891-92), were faced with dark tawny iron spot brick, their later designs generally display a much lighter palette, integrating limestone with complementary terra-cotta reliefs. Noteworthy examples include: 39 Great Jones Street (1896), 380 Canal Street (1897), and 285 West Broadway (1898).⁹

The firm disbanded in 1897. For a brief period, Tryon partnered with Louis Brown and George Burnham. He served as secretary of the Fine Arts Association and was architect of the 1910 extension to the Century Association (a designated New York City Landmark) on West 43rd Street. At the time of his death, he was described as a "man of genuine culture and many accomplishments . . . best known for the many country houses to which he brought a refined taste in design and decoration."¹⁰

Brunner, in contrast, continued to build synagogues, educational buildings, and civic structures. One writer described "his activity in the designing of appropriate and impressive public buildings [as] absolutely tireless."¹¹ At Columbia University, he designed Lewisohn Hall (School of Mines, 1904) which was the first of many pavilions to fill empty sites within McKim, Mead & White's 1893 master plan. Other Brunner commissions included the original 92nd Street YMHA (1900, demolished), Mt. Sinai Hospital (begun 1904), the Public Baths on East 23rd Street (1904, with William M. Aiken) and East 11th Street (1904-5, both are designated New York City Landmarks), Seward Park Pavilion (1905, demolished), Lewisohn Stadium (1913-15, demolished), and the Cadet Hospital at West Point (1924). Brunner was also active in large-scale urban planning, proposing an extension to Riverside Drive, as well as schemes for Cleveland, Denver, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Washington, D.C.¹² Following his death, his wife donated his travel drawings and

sketchbooks to the Cooper Union (now the Cooper Hewitt-National Museum of Design) and the Arnold W. Brunner Grant, administered by the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, was established in his memory.

Design and Construction

In June 1895, Brunner & Tryon filed plans with the Department of Buildings for a seven-story loft building at 144 West 14th Street. The estimated cost of construction was \$250,000. Work started the following month and was completed in June 1896.¹³ Located on a major cross-town artery, the 125 foot-long facade is dominated by eight monumental arches, each extending from the third to sixth floor. Sixteen smaller arches define the seventh floor, crowned by an elaborate cornice. Many architects who designed commercial structures in the 1880s and 1890s adopted this type of composition, including Post, Brunner's former employer, who often used superimposed multi-story arcades decorated with terra-cotta reliefs. Significant examples included the widely-praised New York Produce Exchange (1881-84, demolished) on Bowling Green, which was built during the period when Brunner was a draftsman in his office, as well as the Havemeyer Building (1892, demolished).

Brunner was a celebrated draftsman and watercolorist. The building's ornament and reliefs have a precise and fluid quality, reminiscent of the sketches he published in *Building* magazine and *Interior Decoration* during the late 1880s. Among subsequent buildings credited to the firm, 144 West 14th Street most closely resembles 39 Great Jones Street, a seven-story loft building. Commissioned by Bittenwieser in mid-1895, the slender facade displays a single monumental arch that is richly embellished with classical detail. Although not identical, the reliefs are the same tan color and appear to be designed by the same hand. They were produced by the Standard Terra Cotta Company of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and it is likely that the same company supplied the ornament for 144 West 14th Street.¹⁴

An example of composite construction, 144 West 14th Street has a skeleton frame, combining both iron and steel elements, supporting a non-combustible curtain wall.¹⁵ Use of these materials permitted Brunner & Tryon to significantly reduce the thickness of the walls. The floors, however, were pine joists. Since wood is combustible, the height of the building was limited to 85 feet.¹⁶ Joists, such as this, also lacked stability. To counteract this, few, if any windows were originally located in the side walls. Although the east wall was later obscured by the adjoining office building, the west wall has only a single window opening.¹⁷

Since the time of completion, there have been few alterations to the building's exterior. Plans for the widening of West 14th Street brought minor changes to the lower facade in 1912. The storefront projections were reduced, as was the size of the vault enclosure. The vault lights were removed in 1950 and have been replaced with a solid concrete sidewalk.¹⁸

Subsequent History

Commissioned as a speculative venture, Bittenwieser sold 144 West 14th Street to Frederick Hill Meserve in December 1897. An important early collector of American photography, Meserve was executive director of the Deering Milliken Company. In 1899 he conveyed the property to his uncle, Seth M. Milliken. Until the 1950s, the Milliken family, under various corporate names, retained an interest in the property.¹⁹ Various floors were used as offices, showrooms, and manufacturing spaces. In 1950 approximately 600 people were recorded as employed in the

building.²⁰ A large number of the tenants were involved in the textile trade or garment industry. Filings with the Department of Buildings give evidence of these businesses, through the installation of laundry trays and spray rooms.

