

6 West 46th Street: A Loft to Last Another 100 Years



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In Midtown West near Fifth Avenue, a 1924 loft designed by Schwartz & Gross stands tall, proud amongst its different and distinct neighbors.¹ The loft, 6 West 46th Street is unnamed, but it has hosted a famous coffee shop, many jewelry businesses, real estate offices, light manufacturing, show rooms, and more. When examining whether a building is significant and if it should be saved if threatened, it is important to consider the building's history, occupancy, design, and context. With these criteria in mind, 6 West 46th Street is a significant building as it typifies lofts built after the 1916 zoning resolution in New York City, epitomizes the loft building designs of Schwartz & Gross, and is unusual in its neighborhood context. Moreover, the building's well-maintained condition and limited exterior alterations add to its significance.

Background

Built on block 1261 and lot 42 in Manhattan, the site of 6 West 46th Street used to be inhabited by the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church.² The last time this church was mentioned in the newspaper was a 1922 announcement for a funeral to be held in the sanctuary.³ After this article, the newspaper record on the church stops. However, a year later, the 1923 edition of the *Straus Investors Magazine* notes that “the old church was condemned,” making way for the construction of 6 West 46th Street.⁴ The S.W. Straus and Co. was one of the nation's largest investment bond brokers and property financiers in 1924.⁵ The company funded the construction of 6 West 46th Street with a 1.2 million dollar loan.⁶ Designed by the firm of Schwartz & Gross, which created

¹ Office for Metropolitan History, “Metro History Permit Search for 6 West 46 Street,” Office of Metropolitan History, Accessed December 17, 2023.

² Hightower, “Metro History Permit Search for 6 West 46 Street.”

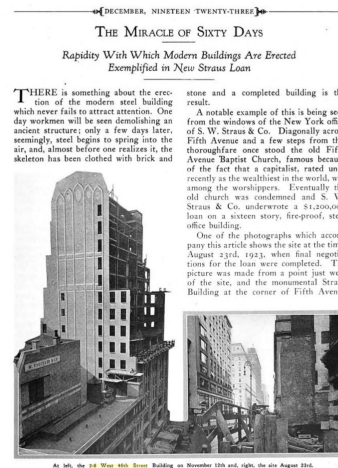
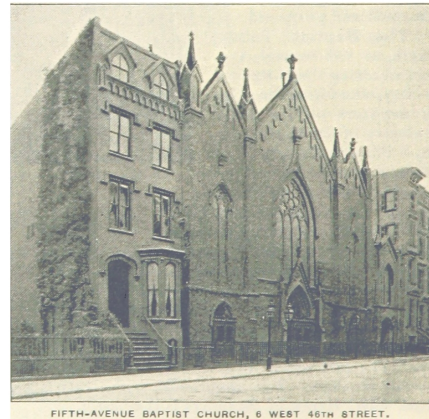
³ “Rail Officials Attend A.T. Hardin's Funeral: Dr. Woelfkin Officiates in 5th Avenue Baptist Church,” *New York Herald*, February 25, 1922, Accessed November 3, 2023.

⁴ S.W. Straus and Company, “The Miracle of Sixty Days,” *Straus Investors Magazine*, Vol 14, 13-14. December 1923, Accessed December 7, 2023.

⁵ “Metropolitan Tower - Straus Building,” Chicago Designs Linger Blog, February 2015, Accessed December 1, 2023.

⁶ S.W. Straus and Company, “The Miracle of Sixty Days.”

around 65 loft buildings in Manhattan, 6 West 46th Street was said to be a miracle in the same *Straus Magazine* article because it was built in only sixty days.⁷



Fifth Avenue Baptist Church⁸ & Straus Investors Magazine Article.⁹

The building was able to rise so quickly because of its steel skeleton, which was then clad in brick and stone with Gothic terra-cotta ornament. The building uses yellow brick and a yellow and tan glazed terra cotta that shines in a way that makes the building appear golden to onlookers.

