Koch & Company Department Store

132-140 West 125th Street

Significance Assessment

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Studio I

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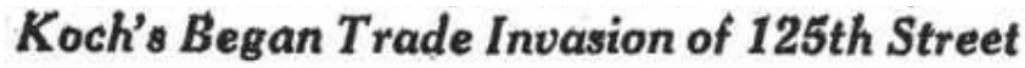
132-140 West 125th Street houses a moribund SNAP food center on 125th street is an invaluable key to decoding Harlem's dynamic cultural and developmental history. An impressive building of the Romanesque Revival style, it stands six stories tall above Harlem's major commercial thoroughfare between Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevards. Though much of its light colored brick and terra-cotta facade is hidden behind scaffolding today, it's impossible to miss the iconic nameplate above the cornice, pronouncing "Koch & Co." in pressed metal. Yet when walking down the busy street into the Jimmy Jazz discount clothing store on the ground level, or perusing street vendor wares like incense, disposable masks, and colorfully printed clothes, it may be easy to forget to look up. Yet the story behind this building's name takes us through Harlem's history as a thriving center of development, a haven for immigrant communities, and its integration as a major New York City neighborhood. Through my exploration of 132-140 West 125th Street's history, it is clear that this is a building that deserves to be preserved and recognized for its historic significance today.



Headline, *The New York Times* 1930.

Erected in 1891, the Koch & Co. department store was the first major commercial outlet on the then-residential 125th street.[1] Harlem's population had begun to steadily increase due to an influx of railroads, elevated transit, and speculative row house

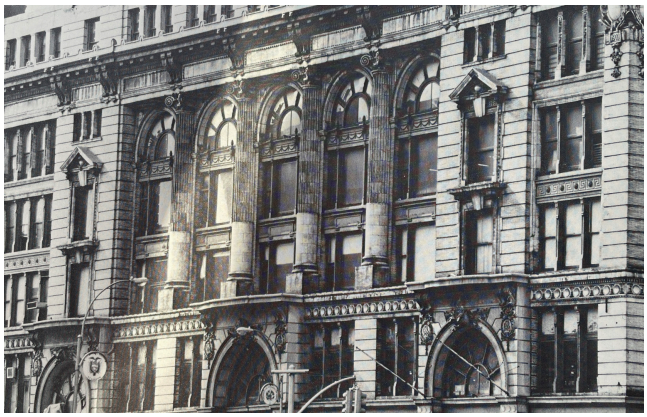
[1] Dolkart, Andrew. *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan.*

development designed to serve and attract a growing New York City population that was overcrowding Manhattan's historic downtown city center. In the late decades of the 19th century, Harlem was considered by many to be a suburban, sleepy region of the city, maybe akin to how we view Westchester today. Yet this distinct northern neighborhood character meant Harlem had a city feel all of its own. A burgeoning local community of white-collar, largely second-generation Americans flocked to the new apartment houses and row homes designed to attract middle-class, Protestant families, as heads of household could commute easily downtown via the newly laid IRT subway.

The Koch family, whose head of household was Henry Christian Frederich Koch, or Henry C. F. for short, was part of a German immigrant community of professionals living in the newly built, spacious brownstones of the area. Henry left his native Germany in 1851 originally seeking a fast fortune in Australia during their gold rush, but he left for New York just two years later, in 1853, settling here permanently and even becoming a naturalized citizen in 1873. By 1858, the young Henry Koch had married Lavinia Sarah Heath, another German-American who bore his first son, Henry Gustave.[2] His new father-in-law, though, was a key figure in Henry's fortune, offering to partner with his young son-in-law in the opening of a dry goods business in 1860. Located first at the corner of Carmine and Bleecker Streets downtown, this was the first iteration of Koch & Co. The success of the enterprise was quick, as Koch became known for his variety of European goods and his variety of price, catering to both ends

[2] "Henry Christian Frederich Koch," Census 1900, ancestry.com

of the spectrum. His store quickly outgrew its small outpost in the dense quarter of the West Village, and coincided with the nationwide interest in large, European-style department stores.