R. H. Macy & Company was an early tenant. An advertisement in the *New York Times* in September 1898 described two facilities in the building: one for producing American flags, and the other, for “ladies silk waist and silk underwear.” Other early tenants included: Silverman Brothers, a manufacturer of suspenders, and Stern Brothers & Co., a diamond seller. The silversmiths, Graff, Washbourne & Dunn, leased space in the building for more than five decades. Founded by Charles Graff, William Washbourne and Clarence Dunn in 1899, the firm was bought out by the Gorham Company in 1961. Related tenants included the Lenox Silver Corporation and Cohan-Epner, specialists in advanced electro-plating.²¹

Epiphone, “one of the world’s largest builders of stringed musical instruments,” was a tenant in the building from April 1935 to 1950.²² Founded in 1873 by Anastasio Stathopoulos, the firm produced guitars, banjos, and basses. The company flourished during the 1930s, doubling its space in the building in 1937. Jazz guitarist Les Paul (b. 1915) designed and assembled the first “solid-body” electric guitar in the Epiphone workshop during 1941.²³ Initially called the “Log” because it had a solid wood core, after various modifications in the mid-1940s it was introduced commercially by the Gibson Guitar Company in 1952. Many well-known musicians were Epiphone clients, including the legendary jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, who visited the company’s factory during his only American tour (with Duke Ellington) in late 1946. Sold to the C. G. Conn Company in 1950, Epiphone was purchased by the Chicago Music Company, owners of Gibson, in 1957.²⁴

Pratt Institute acquired the building in 1999. Rehabilitated by the architects Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn, 144 West 14th Street has served as the school’s Manhattan campus since 2001. Academic facilities are located on six floors, including instructional classrooms, labs, offices, as well as a library and public art gallery.

Description

144 West 14th Street is located on the south side of 14th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. It is a large Renaissance Revival-style building, seven stories tall, and approximately 125 feet wide. The 14th Street facade is divided horizontally into three sections. The **base** is two stories tall. Rusticated limestone pilasters with granite footing separate the lower stories into four sections (from east to west): a storefront with three entries, a storefront with two entries, the projecting entrance portico, and a storefront with two entries. The glass and painted metal storefronts are non-historic. A simple metal cornice crowns each storefront.

The main entrance is located to the west. A limestone **portico** frames a pair of entries: a set of double doors with thin vertical windows, and to the west, a single door with wider glazing. Above the doors, “Pratt Institute” is written with non-historic pin-mounted metal letters. The pilasters have neo-classical reliefs. The portico is crowned by a denticulated cornice and a low ballustrade that fronts three narrow second-story vertical windows. The remainder of the second-story fenestration consists of single pane windows. Above the second story is a richly-detailed projecting cornice with a frieze of buff-colored palmettes, crowned by anthemion. The base of the corona is embellished with rosettes.

The **middle section**, extending from the third through the sixth floors, is faced with tan brick and consists of eight four-story tall arches. A buff-colored terra-cotta lion’s head embellishes the top of the arch, flanked by small cartouches. Inside the top of each arch are rosettes. Below each pair of

windows is a terra cotta spandrel cast with vertical lines and simple reliefs. At center, below the metal frame that divides the windows, is a cartouche with palm fronds. The windows are one-over-one, except on the sixth floor, where inside the arch they are flanked by curved side windows. Terra-cotta cartouches, set into small medallions, are located between the arches at the sixth story. Between the sixth and seventh story is a simple cornice with circular reliefs.

The **seventh story** is divided by tan brick pilasters into eight pairs of small arches. Near the top of each pilaster are terra-cotta reliefs. A cartouche is located in the arch above each one-over-one window. The roof has a richly-detailed cornice in which the dentils alternate with rosettes. Non-historic metal lighting fixtures have been installed on various floors to illuminate the facade. The **west** facade is partially visible above the fifth floor. Faced with brick, there is a single window and a non-historic chimney. The **east** facade is not visible. The **rear** (south) elevation faces West 13th Street and is visible to the west of the Village Presbyterian Church (part of the Greenwich Village Historic District). Faced with red brick, a row of non-historic metal ventilation grilles and non-historic one over one windows can be seen. Two ventilation units are located on the roof.

