

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 7, 1988; Designation List 204
LP-1558

U.S. REALTY BUILDING, 115 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1907; architect Francis Hatch Kimball.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 50, Lot 1.

On November 12, 1985 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the U.S. Realty Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing was continued to December 10, 1985 (Item No. 5). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. One witness spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has received three letters in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The U.S. Realty Building, designed by Francis Hatch Kimball and built in 1907, is among the first Gothic-inspired skyscrapers in New York. Kimball's sensitive adaptation of this historical style established a sympathetic relationship between the earlier Trinity Building and its neighbor, Trinity Church, which is continued in the design of the U.S. Realty Building. An entirely freestanding, steel-framed structure, the U.S. Realty Building, like its near twin, the Trinity Building, anticipates the skyscraper "cathedral" tower type which emerged a few years later--of which the Woolworth Building is the most notable example. The spire of Trinity Church, the picturesque rooflines of the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings, and the Woolworth Building tower form a romantic ensemble and create a striking, Gothic silhouette on Lower Broadway. Kimball, who had worked with the English Victorian Gothicist William Burges, had won acclaim as a designer of theaters and churches before receiving several important skyscraper commissions at the turn of the century; these tall buildings are known for their important innovations in the technology of caisson foundations. His strong predilection for Gothic design and his engineering expertise made Kimball the ideal architect of for the U.S. Realty Building commission.

Development of Lower Manhattan

Since the seventeenth century, Lower Manhattan has been New York's center of commerce and finance. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, many major American businesses had established headquarters there,¹ and by the early twentieth century, the skyline of Lower Manhattan had been dramatically transformed as the early skyscrapers appeared. The advancement of elevator technology and new developments in structural engineering allowed architects to construct tall, spacious, and efficient office buildings, suited to the narrow sites of the island.² In the 1880s and 1890s, Broadway became the main artery of the district.³ Insurance companies, conscious of their public images, were among the first to erect structures celebrating their wealth and prosperity. In 1898, the five

boroughs were consolidated into Greater New York, awakening a strong awareness of the city's history and a sense of civic pride on the part of the general public. At this time, there was also a growing mistrust of monopolies and big business practices were severely criticized. Large corporations attempted to counter such sentiments by erecting buildings that would give an impression of not merely financial stability but of trustworthiness, tradition, and integrity, in order to imply that big business served the needs of the public.⁴

As this new building type emerged, so did the need for appropriate stylistic and compositional expression. Architects found solutions in a variety of historical styles, but none was more pervasive than classicism. The classical, tripartite division of the elevation into a base, a shaft, and a capital was widely accepted, in part because it could accommodate the large proportions of skyscrapers; the neo-Classical style was commonly employed for civic architecture,⁵ thus providing, by association, a positive image for the corporation.

The Neo-Gothic Style

Although the Gothic Revival was influential in the United States during the nineteenth century, the style was rarely employed for commercial architecture and early skyscraper designs. Contemporary architectural criticism focused on the notion that no single historical style could accommodate the variety of building types demanded by modern life, and until "a distinct system of architectural forms appropriate to our age and civilization" was found, historical styles should co-exist.⁶ Despite the acceptance of stylistic variation, Gothic was generally not considered to be relevant to the design of office buildings,⁷ prior to the erection of the Woolworth Building, (Cass Gilbert, 1911-13, a designated New York City Landmark). Although few, the early, Gothic-inspired skyscrapers were massive, stylistically innovative structures which proved to have a great impact on Manhattan's skyline. In addition to the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings, other outstanding examples of Neo-Gothic skyscraper design are Gilbert's West Street Building, (1905); Kimball's enormous City Investing Building, (1908, demolished); and the Liberty Tower by Henry Ives Cobb, (1909, a designated New York City Landmark).

The subjective connotations of the Gothic style--spirituality, scholasticism, fraternity, craftsmanship--seem to have little to do with an architecture of capitalism. As the "Commerical Gothic" developed, however, critics made formal, stylistic comparisons between the verticality and thrust of Gothic cathedrals, (particularly their spires), and skyscrapers. Due to their location next to Trinity Church, a sense of place and the picturesque qualities of the Gothic style were decisive factors in Kimball's choice of style for the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings.

