

# 101 West 116th Street (Bernheimer Building)

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Image courtesy the Library of Congress. Circa 1986.

**INTRO:**

The Bernheimer Building, located at 101 West 116th Street in Harlem, is a 1906 tenant business building situated within a primarily residential district with close proximity to the two subway line. Its current condition represents the myriad of uses to which it has been witness in its 126-years of service to Harlem.

Maxwell and Simon E. Bernheimer, for whom this building of study was named, were sons to Emmanuel Bernheimer who emigrated from Germany to New York City in 1844.<sup>1</sup> In 1850, with business partner August Schmid, Emmanuel founded the Lion Brewery in New



*Figure 1 - The Lion Brewery at Columbus Ave. and 108th St. Photo courtesy Tavern Trove.*

<sup>1</sup> Brooks, Jay. "Historic Beer Birthday: Simon E. Bernheimer." [Brookston Beer Bulletin](#), November 27, 2021.

York City, their initial establishment located at the intersection of Columbus Avenue and 108th Street.<sup>2</sup> (Figure. 1) After Emmanuel's retirement in 1878, his son Simon succeeded him as a partner in the Lion Brewery.<sup>3</sup> Schmid's death in 1889 resulted in the shift of ownership to his wife, Josephine Schmid. In the next six years, the Lion Brewery grew to become the sixth largest brewer in the nation, despite mounting tensions between the business partners and Schmid's widow. In 1901, proving to be an incompatible business relationship, Josephine bought out all of the constituents of the brewery with whom her husband had so long been affiliated. The Bernheimer brothers and long-time business partner Anton Schwartz invested in their own brewing venture shortly thereafter in what would become the Bernheimer and Schwartz Pilsner Brewing Company. They built their newest facility at the intersection of Amsterdam Avenue and West 128th Street, which, in part still



Figure 2 - The Bernheimer and Schwartz 1903 facility at 128th St. and Amsterdam Ave. Image courtesy Daytonian in Manhattan.

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<sup>2</sup> White, J. T. The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography. Vol. 5. J. T. White Company, 1894. p.375.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, Jay. "Historic Beer Birthday: Simon E. Bernheimer." Brookston Beer Bulletin, November 27, 2021.

stands today.<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2)

The Bernheimer enterprise proved lucrative, to which their heirs could attest. In a 1943 New York Daily News special, the unfolding story of a gruesome murder was described, the victim being Patricia Burton Lonergan, 22-year-old heiress to the four million dollar Bernheimer fortune left by her grandfather, Maxwell Bernheimer. The feature named her husband, Cadet Wayne Lonergan as a likely suspect in the murder. In further researching the on-goings of the Bernheimer brothers' enterprise, one may encounter traces of other business ventures that they sought in tandem with the production of pilsner which contributed to this fortune. One such development and the subject of this paper was the construction of a speculative commercial building known as the "Bernheimer Building".

#### **DEVELOPMENT & TENANTS:**

Reflecting their business-savvy practices, the location at which the Bernheimers decided to invest in this business facility posed a host of advantages, especially where transportation was concerned. In 1895, The Metropolitan Railway Company opened a street car along Malcolm X Boulevard (then, Lenox Avenue) spanning between West 110th Street and the Harlem River.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, prior to the Bernheimer's acquisition of the corner lot in 1905, the Interborough Rapid Transit subway had established a line along Lenox Avenue in 1904 with a stop at West 116th Street.<sup>6</sup> This building was well suited for this area not only for the ease with which it could be accessed, but also in its immersion in an area replete with

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, Tom. The 1903 Bernheimer & Schwartz Brewery -- Amsterdam Avenue and 128th Street, January 1, 1970. <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2012/03/1903-bernheimer-schwartz-brewery.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Urban Archive. "Bickford's Restaurant." Urban Archive. <https://www.urbanarchive.org/sites/WGEyEAwJNhfxFgBcTrv8Ef>.