Report researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

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1. New York City, Department of Buildings. Block and Lot folders for this site are found at the Municipal Archives.
 2. Other notables buildings the area included: the Mrs. Nicholas Cruger mansion (James Renwick, 1853-54, demolished) at 128 West 14th Street and the Andrew Norwood House (1845-47, a designated New York City Landmark) at 241 West 14th Street. From 1873-79 the Metropolitan Museum of Art had galleries in the Cruger mansion. Morrison H. Heckscher, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: An Architectural History* (New York, Summer 1995), 7-8. According to the *New York Times*, the Dana house was “one of the first residences on Fourteenth Street and was considered at the time as being far up town.” See *New York Times*, February 18, 1894.
 3. *Brown Building (originally Asch Building) Designation Report* (LP-2128), (City of New York, 2003), prepared by Gale Harris.
 4. “Church of the Annunciation Sold,” *New York Daily Tribune*, February 26, 1895, 9. The Protestant Episcopal Church and rectory was sold to Benedict Cline (sp) who intended to erect a 12-story business building, unless “disposed of within the next two weeks.” Klein later sold the four lots (609/16-19) to Bittenwieser in May 1895. New York County, Office of Register, Conveyances, May 10, 1895. Bittenwieser also filed plans for a five-story tenement building at 9 Thompson Street in 1894.
 5. “J. L. Bittenwieser Realty Man, Dies,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1938, 19; Benjamin Bittenwieser, *Bittenwieser Family Tree*, (New York, 1975).

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6. Arnold W. Brunner, *Cottages or Hints on Economical Building* (New York: W.T. Comstock, 1890); Arnold W. Brunner and Thomas Tryon, *Interior Decoration* (New York: W.T. Comstock, 1887/1891) reprinted 1972.
 7. The Mt. Sinai Dispensary is a designated New York City Landmark.
 8. Andrew S. Dolkart and Matthew A. Postal, *Guide to New York City Landmarks* (Third edition, New York, 2003), 136; Bittenwieser obituary, 1938. Construction of Temple Shearith Israel began in March 1896 and was completed in May 1897.
 9. The building at 661 Broadway is located in the NoHo Historic District.
 10. Century Association, *Report of Board of Management*, 1921, 18-19.
 11. Century Association, *Report of Board of Management*, 1926, 22.
 12. Adolph Lewisohn was the grandfather of Laurence Bittenwieser, grandson of Joseph L. Bittenwieser.
 13. New York City, Department of Buildings (NB1332-1895), June 29, 1895, amended July 9, 1895.
 14. Established in 1890, the Standard Terra Cotta Company merged with the Atlantic Company in 1907. In addition to Brunner & Tryon, they produced ornament for buildings by William Schickel, Buchman & Deisler, and H.J. Hardenbergh. *A History of Real Estate Building and Architecture in New York City* (1898, reprinted), 530. Also see Susan Tunick, *Terra-Cotta Skyline* (Princeton, 1997).
 15. According to documents filed with the building department, the front walls consist of plate girders, web plates, flange plates and steel I-beams. On the east side of the building are 11 inch diameter cast-iron columns.
 16. Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condict, *The Rise of the New York Skyscraper 1865-1913* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996), 181-83. The height allowed by the building code was reduced in 1897 to 75 feet.
 17. Donald Friedman, *Historical Building Construction: Design, Materials and Technology* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 14-18, 56-67.
 18. A fuel burner was installed in 1946. This made access to the basement coal bins unnecessary and a new sidewalk was installed in 1950. New York City, Department of Buildings, Block and Lot folder.
 19. New York City, Office of the Register, Conveyances, December 28, 1897.
 20. Certificate of Occupancy, 1952. New York City, Department of Buildings, Block & Lot folder.
 21. See the *Encyclopedia of American Silversmiths*, 1998, 53, 80, 514, 594.
 22. See obituary of "E.A. Stathopoulos: Head of Epiphone, Inc.," *New York Times*, June 8, 1943, 21.
 23. The original prototype is in the collection of the Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville. See www.si.edu/lemelson/guitars/frames/eg08.htm.
 24. Tom Wheeler, *American Guitars: An Illustrated History* (1982); Mary Alice Shaughnessy, *Les Paul: An American Original* (New York, 1993), 93; Tony Bacon, *Years of the Gibson Les Paul* (2002). For information on the sale to Reinhardt, see "Django's EPI #3442" at www.hotclub.co.uk/html/epiphone.html.

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 144 West 14th Street (aka 138-146 West 14th Street) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, 144 West 14th Street is a grandly-proportioned Renaissance Revival-style loft building; that it is faced with limestone, tan brick and terra cotta and was designed by the prominent architects Brunner & Tryon in 1895-96; that it is seven stories tall and has a street façade articulated through a series of monumental arches embellished with neo-classical ornament; that Brunner, who began his career in the office of George B. Post, built many institutional structures in Manhattan, including synagogues, hospitals, and buildings on the campuses of Barnard, Columbia, and City College; that during the 1890s Brunner designed many commercial buildings reflecting the influence of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the subsequent rise of the City Beautiful movement; that this building was commissioned by the developer Joseph L. Bittenwieser and sold in 1897 to Frederick Hill Meserve, an early collector of fine art photography, who conveyed it to Seth M. Milliken, of the prominent textile firm Deering, Milliken & Company in 1899; that many notable tenants were involved in manufacturing, including R. H. Macy's, which produced flags and silk underwear here, the silversmith Graff, Washbourne & Dunn, as well as Epiphone, a leading manufacturer of stringed instruments; that the legendary jazz guitarist Les Paul assembled the first "solid body" electric guitar, a prototype for many electric guitars played today, in the company's workshop; and that after acquiring the building in 1999 Pratt Institute restored it for use as its Manhattan campus.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) 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 144 West 14th Street (aka 138-146 West 14th Street), Manhattan, as a Landmark, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 609, Lots 1101 and 1102, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair

Fred Bland, Stephen Byrns, Diana Chapin, Roberta Brandes Gratz,

Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners



144 West 14th Street (aka 136-146 West 14th Street)

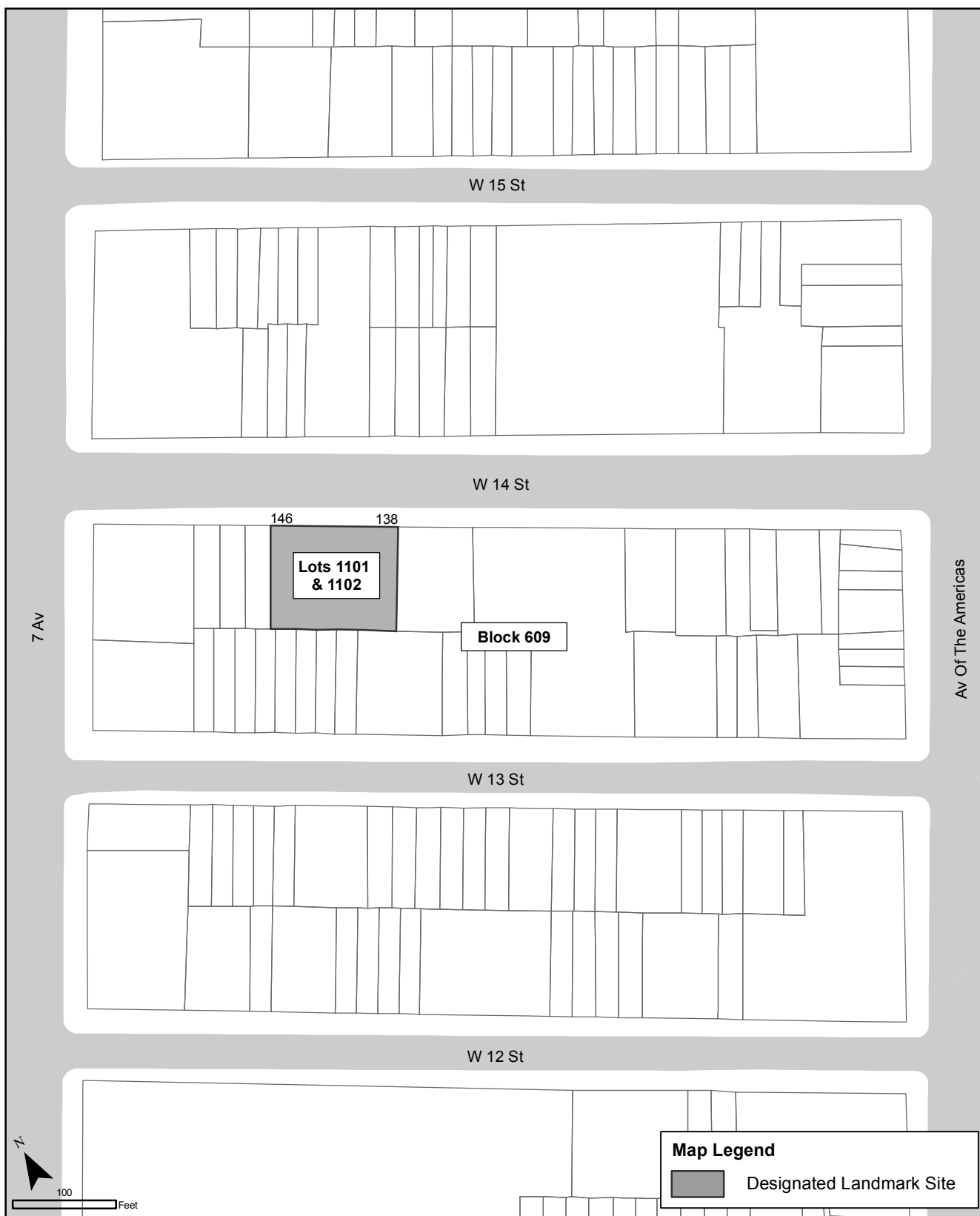
Photo: Chris Brazee



144 West 14th Street
Photos: Matthew A. Postal



144 West 14th Street
Photos: Carl Forster
Details



144 WEST 14TH STREET BUILDING (LP-2315), 144 West 14th Street (aka 138-146 West 14th Street).
Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 609, Lots 1101 and 1102.

Designated: November 18, 2008

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 06C, December 2006.
Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.