Figures 1-3, (from top to bottom):
Hugh O'Neills (1875) designed by Mortimer C. Merritt
Siegel Cooper (1895) designed by DeLemos and Cordes
Adams Dry Goods (1900) designed by DeLemos and Cordes

Department stores were not just purveyors of goods and services, as dry goods stores were, but were monuments to commerce through their fanciful architecture and industrial size. Many iconic structures we still enjoy today, like Hugh O'Neills (1875) designed by Mortimer C. Merritt, and the imposing Siegel Cooper (1895) designed by DeLemos and Cordes, still reign over 6th avenue, nicknamed "The Ladies' Mile" during this boom. In 1875, Koch & Co. joined their ranks, ready to act and look the part of a fine, modern department store uptown. However, tragedy struck the Koch family with Lavinia's sudden death shortly before the store's opening.

Henry C. F. the bachelor continued to throw his energies into the family business though with the help of his first son, Henry Gustave, as well as two sons from his second marriage to the much younger Anna Catherine Scheeper, named Erduin and William. They enthusiastically joined their father in business upon finishing their studies. These two younger sons also came to be the leaders of the business in later years, as Henry Gustave broke off relations with his father in an argument over his last name: Henry Gustave had personal issues with his father's new, much younger wife, and insisted on changing his name formally to his biological mother's name, Heath. Henry C. F. subsequently withdrew his first son from the family business partnership, and later, out of his will.[3] (see figure 6)

This dispute also led the Koch family of four — Henry, Anna, Erduin and William — to move their place of residence uptown independently — settling at their new townhouse

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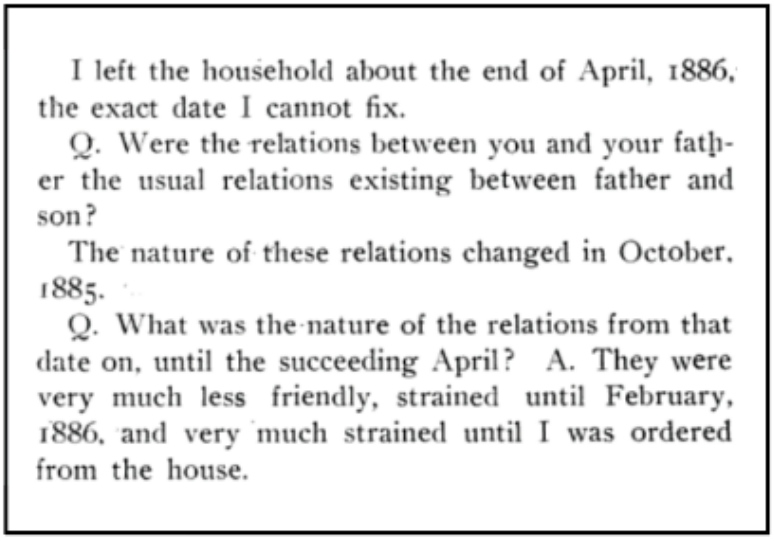
[3]"Son Contests Koch Will," *The New York Times*, Sep 25, 1900.



I left the household about the end of April, 1886, the exact date I cannot fix.

Q. Were the relations between you and your father the usual relations existing between father and son?

The nature of these relations changed in October, 1885.

Q. What was the nature of the relations from that date on, until the succeeding April? A. They were very much less friendly, strained until February, 1886, and very much strained until I was ordered from the house.

Court transcription between Henry Gustave and his lawyer, contesting his father's will, 1900.

residence at 224 Lenox Avenue — while Henry Gustave rented his own quarters with a small fortune supplied to him by his grandmother's passing. As Manhattan kept expanding northward to accommodate new populations and business, the Koch's saw an opportunity for the department store in an emerging market, without the ferocity of downtown competition. At the time, 125th street was lined with a scattering of single-family homes as well as newer multi-family tenement houses, yet the area had no commerce of its own: Residents would take the elevated downtown to the shopping and financial centers. So, the opening of the well-known, and well-heeled Koch & Co. store was a monumental occurrence for the status and commercial vigor of the new neighborhood.[4]

Henry C. F. Koch commissioned renowned architect William H. Hume to design his store at 132-140 West 125th street, a site that had previously hosted a small shack and

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[4]"A Busy Harlem Department Store" *The New York Herald,* 16 Aug 1903.