Both buildings have very narrow sites; they were therefore limited to twenty-one stories each, due to the proportion of elevator area to floor area. Although the upper stories and the parapets of both buildings create a cathedral-like effect, the treatment of the curtain wall of the intermediate stories does not stress the verticality of the piers as it does in Gilbert's West Street Building or his later Woolworth Building. It was considered essential, rather, that the Trinity Building--as well as its near twin, the U.S. Realty Building--relate aesthetically to its neighbor

and namesake, Trinity Church.

The designs of the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings were highly praised in contemporary accounts, for they not only harmonize with the style of the church, but also adjust such compositional features as the decorative ornament and the arcaded windows of the lower stories to comparably scaled proportions. The site of the Trinity Building, previously occupied by Richard Upjohn's Trinity Building, (1853), was "long regarded as one of the most attractive [not to mention valuable] parcels in the city for office building construction" due to the exposure to light and air guaranteed by its location adjacent to the churchyard.⁸ Giles Edgerton, writing in The Craftsman, extols the picturesque possibilities of the skyscraper type, making reference to the Trinity Building without identifying it:

...[the skyscraper's] charm must always depend on its environment....It needs the Old Gothic Church with its slender spire, the hoary churchyard...to fold about it, to rest near it and connect it with the earth.⁹

Montgomery Schuyler described the Trinity Building's southern elevation, (along with the northern elevation of Kimball & Thompson's Empire Building, just south of the church), as "counterparting frontages" embracing Trinity Church, which have the "effect of framing and protecting the relic."¹⁰ And The New York Times states:

...[the Trinity Building] rears its head over the very spot around which the most sacred American traditions hover: It looks out upon Trinity Churchyard...It is more than an office building, it is a monument, a gigantic milestone marking the advance of ideas.¹¹

Gothic styling, therefore, provided Kimball with a means to synthesize commercialism with a sensitivity to the city's historical past, in line with the current of civic pride.

Francis Hatch Kimball (1845-1919)

Francis Hatch Kimball, a devoted and prolific Gothic Revivalist, participated in the evolution of neo-Gothic design from a High English Victorian to an American modern, commercial style. He is also noted for making important structural innovations that furthered the development of the skyscraper.

Kimball was first employed by a Massachusetts relative as a carpenter's apprentice. In his early career, he managed the Hartford office of the Boston firm of Rogers & Bryant. While in Hartford, Trinity College appointed him as a "superintending" architect, with G.W. Keller, for their new buildings (1873-82), designed by the English architect, artist and theorist, William Burges, (1827-81). Before construction began on Trinity College, Kimball traveled to England, visiting medieval churches and consulting with Burges over the commission. Burges's High Victorian Gothic aesthetic and his particular interest in thirteenth century French Gothic architecture made a lasting impression on Kimball.

In 1879, he moved to New York and soon formed a partnership with the English-born architect Thomas Wisedell--also a student of the Gothic style--which lasted until Wisedell's death in 1884. They were especially active in theater design. Apart from a brief partnership with Henry S. Ihnen during the year 1886, Kimball practiced alone until 1892. In this period, he designed the Catholic Apostolic Church on West 57th Street in the neo-Gothic style, the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn (a designated New York City Landmark) in an early French Gothic mode, and the Venetian Gothic Montauk Club in the Park Slope Historic District. These buildings are notable for their use of terra-cotta ornament. Kimball formed a partnership with George Kramer Thompson in 1882, and terra cotta became a hallmark of their designs.

Although each had backgrounds in theater, residential, and ecclesiastical design, Kimball and Thompson also became prominent and pioneering designers of tall commercial structures. Their Manhattan Life Insurance Building, (1893), was the first New York skyscraper fully framed in iron and steel and set on concrete caissons that were sunk to the bedrock using an ingenious pneumatic process, which allowed the foundation to be set in place without disturbing the sandy soil of Manhattan. Kimball & Thompson also designed the Empire Building, and the Francois I style Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion (1895-98, a designated New York City Landmark). The Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings, the massive City Investing Building, and the Adams Express Building were the work of Kimball alone.¹²

The Construction

"Twin examples of Gothic splendor,"¹³ the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings were originally conceived as freestanding office buildings to be erected simultaneously. Due to delays in securing the sites, they were actually built two years apart and not as identical structures. The commissions were awarded to Francis Kimball by the highly successful United States Realty and Construction Company. The project called for speculative office space, although the sponsoring corporation also planned to maintain their headquarters in the U.S. Realty Building. In 1912, the Lawyers Club, (founded 1888), moved from the Equitable Building, which had been destroyed by fire, across the street into new quarters on the twentieth and twenty-first floors of the U.S. Realty Building, (The top floor was added to a portion of the roof). Designed by Kimball and Henry A. Davison, the interior of the prestigious club continued the Gothic theme of the building.¹⁴

The United States Realty and Construction Company was incorporated in 1901. It then acquired a large percentage of the George A. Fuller Company, (general contractor for these commissions), and the well-established New York Realty Corporation, among other holdings. The corporation was formed in order to consolidate real estate investments and make new building contracts through the George A. Fuller Company.