<sup>6</sup> "Early Rapid Transit in New York." [nycsubway.org: Early Rapid Transit In New York. https://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/Early\\_Rapid\\_Transit\\_In\\_New\\_York](https://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/Early_Rapid_Transit_In_New_York).

residential buildings. In examining the New York City address telephone directories, one can see that this location evidently proved ideal for many, as these business directories show tremendous numbers of tenants in the earlier years of the building's operation. A quick sample of the businesses in this building between the years of 1929 and 1986 at roughly five year intervals revealed 53 different business entries.<sup>7</sup>

A comprehensive look at all details of the tenants and activities of the Bernheimer building is beyond the scope of this essay, but some of the key trends and events will be touched on. The specialties of the businesses who occupied this building include: liturgical organizations; dance studios and education; special education; medical and dental facilities; municipal government operations; restaurants; grocery stores; retail spaces of furniture, municipal government operations; restaurants; grocery stores; retail spaces of furniture,

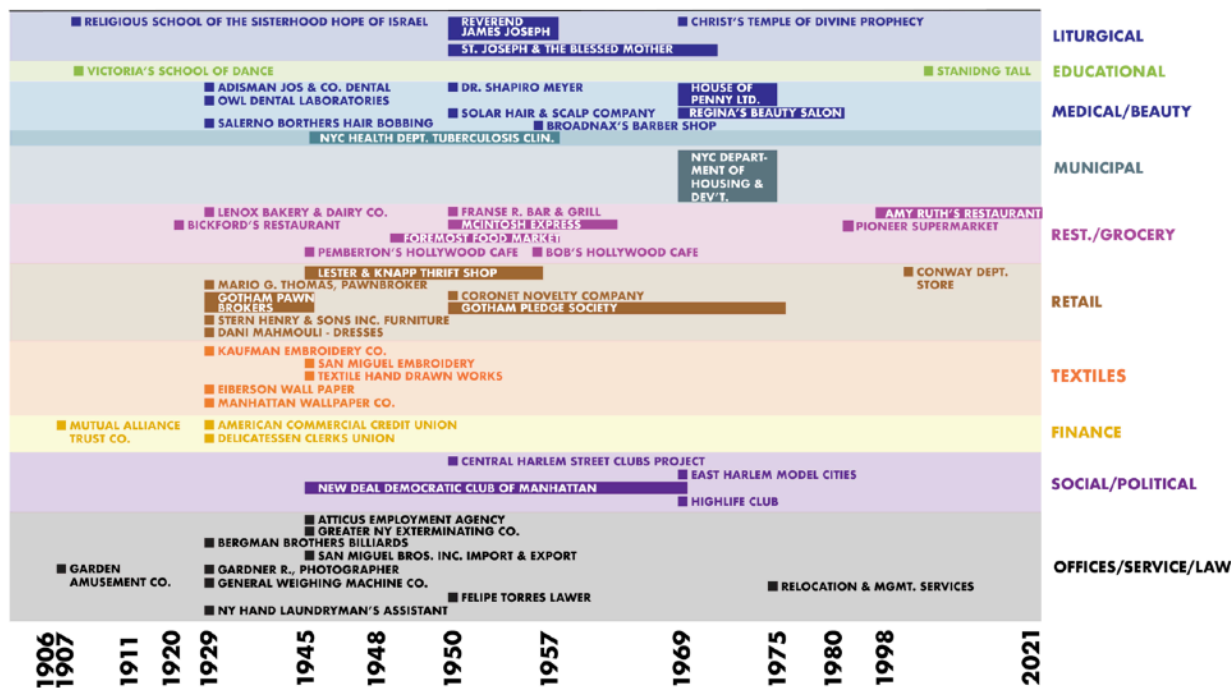


Figure 3 - at-a-glance view of the various businesses that occupied the Bernheimer Building. This list is in no way exhaustive of every tenant that occupied it. Source: New York City Address Telephone Directories: 1929, 1948, 1950, 1957, 1969, 1975, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> New York Telephone Company. 1929, 1948, 1950, 1957, 1969, 1975, 1980. *New York City Telephone Directory. Manhattan.*

pawning, dresses and novelties; barber shops and beauty parlors; textile industries; financial operations; social and political organizations; law offices; and a host of others. These findings were mapped onto a diagram which divides them into the aforementioned categories (Fig. 3). A close look at these businesses reveals some that were part of larger chains of businesses and others were locally-owned.