1940 NYC Tax Photo, 224 Lenox Avenue: The Koch family home, 1891

a horse stable. Hume had designed many impressive “Ladies’ Mile” department stores downtown, like the B. Altman Stores, still standing today as the Container Store at 6th Avenue and 19th Street. He had also specialized in the building of Romanesque-style “high rise” buildings (for the time) like the Langdon Building at Duane Street and Broadway, whose height is clad in the solidity and weight of Romanesque monumental blocks and round arches. Yet he had also displayed proficiency in designing with new, innovative architectural forms like cast iron, which he employed in several buildings on Greene Street, now part of the trendy, loft quarter of SoHo we call the Cast Iron District. By bringing these contemporary architectural sensibilities together, Hume crafted an impressive and symmetrical building for Koch & Co. that showcased

intricate brick and terra-cotta work on the main facade, as well as state-of-the-art cast-iron columns at the store's ground floor, complete with casts of the store's "initials," KCo.

Original cast iron initials at the storefront. Photo courtesy the author

While the proposed building was completed in 1891, just two years later Koch commissioned Hume to expand it — 132-140 rose from four to six stories, adding a bold fifth-story arcade of arches and a narrow sixth clerestory at the very top. This expanded the store's footprint even more, to 50,000 square feet of sales space, and also coincided with the acquisition of a stockroom, or warehouse, specifically for large items like furniture sets immediately behind the store on the south side of 124th street.

Though the Koch family commissioned the building, almost immediately upon its completion the *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* conveyances indicate they sold it, becoming tenants on a 30-year lease but taking in a sizable cash sum.[5] By the turn of the century, business was booming. The store's arrival had opened the floodgates for 125th street's renaissance, turning it from a quiet residential avenue into the busiest commercial and industrial thoroughfare in northern Manhattan.

Left: A 2017 image of Koch & Co., courtesy Walter Grutchfield
Right: An 1891 illustration of Koch & Co., courtesy *New York Times* archives

However, the Koch family also was socially drawn to the burgeoning German immigrant community of white-collar status in south Harlem at the time. They moved into a stately brownstone at 224 Lenox Avenue in 1891, the same year their store broke ground on

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[5] *The Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide,* pg. 987, July 1893.

125th Street. The family home housed, throughout the years, several German/Austrian servant girls, occasionally Henry's German-residing nephew, Julius Holehamp, as well as occasional members of Anna's extended family, over three decades.

The block they lived on offers a glimpse into the community they found: Most families on the block in the late 1890s were German or Austrian in origin, and the heads of the families held jobs like clerk, manager, salesmen and lawyer. Their wives and elder daughters were listed as "at home," rather than working, and households usually had one to three live-in servants.[6] Many were from Germany or Austria as well, likely trying to gain a footing just as the more established families had, but in some cases there were also African-American women newly arrived from the American South, from states like Maryland, Virginia or North Carolina. In the decades to come, this movement of Black communities looking for more opportunity and tolerance in the north would be called the Great Migration, and greatly change, and enrich, the demographic landscape and culture of Harlem.

Koch & Co. enjoyed great success in Harlem for three decades. The store's success was reported and cited in many real estate and commercial circles, papers, and trade journals of the day. A report in the *Real Estate and Builder's Guide* of June 1891 gave Koch & Co. the "Last Week's Big Sale" column, where it was written that:

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[6] "Henry Christian Frederich Koch," Census 1900, ancestry.com

> "This sale is not only the strongest evidence during the last year or two of the great faith which investors have in 125th street property, but it shows that there is a city of itself in Harlem, where business is being done independently of downtown stores."[7]

The move was a signal to the city that Harlem was a prosperous, cosmopolitan neighborhood where successful immigrants like Henry C. F. Koch could live out their American dream after years of hard work in the congestion and competition of downtown Manhattan. It also announced that Harlem was a neighborhood where development would be welcomed, and where businessmen would received healthy returns on their pioneering investments.