Just prior to the sale of the Trinity Building in 1902, the Central Realty Bond and Trust Company, (an affiliate of the U.S. Realty Company), purchased the Boreel Building at 115 Broadway. It was then sold to the George A. Fuller Company, who passed it to a subsidiary, the Thames Court Company. The Boreel Building was built in 1880 and designed by S.D. Hatch.

It was an early example of the commercial, fireproof building type that included a passenger elevator. Also purchased were the firehouse and a "Old Tom's" restaurant behind the Boreel building, so that the U.S. Realty Company controlled the entire lot, in addition to the adjacent Trinity Building site.¹⁵

In order to attain maximum exposure to light for both skyscrapers with a minimum of interior offices, it was planned that the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings would be erected on equal, full-block sites, each with narrow frontages on Broadway and Trinity Place, and with long side elevations. To secure equal sites, however, municipal consent was needed to move the existing Thames Street approximately twenty-eight feet to the north, and to permanently close Temple Street which then ran between Thames and Cedar Streets, bisecting the site of the U.S. Realty Building. Thames Street was originally a carriageway to the stables of Etienne De Lancey, a Huguenot, who lived on the corner of Broad and Pearl Streets in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁶ The city granted these changes, with the condition that Thames Street be widened from twenty-five to thirty feet.¹⁷ Erected prior to the 1916 zoning resolution, there was no provision that the slabs include setbacks in order to allow for more light on narrow Thames Street.

The foundations of the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings were set using the acclaimed pneumatic caisson process which Kimball & Thompson had introduced in the Manhattan Life Building. In the Trinity Building, and then again in the U.S. Realty Building, caissons were sunk to a depth of eighty-five feet below the Broadway curb, causing Real Estate Record and Guide to state that "these will probably be the deepest foundations ever put down in New York."¹⁸ Not only did these two buildings set world records for rapidity of construction, but they were also considered to be the "costliest business structures ever," together totalling fifteen million dollars, including land.¹⁹

Description

The U.S. Realty Building is a freestanding, twenty-story slab, clad in Bedford, Indiana limestone. The building extends the full length of the block between Broadway and Trinity Place, and is bounded to the south by Thames Street, and to the north by Cedar Street. Overall, the building has a tripartite division in elevation. It was Kimball's aim "to produce a broad effect in stone, in one plane, unbroken by vertical lines of projection, depending for the architectural effect on the three divisions, base, shaft and capital; the shaft relieved by groupings of windows into features richly treated."²⁰ Apart from variations in ornamental detail, the design of the U.S. Realty Building is quite similar to that of the Trinity Building, excluding the latter's asymmetrical addition of 1907. In the early 1970's, the U.S. Steel Corporation constructed a plaza, in conjunction with their new headquarters, directly to the north of the U.S. Realty Building, making its northern elevation entirely visible and enhancing its urbanistic value as a picturesque backdrop to this open space.²¹

The building has a shallow water-table of polished, pink granite. On the north and south sides, a basement of unpolished granite with blind, segmental arches increases in height as the site slopes downward eleven feet between Broadway and Trinity Place. A wooden door is also located in

the base toward the Trinity Place end. The Trinity Place elevation has a one-story granite basement with later storefront alterations.

The main, Broadway facade features a basket-arched portal. The grand portal has ornamented, molded jambs and archivolt springing from elaborate, figurative bosses. The recessed entrance has a decorative bronze grille at the transom; the original bronze door has been replaced by a glass one. The portal is set within a projecting, stepped pediment ornamented with two shields and a ribbon on which is written "erected A.D. 1907." One shield has stars and stripes, and the other has a sunset and the word, "excelsior." The pediment intersects a molded stringcourse, similar to those marking the fifth, eighth, fourteenth, and eighteenth stories, horizontally balancing the verticality of the building. Flanking the entrance are large, basket-arched windows, now partially covered by modern storefronts. The transoms of these windows have bronze tracery and stained glass.