A 1921 *New York Times* advertisement names the “Victoria School for Dancing”, in the Bernheimer Building. It offered a series of eight dance lessons for a total of ten dollars.<sup>8</sup> Bickfords Restaurant chain was at one time located here, evident in an image sourced from the Museum of the City of New York. Samuel Longley Bickford established his restaurant



Figure 4 - A streetcar with the Bernheimer Building at left. Bickford's delicate signage can be made out to the immediate left of the streetcar. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

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<sup>8</sup> “Victoria School for Dancing.” *The New York Times*, June 22, 1921.

chain in 1921, the Bernheimer branch subsequently appearing in 1930.<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 4) In 1937 the New York Times reported that “The City of New York has leased space on the second floor of the Bernheimer Building, at the northwest corner of Lenox Avenue and 116th Street, for a courtroom to be occupied by the Tenth District Municipal Court.”<sup>10</sup> By 1969, the Bernheimer building was host to one of the only department stores it would ever see; Woolworths. As will later be discussed, this resulted in one of the most substantial alterations to the exterior of the building. More recent tenants include Standing Tall special education and Amy Ruths Homestyle Southern Cuisine, which has occupied a portion of the building since 1998. A series of drawings provided by the Department of Buildings reveal the 1998 renovations and interior reconfigurations that Amy Ruth’s made to accommodate their restaurant and kitchen spaces on the ground level. The Standing Tall Facility occupies a large portion of the second level of the building.

Given that it hosted so many people and events, the Bernheimer building found itself occasionally witness to some excitement. A 1911 article from the New York Times details the New York City Police Department’s raid of an illegal gambling event, hosted by the Mauretania Club, on the second level of the Bernheimer building. The article is detailed in its accounts of the officers’ raid on the club’s gambling event, describing the lookout’s failed attempts to warn the club members of the imminent breach and the officers’ subsequent forced entry through the door. At the end of the raid, fourteen arrests were made of gamblers partaking in bets on a horserace in Jacksonville, Florida. Confiscation of much gambling paraphernalia including a “complete poolroom outfit, a large roulette table and

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<sup>9</sup> Urban Archive. “Bickford's Restaurant.” Urban Archive. <https://www.urbanarchive.org/sites/WGEyEAwJNhfxFgBcTrv8Ef>

<sup>10</sup> “Tenth District Municipal Court.” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1921.

wheel, a faro layout, thousands of chips, several boxes of dice.”<sup>11</sup> In 1948, the New York Times reported that “Fifty foot and mounted policemen, and sixty detectives were sent to Harlem late last night as a precautionary measure following a disorder in the afternoon in a food market at 101 West 116th Street, at Lenox Avenue.”

### **AESTHETIC DESCRIPTION/ALTERATIONS:**

According to the New York Times, the plot of land for the Bernheimer building was purchased by Simon and Max Bernheimer for \$94,000 in 1905. It also notes how this property was adjacent to another plot of land the brothers already owned.<sup>12</sup> Combined, this made for a lot that was 100 by 200 feet in size, large in comparison to the footprints of



Figure 5 - 29 East 19th St.  
New York, NY



Figure 6 - Kenilworth Apartments,  
Central Park West, New York, NY



Figure 7 - 8 East 34th St.  
New York, NY

<sup>11</sup> “Raid Big Gambling House in Harlem.” *The New York Times*, March 03, 1911.

<sup>12</sup> “Bernheimer Buys on 116th Street.” *The New York Times*. March 02, 1905.



buildings in the immediate area. According to the Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide of 1906, the Bernheimer brothers consulted Townsend, Steinle and Haskell Architects to design their new building which was constructed during this year for a cost of one-hundred thousand dollars.<sup>13</sup> Townsend, Steinle and Haskell frequently designed hotels and apartment buildings in the New York City area (Figs. 5, 6 & 7). The Office for Metropolitan History reveals that one of their most noteworthy projects was the Beaux Arts style Kenilworth Apartments at 151 Central Park West. The Bernheimer project was relatively small in budget and in scale



Figure 8 - 1940 Tax Photo showing the original southern portico with its broken triangular pediment. Photo courtesy the New York City Municipal Archives.

compared to some of the others which the firm was commissioned to design.<sup>14</sup> Though much smaller in budget, the Bernheimer building similarly demonstrates rich ornamental detailing as those of Townsend, Steinle and Haskell's other larger projects.

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<sup>13</sup> Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide, July 1906.