When Henry C. F. Koch died in 1900, many mourned, and his death was reported in newspapers and journals across the city and the country. It was quickly announced that the eldest son in the family business, Erduin, would take over in his father's stead. Business continued to prosper for Koch & Co. under Erduin's direction over the subsequent two decades. Management changed hands again upon Erduin's own death in 1929, when William then took over. At this time, Koch's was approaching the end of its 30-year lease at 132-140 West 125th street, and the United States felt the immense financial impact of the Great Depression. It also was a time of changing cultural tides and demographics in Harlem.

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[7] "Last Week's Big Sale," *The Real Estate and Builder's Guide,* June 16, 1891.

Harlem's changing neighborhood character was reflected in many ways in Koch & Co. clientele. The neighborhood was largely white, Protestant and European when the Koch's moved into their Lenox Avenue home. However, as Harlem's speculatively developed row houses and tenement apartments failed to meet projected vacancy goals after the financial panic of 1897, coupled with a cessation of resources and economic shrinkage during World War I, many landlords turned their rentals and sales to New York's Black community. Former slaves and their families who had migrated from the South during the Great Migration either traveled directly to Harlem, or moved to Harlem from downtown neighborhoods like Hell's Kitchen, where racial tensions between Jews, Irish and Italians had led to territorial battles over community space. As Harlem landlords began to let to Black tenants, the dream of a self-sufficient Black community seemed to be within grasp, and attracted sharecroppers from the South, new immigrants from the Caribbean, and even other Black communities from large cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and St. Louis who were looking to join in the cultural eruption. Within a decade, from 1900-1910 and onwards, Harlem shifted towards its role to the center for Black life and culture as we know it today, though not without the continuous racist social, economic, and political policies that plagued New York, and the country at large, at the time.

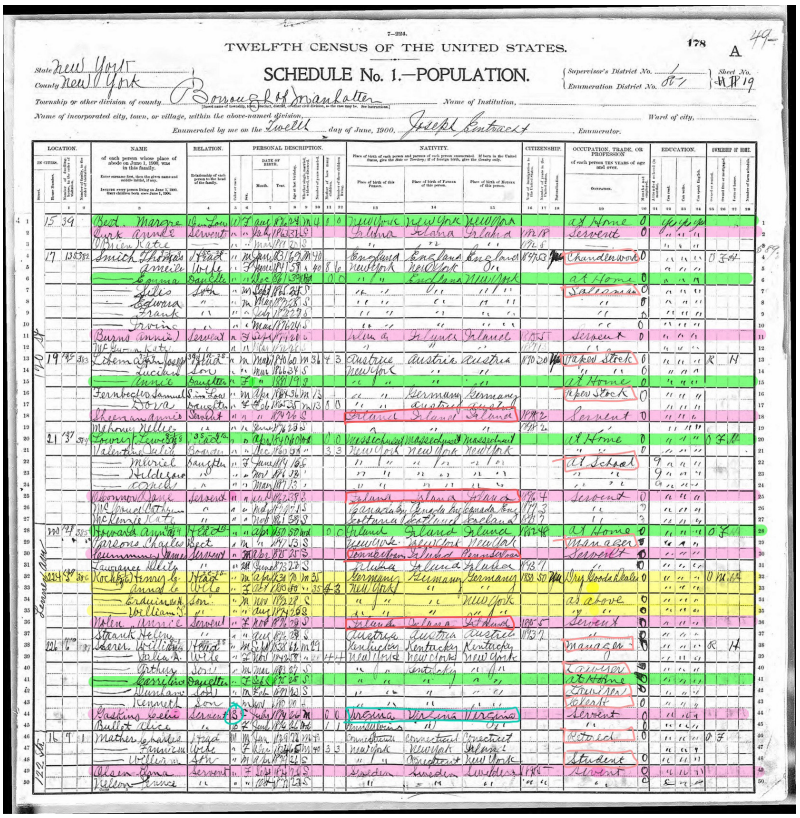
This shift, of course, meant that before long, Koch & Co. was frequented overwhelmingly by the Black community, though the Koch family, as well as many other white store owners, refused to hire Black employees for their higher-paying, front-of-house positions like cashiers and clerks.