Looking closer at building design, 6 West 46th Street is a tri-part, symmetrical building with a total of six main setbacks and repetitive Gothic ornament. The center section of the building differs from its two identical wings and contains two tower-like structures, creating the look of a frontispiece. The sweeping nature of the setbacks and the way they are crowned with ornate, pointed terra-cotta cornices creates a sense of verticality as these elements reach toward the sky, especially on its frontispiece-like center. At the same time, the building contains a three-story base which includes bigger windows than the remaining upper floors. These first few floors with their large windows were likely home to retail and commercial spaces which could

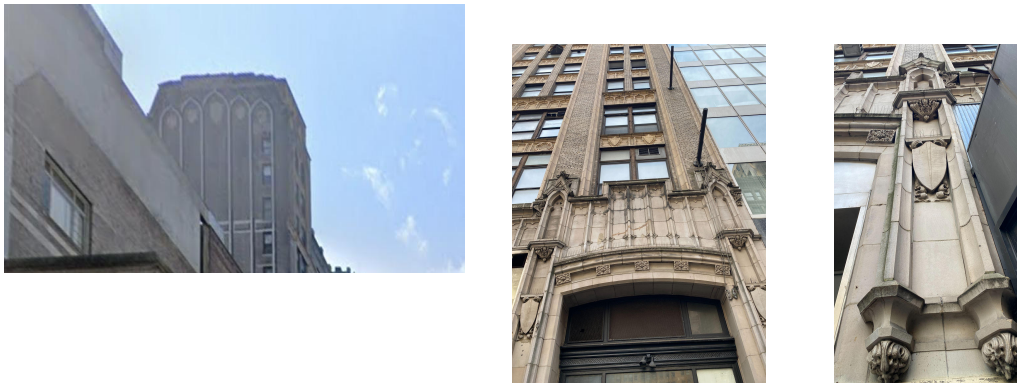
⁷ Sam Hightower, "Metro History Permit Search for Schwartz & Gross," Office of Metropolitan History, Accessed December 17, 2023.

⁸ Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York City* (London: British Library, 1893), 388.

⁹ S.W. Straus and Company, "The Miracle of Sixty Days."

communicate with street level onlookers, whether it was through display window decorations, signage, or something else.

Above the base, the terra-cotta ornament works horizontally across most of the building in spandrels and well-postured cornices formed from shield designs, as well as quatrefoils and floral patterns. There are also many stand-alone shields that crown the upper levels of some setbacks, while others have ornate corbels topped with pointed, tower-like turrets on the edges. The decorative Gothic arches on the side facade are created with the brick, and the Gothic arches on the front facade are crafted with brick as well as terra cotta. The large arches on the left and right side of the front facade contain three large shields and include golden terra-cotta horizontal spandrels, combining many of the horizontal, vertical, and Gothic ornaments of this building.



*Gothic Designs in Brick and Terra Cotta.*¹⁰

By viewing images of the building today and comparing them to the 1940s tax photos, it is clear that not much has changed in terms of the building's facades. The tax photos do not clearly show the first level of the building; however, looking at the tax photos of the building and its appearances in its neighbors' photos, the ornament, windows, and structure look the same in 1940 as they do today. The main difference likely lies in the first floor.

¹⁰ Sophie Hass, Personal Photographs on West 46th Street, November 2023.



1940s NYC Tax Photos of 6 West 46th Street.¹¹

This floor used to house one of Alice Foote MacDougall's famous coffee shops: the Firenze. Known for transforming a small hot coffee business into a restaurant empire, MacDougall opened several restaurants in Manhattan that evoked the style of European cafes. Setting herself apart from crowded lunch counters, MacDougall's restaurants also sold elegant chinaware and glassware. Unfortunately, the Great Depression led to the closing of all of MacDougall's locations, though she later went on to publish cookbooks and an autobiography.¹²



Interior of the Firenze & Alice Foote MacDougall.¹³

¹¹ Julien Boilen, "Street View of 1940s New York: 6 West 46th Street," Accessed November 3, 2023.

¹² Luis Rodriguez, "Alice Foote MacDougall, Queen of the Coffee Shop," New York Historical Society Museum & Library, July 2018, Accessed November 15, 2023.

¹³ Rodriguez, "Alice Foote MacDougall, Queen of the Coffee Shop."

Though there are no known existing photographs of the exterior of the Firenze or the exterior of 6 West 46th Street's first floor, the middle section of this floor currently houses a convenience store with one level descending underground. The style of this store does not look original to the building and is likely an alteration done in the latter half of the 20th century. With this alteration and MacDougall's business in mind, there are no records of what businesses initially inhabited 6 West 46th Street beyond the advertisements for MacDougall's restaurant. When entering the building in the present, a television screen presents a directory of the businesses that currently occupy the building: there are approximately 123 different businesses inside of 6 West 46th Street, many of which are related to jewelry, medicine, and real estate.