The Broadway facade has a three-story, gabled bay centered above entrance. The bay contains three, rectangular windows, continued visually above a stone balustrade by double-height, pointed-arched windows. Bundled piers topped by engaged finials, some with crouching lions, outline the bays and give an undulating effect to the wall surface. This major bay is identical to bays on the the northern and Trinity Place elevations, which together articulate the base of the building.

The four-story base of the northern side elevation features an arcade of single- and double-height basket-arched windows, with paired, rectangular "clerestory" windows above. This compositional system resembles the interior nave elevation of a medieval church, and relates in scale to Trinity Church, located next to the U.S. Realty Building's counterpart, the Trinity Building. Bays alternate with thin, bundled piers, topped with ornate, engaged finials. Employed in the arched windows are Perpendicular Style bronze tracery and infill panels, as well as stained glass. Tall, gabled bays, (described above, matching those on the Broadway and Trinity Place facades), flank the arcade. The pointed gables intersect a dentilled cornice with gargoyles at the corners capping the base.

The thirteen-story shaft, on all three major elevations, is punctuated by bays of paired, rectangular windows with simple sills. The original one over one, double-hung sash windows are a copper or bronze kalamein. Alternating bays have Gothic details: inscribed arches with decorative shields at the sixth story, blind tracery at the ninth story; balustrades at the eighth story; and pointed gables at the fifteenth story. Decorative moldings, and figurative finials and bosses add texture to the flat treatment of the wall surface. The shaft is terminated by a row of Gothic brackets supporting a dentilled cornice.

The upper portion or "capital" of the elevation features an arcade of double-height, basket-arched windows containing bronze infill panels and tracery in the transoms, alternating with pointed, engaged buttresses. End bays, continuing the gabled bays of the base, have triple-height Gothic windows framed with fretwork and are surmounted by high, crenelated parapets on the northern elevation, or stepped parapets with ribbed panels on the Broadway and Trinity Place facades, which form tower-like

terminations to the roofline. Tall pinnacles with ball finials also add interest to the roofline of the northern elevation. In 1912, a copper-clad addition was erected on a portion of the roof in order to accommodate one story of the new Lawyers Club.

The Trinity Place facade, though much narrower than the southern elevation, has the same general bay articulation, with one major bay rising from base to crown. The entrance is much less elaborate than that of the primary facade, consisting of a simple rectangular opening in the granite base. The Thames Street elevation is comparatively unarticulated, apart from one-bay returns from the Broadway and Trinity Place ends.

In 1912, a footbridge was erected across Thames Street, approximately midway between Broadway and Trinity Place, joining the roofs of the Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings. Designed by Kimball, the bridge has steel framing and ornamental wrought iron panels with a quatrefoil pattern.

Since its completion, the U.S. Realty Building has continued in use as commercial office space. Restoration and refurbishment of the interior lobbies is underway, and a program is planned for the exterior restoration, including cleaning and the removal of later alterations.

Conclusion

Once a very tall building in Lower Manhattan, the U.S. Realty Building is now surrounded by many taller structures; although freestanding, it is enriched by its complementing neighbor, the Trinity Building, and maintains a visual prominence on Broadway. The unusual Gothic style and picturesque roof of the U. S. Realty Building distinguish it from its downtown neighbors, making it an important visual landmark in the financial district.