This tension led to a social campaign called the “Buy Where You Can Work” campaign, where Black Harlemites boycotted stores where they weren’t seen as equal, though they were the community these owners had the reality of serving.[8] This campaign began in Chicago, but quickly spread to almost every large American city. In Harlem, it began in 1929 and was largely led by two local organizations: the Harlem Housewives League and the Colored Merchants’ Association. While there are many accounts of this boycott’s effect on Koch’s rival 125th Street department store, Blumstein’s, there are conflicting accounts regarding Koch & Co.’s views and actions towards mounting racial tensions at this time. *The Afro-American* newspaper writes that Koch is “credited with having trained hundreds of young women during the past months in the rudiments of department store methods” in an article announcing the boycott’s success for Harlem salesgirls earning equal pay by picketing outside Blumstein’s. However, a conflicting report comes to light within the Department of Planning comprehensive report on the area in preparation for a vote on Harlem’s 125th street rezoning: When offering an argument for the historic significance of the Koch & Co. building, as well as its eligibility for the National Register, the author writes that,

> “Like the former Blumenstein’s Department Store (Resource 12) Koch was a target of the “Buy Where You Can Work” campaign which brought attention to discriminatory hiring practices. Rather than accede to community

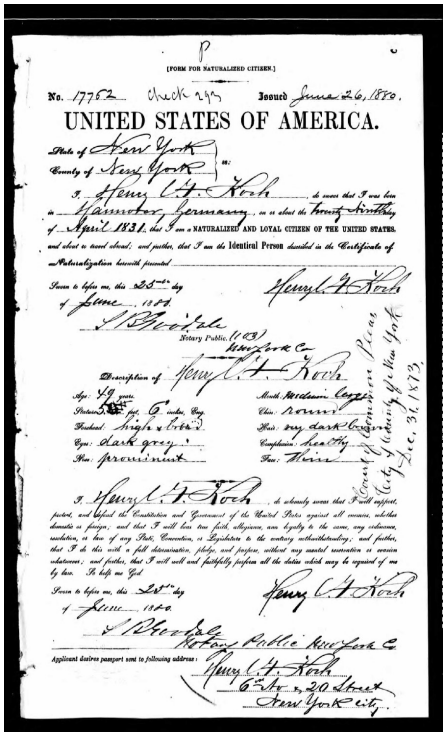
[8] Smith, Valerie, “L. M. Blumestein Department Store — Why Save This Building?” 2020.

demands for equal treatment and opportunity, the Koch Family chose to sell the department store in 1930."



TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES.

SCHEDULE No. 1.—POPULATION.



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Right: Lenox Ave block census, 1900 (pink boxes = noted white-collar professions. Green highlight = "at home" wives and elder daughters. Pink highlights = servants.
Left: Henry C. F. Koch's Passport Application, mostly a description of his "white" features like complexion = fair, eyes = grey/blue, hair = dark

While the exact verdict of the Koch family's attitude towards Black employees remains murky, we can take into consideration the definite tensions between more entrenched 19th century white Harlem residents and their new, Black 20th century neighbors. William was quoted in a 1930 *New York Times* piece in the wake of his announcement of the store's sale saying, "Yes, times have changed slightly since first we came here."[9] A racist vein in the family business management is definitely plausible.

That same article somewhat melodramatically mourned what they thought would be the inevitable loss of the iconic Koch & Co. pediment upon William's 1930 sale of the store to a Mr. Morris Weinstein, dry goods merchant, who had plans to expand the scope of the store's wares to include groceries and refrigeration. However, later articles show us that even under different management, the new owner decided to keep the same name on the storefront that had garnered such a strong customer following, and such strong neighborhood pride, over the years. That is why today we can still see, though slightly damaged — missing a furled wing on its left side, its paint slightly peeling — the Koch & Co. pediment standing above 125th Street.