From these examples and the discussion of 6 West 46th Street's design, it is clear that this building is quite ornate, in good condition, and well-inhabited nearly one hundred years after its construction. With only one visible exterior alteration and the overall cleanliness of the building, there does not seem to be any imminent or threatening damage, such as visible cracks or water damage. In addition, considering the rising trend and problem of vacancy in Midtown's office buildings, 6 West 46th Street's future seems promising amongst the general Midtown context.¹⁴ Such context sets a strong background for the case of 6 West 46th Street's overall significance and argument that if this building becomes threatened, it should be saved.

¹⁴ Matthew Haag, "What Record Office Vacancies Mean for New York City's Economy," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2023, Accessed December 16, 2023.

Significance



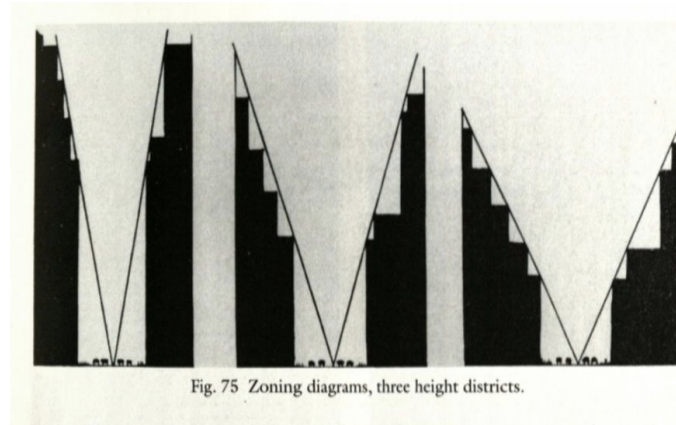
*6 West 46th Street in November 2023.*¹⁵

Alongside the good condition and seeming maintenance of 6 West 46th Street, the building is striking and significant for three reasons, which set it apart from its neighbors and creates a case for its salvation if threatened. First, this building typifies loft buildings after the 1916 Zoning Resolution, especially with its emblematic setbacks. It is especially representative of mid-block lofts as it does not have a large tower. Despite the typicality of the design, the building is highly ornamental with its Gothic features, which sets it apart from its contemporaries.

Building design and development after 1916 was impacted by new laws regarding the zoning envelopes of buildings. To provide more light and air to the streets of New York City, buildings followed rules that determined that at a certain height, a building would have to recess at a certain ratio, creating setbacks and ziggurat-style skyscrapers.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sophie Hass, Personal Photographs on West 46th Street, November 2023.

¹⁶ Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 72.



*Image Exemplifying Post-1916 Buildings with Setbacks.*¹⁷

The zoning law lent itself to symmetrical and visually balanced buildings.¹⁸ The 1916 zoning law is usually associated with buildings that have a large central tower as the law allowed for unlimited height on one quarter of a building's lot.¹⁹ However, this rule that led to profitable and large towers was not utilized for 6 West 46th Street and other midblock buildings, including many loft buildings, because the lots were not large enough for this tall tower construction. Overall, the 1916 Zoning Resolution is usually best known for creating the "setback style," and 6 West 46th Street is a clear example of this beautiful and monumental form and thus typifies the zoning resolution's aesthetic.²⁰

In addition to the 1916 Zoning Resolution, the time period of 6 West 46th Street's construction coincided with the development of loft buildings and their form and style. These buildings were known for having many stories with rentable space and open floor plans that allowed for flexibility. Such loft buildings typically had industrial, showroom, and storage uses.²¹ 6 West 46th Street's documentation from the New York City Department of Buildings

¹⁷ Willis, *Form Follows Finance*, 71.

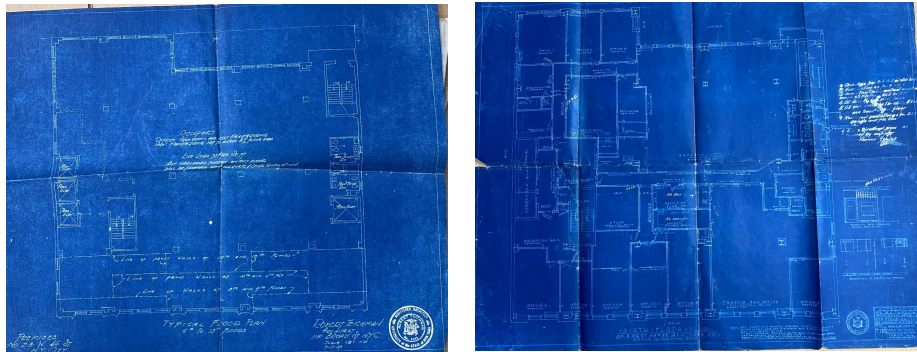
¹⁸ Willis, *Form Follows Finance*, 73.