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NOTES

1. Works Progress Administration, New York City Guide, (1939; rpt. New York, 1970), 58-60. See also Andrew S. Dolkart, Lower Manhattan Architectural Survey Report, (New York, 1988), intro., and "Large Corporations Moving to New York," Real Estate Record and Guide, 66, No. 1709 (Dec. 15, 1900), 822.
2. For a survey of the development of skyscraper construction, see Carl W. Condit, American Building Art: The Nineteenth Century, (New York, 1960), chpt. 2, and Winston Weisman, "A New View of Skyscraper History," in Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., ed., The Rise of an American Building Architecture, (New York, 1970), 115-60. For a contemporary account, see "Modern Office Buildings," Architects' and Builders' Magazine, 8, No. 9 (Jun., 1907), 413-47.
3. Dolkart, intro., and "Skyscraper Builders in a Gigantic Race," RER&G, 77, No. 1998 (Jun. 30, 1906), 1237.
4. Kenneth Turney Gibbs, Business Architectural Imagery in America, 1870-1930, (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984), 93-121, and Robert A.M. Stern, et al, New York 1900, (New York, 1983), 17-18.
5. Stern, 19-21, and Gibbs, 95-8. Examples include Bruce Price's American Surety Building, (1894-96), and Kimball & Thompsons' Manhattan Life (1893-94), and Empire (1898) buildings.
6. A.D.F. Hamlin, "The Battle of the Styles," Architectural Record, 1 (Apr.-Jun., 1892), 412.
7. M.S. [Montgomery Schuyler?], "Is Gothic Dead?" and "Gothic Revivals," AR, 19 (Jan., 1906), 66-7. For the opinion that Gothic Revival had failed, see A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City during the Last Quarter of a Century, (1898; rpt. New York, 1967), 558-70.
8. "Famous Trinity Building to Go After Fifty Years," The New York Times, (Nov. 11, 1902), p. 32, and "Big Twin Skyscrapers for Lower Broadway," (May 14, 1904), p. 9.
9. Giles Edgerton, "How New York has Redeemed Herself from Ugliness--An Artist's Revelation of the Beauty of the Skyscraper," The Craftsman, 11 (1906-07), 469.
10. Montgomery Schuyler, "Some Recent Skyscrapers," AR, 22, No. 3 (Sept., 1907), 162-63.
11. "New York's Newest Downtown Skyscraper," NYT, (Jun. 4, 1905), mag. sect., p. 7.
12. LPC, Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report, (New York, 1981), 1275-7. See also Montgomery Schuyler, "The Works of Francis H. Kimball," AR, 7 (Apr.-Jun., 1898), 479-518; A History of Real Estate, 479-481, 698; Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects, (New York, 1982), 565-6; and Withey and Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American

- Architects (Deceased), (Los Angeles, 1970), 343-4.
13. NYT, (Oct. 6, 1907), pt. 5, p. 3.
 14. "The New Lawyers Club, AR, 32, (1912), 393404.
 15. "Trinity Building Sold," NYT, (Nov. 14, 1902), p. 1.
 16. Gerald R. Wolfe, New York: A Guide to the Metropolis, (New York, 1975), 9.
 17. "Streets to be moved for Skyscrapers," NYT, (May 22, 1904), p. 14.
 18. RER&G, (Feb. 20, 1904), 383.
 19. "Twin Skyscrapers on Broadway," NYT, (May 27, 1906), p. 16. See also Frederic Taber Cooper, et al, Rider's New York City, Freemont Rider, ed., 2nd ed., (New York, 1923), 177-78.
 20. "Trinity and U.S. Realty Buildings," New York Architect, 2 (Mar., 1908), n.p.
 21. This plaza was constructed under a special permit approved by the New York City Planning Commission in 1961, a provision of the 1961 zoning resolution which defines a plaza as an open area accessible to the public at all times.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the U.S. Realty Building 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, the U.S. Realty Building, built in 1907, is among the first skyscrapers in New York designed in the neo-Gothic style; that it adapts Gothic elements to office building design in an innovative way; that it is a fine architectural composition, designed by Francis Hatch Kimball, who was trained in the neo-Gothic style and worked with the highly acclaimed English Victorian architect and theorist, William Burges; that Kimball was also responsible for structural innovations that furthered skyscraper technology; that among the notable design features of the building, as a near twin to the Trinity Building, is its sympathetic relationship to Trinity Church; that it has urbanistic value as a picturesque backdrop to the plaza directly to the north; that it has Gothic detailing in fine materials, including bronze tracery and stained glass, decorative moldings, finials and gargoyles; that it features picturesque massing at the roofline with tower-like parapets; that its caisson foundations are a notable structural feature; that being entirely freestanding it is not only rare for its period, but also anticipates the emerging skyscraper "tower" type; that its design is also enhanced by the Trinity Building, with which it forms a coherent pair; and that the U.S. Realty Building continues to stand as an important visual landmark in Lower Manhattan.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 as a Landmark the Trinity Building, 111 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 49, Lot 2, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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U.S. Realty Building, 1907
115 Broadway