In the intervening decades of the mid-20th century, the Hume building at 132-140 West 125th Street has served as a store, as well as various subdivided offices for private enterprises. Most notably, however, it became a hub for New York City municipal government offices, specifically relating to Human Resources. The Human Resources Department and ACCESS NYC, as well as the SNAP food stamp distribution program

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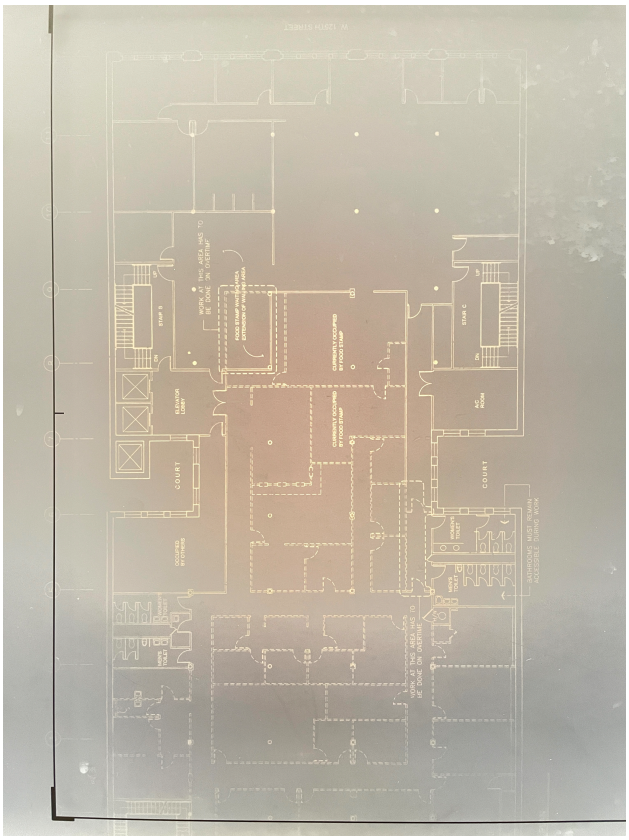
[9] "Harlem's Pioneer Department Store Sold;" *The New York Times,* 22 Aug 1930.

have all been housed in this building since the 1980s. They lease the space from a private realty interest called 132 West 125th LLC, that has owned the building continuously since 1996.[10] The interior has been updated to allow for small cubicle-style offices and subdivided floors, as well as for modern fixtures and HVAC systems.

New side entrance to the NYC HR Administrative spaces, closed to the public. Photo courtesy the author.



Microfiche, dated 1980 depicting planned interventions and HVAC system. Courtesy DOB archives.

Most notably affecting Hume's design, though, are the changes at street level to the storefront facades. As is the case with many storefronts in the city, the entrance has been pushed out slightly further into the street and crowned with colorful, modern

[10] ACRIS records, New York City Department of Finance.

electric signage that partially covers the historic face of the Koch & Co. building. Dimensional lumber columns support hung ceilings that protrude out from the original brick-backed, cast- iron storefronts, and the interstitial elements between new and old are sorely in need of repair today. Many recesses of missing brick are visible immediately below the modern plastic signage, and an inconsistent plan of new technical cladding overlapping old is apparent throughout the ground floor — for example, over the new side entrance to the offices on the upper floors, a cast-iron column is partially overlapped by a modern steel vent system, rather than it being flush to the historic fabric. Both new and old are painted the same blue-grey color. New steel panels and vents are laid on top of, rather than flush with, historic facades and the main entrance to the services and offices on the building's upper floors is tucked onto the western side behind a black aluminum double door frame. The elevator lobby beyond has damaged black and white tiling and harsh fluorescent lighting. Overall, the welcome to this building, both for the commercial spaces as well as the offices above, is far from the high-end, warm ambiance that the Koch family sought out and designed for their turn-of-the-century clientele.