<sup>14</sup> "Lenox Avenue, West 116th Street, northwest corner." *Office for Metropolitan History*.



Figure 9 - The surviving cast stone portico at the West 116th Street entrance. Photo by author.

A 1940 tax photograph reveals what appears to be the building's original facade (Fig. 8) The image shows a classical facade, bipartite in composition both on the West 116th Street and Lenox Avenue facades. The principle facade on West 116th Street and in the left hand of the 1940 image is divided into 18 bays. At the center bay on the ground level of this facade is a portico with a pediment broken by a cartouche which is still extant (Fig. 9). Of note at the center of the 1940 image and on the chamfered corner of the building flanked by the West 116th Street and Lenox Avenue facades is another classical portico, triangular in shape marking the entrance to a tenant space. This pediment has since been lost, and is no longer visible on the facade. In comparing additional 1940 tax photographs with contemporary observations, the upper stories of the building appear relatively intact in comparison to the ground-level street facades.



Figure 10 - The building in December of 2021. Photo by author.

In examining the facade today, one can notice a myriad of similarities and differences with its 1940 appearance (Fig. 10). The aforementioned extant portico appears to be made of cast-stone, as its denticulated trim has begun to crumble from underneath. To the frieze of this portico are attached bronze or copper letters stating “Bernheimer Building”. These letters have developed a rich verdigris patina, but a few of them are missing. The Malcolm X Boulevard facade is similar to its West 116th Street facade in that the second story is far more intact from the 1906 design than its ground-level counterpart. This facade is divided into nine structural bays. The greater portion of the street level appears to have been clad with some sort of cementitious material, with a concrete stringcourse at about eight feet from the sidewalk to support awnings. Dotted the Malcolm X Boulevard facade are a series of small metal roll-up doors. A street entrance can be seen at the north end of this facade. Amy Ruth’s Homestyle Southern Cuisine occupies about a third of the West 116th ground level facade, breaking up the monotony of the otherwise plain ground level.



*Figure 11 - A glance of the classical detailing of the upper floor of the Bernheimer Building. Photo by author.*



*Figure 12 - Photo by author.*

The classical facade of the upper stories is clad with what appears to be terra cotta, glazed to resemble limestone (Fig. 11). Records from the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company reveal that Townsend, Steinle and Haskell architects commonly specified terra cotta facades with glazing treatments to resemble limestone. The pilasters of this second level are done in such a way that gives them a likeness to rusticated stone. Intermediate pilasters at each end of the building and above the classical portico are fluted

and feature Ionic capitals. The spandrels above every second level window are adorned with cartouches and festoons. More cartouches abound on the capitals of the rusticated pilasters. This terra cotta has sporadic penetrations and cracks (Fig 12). From the western edge of the



Figure 13 - Missing cornice, subsequent staining and plant growth. Photo by author.

building, a green sheet metal cornice with a denticulated trim remains intact. This cornice lines only about one sixth of the two street facades combined. Elsewhere, it has been removed altogether. This results in a notably abrupt edge in line with the right-hand edge of Amy Ruth's storefront. There are visible signs of water staining a stringcourse which were at one point protected by the cornice. Too, there are numerous cases on this stringcourse where vegetative growth can be seen. (Fig. 13)

In 1920, the *New York Times* Reported a fire swept "through the two-story Bernheimer Building at 107-111 West 116th Street ... flames bearing down on the branch of the Chatham

and Phenix National Bank located in one of the dozen small stores in the ground floor of the building.”<sup>15</sup> The extent of the fire damage is not known from this article, but it is evident in observing the building’s lobby today that interior renovations have been heavy-handed. Another substantial alteration to the building came with the occupation of the Woolworth department store in 1969. An alteration record from this year at the Municipal Archives states that the project “rehabilitated [the] first floor and basement.”<sup>16</sup> As described, the resulting alteration is pronounced in the context of the greater facade. It entailed the infilling of nearly all of the storefronts at the building’s ground level, which produced the facade seen today. This renovation also likely marks the point at which the missing triangular portico at the



Figure 14 - A photo taken from roughly 1948 showing the removed parapet of the building. Photo Courtesy Museum of the City of New York.

<sup>15</sup> “Fire at Bernheimer Building.” *The New York Times*. January 26, 1920.