¹⁹ Willis, *Form Follows Finance*, 76.

²⁰ Willis, *Form Follows Finance*, 77.

²¹ Andrew Dolkart, "The Fabric of New York City's Garment District: Architecture and Development in an Urban Cultural Landscape.," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 18, no. 1 (2011): 17.

(DOB) presents these features across time as the building had many alterations that added partitions on different floors, indicative of the flexibility of the space.²²



6 West 46th Street Blueprints Representing (1) The Typical Open Floor Plan of Floors

*6-13 and (2) a 1939 Alteration to the 6th Floor, Illustrating the Flexibility of These Spaces.*²³

Moreover, the documents from the DOB exemplify the general nature of the floor usage and businesses inside 6 West 46th Street, which include storage, a restaurant, showrooms, offices, and light manufacturing.²⁴ In addition, because loft buildings needed to be modern work spaces, they needed to be fireproof and have ample light and ventilation.²⁵ As such, the steel frame and multitude of windows, and mentions of sprinkler systems and emergency egress in the DOB files all lend themselves to the loft typology that was common in New York City when 6 West 46th Street was built.

Although 6 West 46th street fits the trends and tenets of buildings after 1916, it is generally understood that “loft and showroom buildings are not high-style works of architecture.”²⁶ With their industrial uses and sometimes simple massing of setbacks, loft buildings following the new zoning law in the early 20th century were not known for being

²² “NB Application 289 1923 Block 1261 Lot 42 Drawings Vol III,” NYC Department of Buildings, Accessed November 17, 2023.

²³ NYC Department of Buildings, “NB Application 289 1923 Block 1261 Lot 42 Drawings Vol III.”

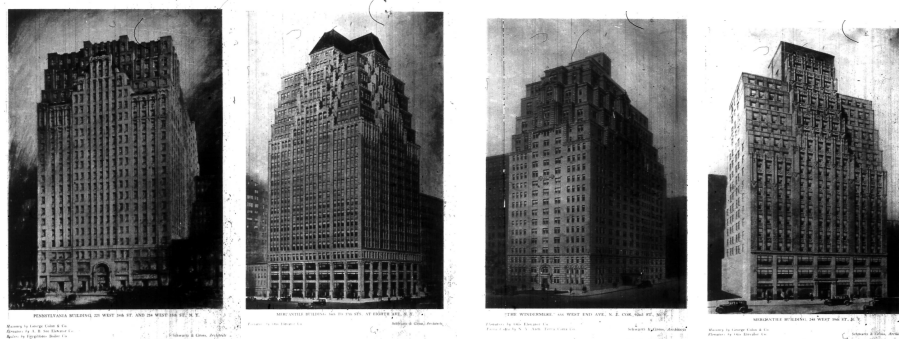
²⁴ NYC Department of Buildings, “NB Application 289 1923 Block 1261 Lot 42 Drawings Vol III.”

²⁵ Dolkart, “The Fabric of New York City’s Garment District,” 25.

²⁶ Dolkart, “The Fabric of New York City’s Garment District,” 31.

ornamental like 6 West 46th street. As such, 6 West 46th Street stands out amongst its contemporaries, shining with its golden color, repetitive decorations, and overall Gothic ornamental details in a way many other setback style loft buildings do not, making it both an example of a specific style while differentiating itself from similar structures.

The second reason supporting 6 West 46th Street's significance is that it epitomizes the loft building designs of the prolific Schwartz & Gross firm. Specifically, Schwartz & Gross loft buildings from this time have three main tenets that create their typology, as evident from their 1927 architectural catalog.²⁷ First, these buildings have a three-part structure in which the building has three distinct sections in a symmetrical rhythm with a two to three story base, likely to communicate with people on the street level for shopping and commercial purposes. Second, the middle section of these three-part buildings projects upward and differs from its two wings, adding an emphasis to the building's verticality and presence, which ultimately acts as a frontispiece on the building. Third, these buildings follow the form of being a square box with a crown, meaning these buildings include an ornamental and staggered top that looks like a crown, rather than the "wedding cake" style generally and typically associated with post 1916 New York buildings.