While the overall atmosphere and patterns of use have changed at 132-140 West 125th Street over the past 135 years, it has been a progression that's closely followed the neighborhood at large. What used to be a vibrant, multicultural neighborhood during the height of the Harlem Renaissance fell into serious disrepair during the mid-century decades. As commerce and industry flowed out of Harlem, and out of New York City in general, amidst such city planning schemes like Urban Renewal, public budget cuts

Store Boycott Wins Employment for 35 Harlem Salesgirls

125th Street Department Store Yields to 8-Week Picket Campaign.

RIVAL GROUP CALLS NEW AGREEMENT A SELL-OUT

Girls to Receive Same Pay as Whites—$14.75.

NEW YORK. — Organization, mass meetings, picketing, and boycott against L. M. Blumstein's, Harlem's largest department store, brought jobs this week to colored clerks and salespeople, after a four-month fight in which preachers, physicians, fraternal societies, the press, and other groups took part.

are getting. Eric Miller, of Koch's Department Store, is credited with having trained hundreds of young women during the past months in the rudiments of department store methods.

The Citizens' League for Fair Play will next concentrate its effort on Weisbecker's Market, also located in West 125th Street. Of its sixty-odd white salespeople and other employees, it has only two porters. It is also charged with having directed the Ford Motor Company to deliver new trucks to it, driven by white, and not, colored drivers.

25. The former **H. C. F. Koch & Company Department Store** (Photograph 25, Potential NYCL, Potential NR) is located at 132 West 125th Street and was once one of the city's major department stores. Constructed in 1890 and expanded in 1893, the lavish Renaissance Revival style department store, was the first to open on 125th Street in Manhattan and was Harlem's main department store for 30 years. This six-story through-block building was a retail forerunner in what was then an exclusively residential neighborhood. The primary West 125th Street façade is constructed of light-colored brick with terra cotta trim. Like the former Blumenstein's Department Store (Resource 12) Koch was a target of the "Buy Where You Can Work" campaign which brought attention to discriminatory hiring practices. Rather than accede to community demands for equal treatment and opportunity, the Koch Family chose to sell the department store in 1930. The inscription "Koch & Co." on the pedimented gable reflects the structure's original

Right: *Afro-American,* Aug 4, 1930 article reporting on the successful boycott
Left: Department of Planning report on Koch & Co. building NR significance, highlighting racial prejudice in their reasons for closing

and transit plans, the neighborhood was left under-resourced in regards to many of these key policy points and without suitable means for local employment or education acquisition. Even despite being the target of civic-minded building projects like public school construction in the late 60s, and a confluence of tower-in-the-park NYCHA houses, many families who lived there were unable to relocate due to paycheck-to-paycheck realities, especially as landlords sought to churn out all the rent they could from failing, dilapidated buildings. The 70s and 80s led NYC as a whole to the brink of bankruptcy, and appalling percentages as high as 12% of real estate was abandoned, left to disintegrate or purposefully a victim of arson, as landlords attempted to makefire insurance claims for the damage. Most of the money flow in the neighborhood was from cash economy street sales from drugs to food staples.

Yet while it is easy to discuss Harlem and countless other NYC neighborhoods in this negative, anti-asset light during this period, its streets and apartments of course remained home to resilience community members and institutions throughout the mid-century decades. 125th street remained a hub for community activity, as well as the nightlife and that defined much of the neighborhood, from music venues and theaters to international cuisine and faith-based culture. A great variety of populations passed through the thoroughfare in front of Koch & Co. simply due to the intersection's being a subway, bus and highway hub. This meant that the large, open spaces of Koch & Co.'s building were attractive to the City, when mayors Koch (no relation) and Dinkins (a Harlemite himself) were looking to deploy more social services in the area. Together, these two mayors sought to put investment back into south Harlem and use the thoroughfare of 125th street as their spark. 132-140 became a SNAP and ACCESS NYC center, later the St. Nicholas Job Center.[11] In other words, it became a hub for social services in a place where citizens could easily reach the building by subway, bus or car.