Architect: Francis Kimball
Photo credit: Carl Forster



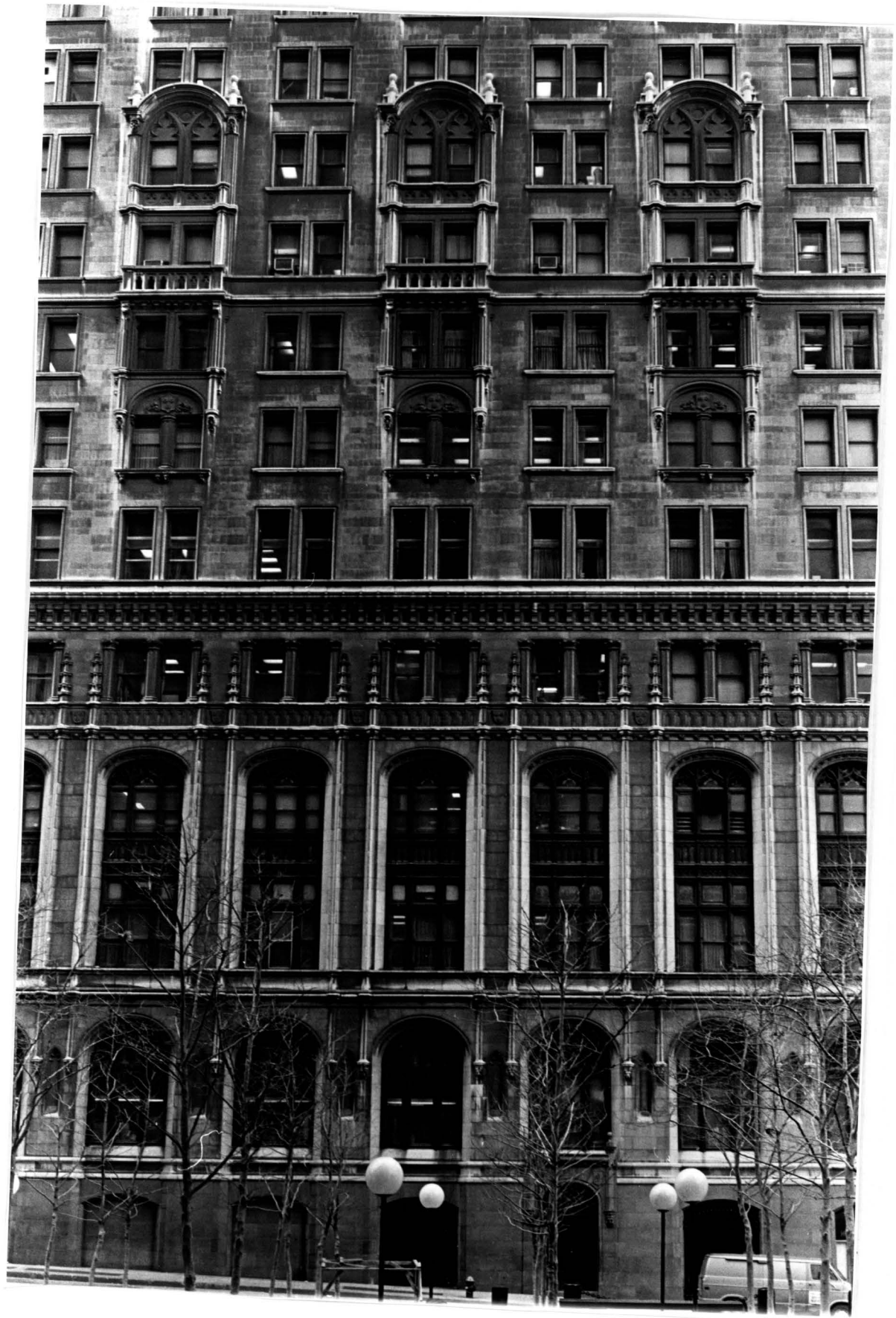
U.S. Realty Building
Broadway facade, with the
Trinity Building on the left

Photo credit: Carl Forster



U.S. Realty Building
Detail, entrance on Broadway

Photo credit: Carl Forster



U.S. Realty Building
Detail, northern elevation

Photo credit: Carl Forster



U.S. Realty Building
Detail, northern elevation,
showing window bay and parapet

Photo credit: Carl Forster



U.S. Realty Building
Trinity Place elevation, with the
Trinity Building on the right

Photo credit: Carl Forster