*Loft Buildings from Schwartz & Gross' 1927 Catalog.*²⁸

²⁷ "Schwartz & Gross, Architects, New York [Microform]," New York: Architectural Catalog Company, Inc, 1927, Accessed December 6, 2023.

²⁸ New York: Architectural Catalog Company, Inc, "Schwartz & Gross, Architects, New York [Microform]."

Looking at examples from Schwartz & Gross' 1927 architectural catalog, it is clear that their loft buildings follow all three tenets above, creating a specific style. Although 6 West 46th Street was not in this catalog, the tri-part form of these buildings with their base with big windows to communicate with the street are evident. In addition, these buildings demonstrate the idea of a frontispiece with the central section of the building differing from the right and left of the building, stacking setbacks that reach toward the top of the building and draw attention to the center. At the top of each building, though following different styles and forms with some being more staggered, some more square, and some more pointed, all of these examples and more from the catalog present the crown shape atop the lower box-like structure of the loft buildings.

The third reason for 6 West 46th Street's significance is its neighborhood context. Many loft buildings are clustered in New York City's Garment District, including 25 by Schwartz & Gross, making 6 West 46th Street's placement outside of this district interesting.²⁹ It is separated from its prolific Garment District sisters, and there is only one other loft building on its block.



*21 West 46th Street, this Block's Other Loft Building.*³⁰

6 West 46th Street's across the street neighbor 21 West 46th Street was not designed by Schwartz & Gross, though it does have a similar base and somewhat central focus. This loft's frontispiece

²⁹ Dolkart, "The Fabric of New York City's Garment District," 36.

³⁰ Sophie Hass, Personal Photographs of on West 46th Street, November 2023.

focus is disrupted by the asymmetry of a tower on the building's top left corner. In addition, 21 West 46th Street is much less ornate than 6 West 46th Street, making it seem much less striking than the Gothic glamor of 6 West 46th Street. Moreover, although a few buildings on this block have Gothic ornament, they do not compare to the overwhelming, intricate, and repetitive style used on 6 West 46th Street. It is the most stylized building on the block, comparable only to its farther-away Garment District sisters designed by Schwartz & Gross and other architects.

In the concrete and glass curtain wall context of this block, the future of 6 West 46th Street is uncertain. One day this building may be under threat by new development, even though it does not seem threatened today. There are two empty lots across the street from the building, recently cleared to make way for the construction of a new supertall skyscraper at 570 Fifth Avenue for Extell.



Renderings of 570 Fifth Avenue as an Office Building (left) and Mixed-Use Hotel and Condominium (right).³¹

³¹ Young, "Demolition Underway for Extell's Potential Supertall At 570 Fifth Avenue In Midtown, Manhattan."

The proposed building will either operate as a hotel and condominium space or as an office skyscraper, and it will likely be completed between 2027 and 2028.³² The new building will directly face and tower over 6 West 46th Street, likely casting it in its 21st century, bronze-colored shadow. This is not to say that the new construction is bad; it represents a new step in New York City development as a supertall, just as 6 West 46th Street once represented a new typology when it was built following the 1916 Zoning Resolution. At the same time, however, as more historic buildings are being demolished in favor of new skyscrapers in Midtown, it is important to look at their context and which buildings will be cast in their shadow.

In essence, 6 West 46th Street is an ornate and striking 1924 Schwartz & Gross loft building separated from its similar Garment District sisters. It still stands tall and proud on its block in between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue, typifying the post-1916 Zoning Resolution loft typology while standing apart from it because of its intricate and stunning design. 6 West 46th Street further represents the architectural form of Schwartz & Gross' loft designs with a three-part symmetrical structure, three story base, frontispiece focus, and box-like structure with a crown on top of it. As such, this building stands as a reminder of the past as it exists in the present and differs substantially from the other buildings on its block. The good condition from being well-maintained, as well as being well-leased with 123 businesses, further denotes the success of 6 West 46th Street across time despite issues of office vacancy in Manhattan. Ultimately, 6 West 46th Street is significant as it juxtaposes commonality and incredible ornament. With its golden terra-cotta crown, 6 West 46th Street should stand for another 100 years, facing the goliaths that will no doubt rise around it but never faltering against them as it stands as a relic of 1924 that is still well used and taken care of in 2023.

³² Michael Young, "Demolition Underway for Extell's Potential Supertall At 570 Fifth Avenue In Midtown, Manhattan," New York YIMBY, March 2022, Accessed December 1, 2023.

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