This social services hub continued until 2019, when both ACCESS and SNAP closed their doors in favor of combining in-person services with the East Harlem branch, a move that left Harlem residents at a severe disadvantage. It's very difficult to move cross-town in Manhattan, especially if you are not able-bodied: Subways largely run north-south, and the few major boulevards that traverse east-west are often extremely

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[11] [website] St. Nicholas Job Center, ACCESS NYC.gov

congested, making transport by car or bus slow and cycling dangerous. Some reports from residents express disappointment in the communication about the closure whatsoever, and also dismay at this very commute.[12] While the City claims that the consolidation is due to more and more of their social service access going online or digital via the newly released HRA app, there is no substitute for face-to-face help for community members when the vast municipal NYC government can already feel inaccessible and anonymous. However, as this move relates specifically to the building itself, it also remains unclear what tenants will be taking over these newly closed spaces, or what will motivated repairs if large tenants (and their rents) are moving out.

When considering contemporary conditions and the future of the Koch & Co. building, however, one is likely to feel optimistic: The historic structure is about to get a new neighbor. The empty lot to the west currently has green construction barricades up proclaiming the services of top-tier contracting firm Sciame, and renderings of a modern, somewhat cantilevered concrete-and-glass structure. This is the new Harlem Studio Museum, designed by internationally renewed Black architect David Adjaye. The previous museum building has been demolished to make way for an entirely new, updated, and expanded exhibition space to house the museum's programming as well as esteemed studio arts program for emerging POC artists. In other words, this new, dynamic cultural neighbor could turn into a lively partner for the Koch & Co. building, encouraging its owners to make the necessary repairs to measure up to such an

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[12] "SNAP Snapped," *Manhattan Times News.* July 2, 2019 AND "As HRA Announces Closure of Another Food Stamp Center, Research Finds Excessive Wait-Times" *Gotham Gazette,* June 13, 2019.

Rendering of the new Studio Museum, adjacent to the extant Koch & Co. building to the east. Courtesy Adjaye Associates, 2020.

attention-grabbing institution. It's hard to imagine lines of tourists forming beneath the haphazard current scaffolding system, looking up at missing roof tiles, peeling paint, and precarious brick supports.

While there are many examples of "starchitect-"designed museums swiftly bringing gentrification into the areas they occupy, I believe that the landmarking of the Koch & Co. building could allow for an interesting duality on 125th street, representing the new and old, and ever-changing culture and demographics of the Harlem community. The potential for reinvigoration can also take advantage of recent updates to the 125th

Street zoning ordinance, that makes concessions for new, taller structures that incorporate arts programming at the street level. The original, through-block floorpans that accommodated store merchandise from around the world could easily be reclaimed for studio spaces for visual arts or dance. More sectioned spaces left behind by government agencies could also be used by local community groups, activists, and churches for resource or skill-sharing programs. The proximity to the 125th Street transit nodes means that people from all over the city, as well as from all over Harlem, could easily access these newly available spaces and the amenities they could offer, along with the enticing amounts of foot traffic that will be generated by the Studio Museum upon opening.

Overall, I have a lot of hope for this new chapter of 125th Street's history and commercial livelihood. The Department of Planning has already deemed the Koch & Co. building eligible for the National Register, and I agree with their report and hope to see it carried forward, as I believe my research supports and adds to their claims for the building's significance. This pair of buildings — Koch & Co. and the Studio Museum — has the potential to work together to write a new chapter in Harlem's future, while never forgetting its past.

I find the Koch & Co. building to be significant and deserving of recognition for generations of Harlem residents to come. The layers of history, as well as a direct entanglement with the earliest emergence of Harlem's identity itself, reside within the Koch & Co. building and its story. The building is also so large, and well-preserved in

its facade order and materials that it retains an authenticity important for our national landmarks. However finally, and maybe most importantly, the building has a flexible, chameleon-like potential to serve many modern purposes and demands, ensuring that the spaces within will not lie dormant or be a challenge to use. Vigor and adaptability are key characteristics for buildings on such busy and important thoroughfares like 125th Street, and I believe that 132-140 balances both the historic narrative and potential for new stories to be told in this ever-evolving neighborhood.

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