<sup>16</sup> “Record of conveyances for 101-115 West 116th Street.” *New York City Municipal Archives*. 1969.

building's chamfered corner disappeared. Additionally, the parapet seen in the 1940 tax photo of the building disappeared sometime in the late 1940's, and has not since been reinstated. (Fig. 14) In referencing this same 1940 image, one can make out the pivot transom windows aligning the entire second story of the building.

Overall, the building today fortunately still boasts a portion of its original classical detailing and fabric. While these features endure, the building has lost some of the visual presence and capacity to engage with its community in its loss of the storefront facades. Not only does this current ground-level facade stand in contrast with the 1906 facade of the second story, it also contradicts the nature of its entire surroundings, which are otherwise filled with enticing storefronts (Figs. 15 & 16). The bustling activity observed at neighboring businesses which use transparent storefronts is a testament to the value with which the neighborhood views them. Further, Amy Ruth's Restaurant located in the Bernheimer building



Figure 15 - Storefronts opposing the Bernheimer Building's West 116th Street facade. Photo by author.



Figure 16 - Storefronts on the west end of the Bernheimer Building's Block. Photo by author.

itself has been a locally-owned business since 1998, shows the potential for a more community-engaged storefront environment. In order to foster potential organizations and/or businesses that could serve residents in the immediate area, an intervention to reinstate some of the transparency of the Bernheimer Building's ground level is therefore proposed.

In terms of intervening with the building in its current state, the greatest priority is to reinstate storefronts along the entire length of facade at ground level. These storefronts should build on the structural bays delineated in the 1906 design above to give greater congruence to the facade as a whole. Second, and less importantly, the missing cornice has resulted in a visual fragmentation of the building's notably long facades. Too, its absence has resulted in the staining of its terra cotta facades beneath it. The missing segments could be



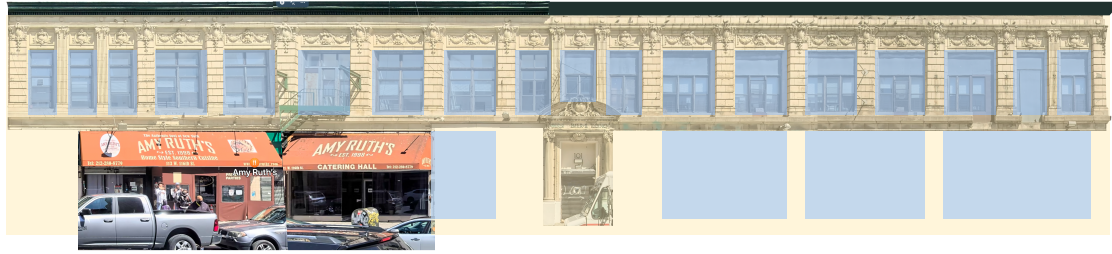


Figure 17 - Elevations showing glass storefronts and cornice reinstated in the building's facade.

reinstated in order to rectify the building's visual unity and to protect the century-old terra cotta facade below (Fig. 17).

In conclusion, the Bernheimer Building is significant for: its association with an established architectural firm in New York City; its association with a New York City brewing empire; and most importantly in its extensive history of tenants which have catered to the residents in the area. The great breadth of businesses and community members for which it has been a host is a testament to the role the building has played in Harlem's history since its construction in 1906. Combined with the architectural features which it still retains, along with this rich history of facilitating a myriad of Harlem organizations and businesses, the Bernheimer Building is significant and worthy of preservation efforts. It has the potential to continue to act as a community anchor for many generations to come. Future preservation efforts must be orchestrated carefully to best suit the needs specific to the community of Harlem.





# Notes

"Bernheimer Buys on 116th Street." *The New York Times*. March 02, 1905.

Brooks, Jay. "Historic Beer Birthday: Simon E. Bernheimer." *Brookston Beer Bulletin*, November 27, 2021. <https://brookstonbeerbulletin.com/historic-beer-birthday-simon-e-bernheimer/>.

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Brewery photos:

<https://www.taverntrove.com/lion-brewery-of-new-york-city-of-new-york-new-york-usa-br-4170.html?plD=23995>

Bio on Bernheimers:

<https://brookstonbeerbulletin.com/historic-beer-birthday-simon-e-bernheimer/>