



256 W 125th Street

Pabst Harlem

Elaf Asibyani,

ARCHA4510

STUDIO I: Historic Preservation

Faculty: Andrew Dolkart, Claudia Kavenagh, and Kate Reggev

Teaching Assistants: Preme Chaiyatham and Jesse Kling

Columbia University in the City of New York

Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation

December 17, 2021

Pabst Harlem

Introduction

Acknowledging the significance of history, buildings, and culture will contribute to preservation. This paper will discuss the history and evaluate the significance of a building located on 125th and 124th Streets using various tools and methods such as archival research, site assessment, historical documentation, etc.

The building is located at 256 West 125th Street between Adam Clayton Powell Jr Blvd. and Frederick Douglass Blvd in the South Harlem neighborhood, Manhattan, New York. It is a two-story, L-shape, mid-block building facing Apollo theatre. It had different functions through the years. In 1900, the building was first built as Pabst Harlem, a restaurant and dance hall. After that, from 1920 until 2017, it became a retail store. Then, from 2017 until now, it has been used by a gym and telecommunication company.

Site Context

The building is located on a commercial street in Harlem. 125th street was the commercial center, the heart of Harlem, where you can find elegant and upscale restaurants, hotels, businesses, and entertainment venues. Many factors contributed to the development and flourishing of 125th street. In the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, the street was designed to be one of fifteen wide streets in Manhattan. It is designed to be 100 feet in width rather than 60 feet.¹ In addition to that, transportation development played an important role. When the subway was constructed between 1900 and 1904 in Harlem, one of the stops was located on 125th street and

¹ '1811 Commissioners Plan For New York', accessed 16 December 2021, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2566/20211028212005/http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/nyc1811.htm>.

Lenox Avenue, making the area highly connected to the surrounding neighborhoods and between upper to lower Manhattan. Most of Harlem's Italian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants were enjoying uptown's fancy hotels, restaurants, and theatres.²

1900-1920: Pabst Harlem Restaurant

Pabst Harlem occupied the plot from 1900 to 1920 (See figure.1). It was a restaurant and dance hall designed by Otto Strack. Pabst Harlem was owned by Fredrick Pabst, who opened the venue to promote his beer.³ Pabst brewer company was based on Milwaukee thus, similarities in the design of Pabst Harlem can be seen in Milwaukee and German buildings.⁴ The building had a German Renaissance Revival architecture / Baroque style. When Pabst Harlem first opened, it was reported to be the country's largest restaurant capable of seating 1,400 people. It was a gathering place for white people and especially the German population. The place was known for its seafood and commonly referred to as a "lobster palace."⁵ The posh interior shows the exceptional skills that the architect had. It has a large vault with beautiful skylights that takes different shapes. The vault design and construction allow a huge span that is not usually found in a restaurant's structure. The restaurant has a classy touch. On the ground floor, the tables were covered with tablecloths and several plants can be seen on the ground floor and the second floor between each window. In addition, on one side, a large painting is placed on the centre of the

² Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (Open Road + Grove/Atlantic, 2011).

³ Columbia University Libraries Digital Program Division, 'Columbia University Libraries: The Real Estate Record: Document View: Real estate record and builders' guide: v. 64, no. 1633: July 1, 1899', Text (Columbia University Libraries, 2010), July 1, 1899, https://rerecord.library.columbia.edu/document.php?vollist=1&vol=ldpd_7031148_024&page=ldpd_7031148_024_00000057.

⁴ Joseph B. Walzer 'Pabst Brewing Company'. Encyclopedia of Milwaukee (blog). Accessed 22 January 2022. <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/pabst-brewing-company/>.

⁵ Carolyn, 'Pabst Harlem, Harlem, 1900-1917', *Harlem World Magazine* (blog), 8 April 2021, <https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/pabst-harlem-harlem-1900-1917/>.

wall. On the opposite side, a big clock and Pabst's logo were aligned above each other. (See figure. 2,3). In addition to its lavish interior, this place was famous for its music, orchestra, opera, and musical and dance performance. Famous people played music and sang at this place such as Sigmund Romberg, a famous composer of operettas, who worked at Pabst restaurant when he first came to the United States and where he learned a good deal at this job.⁶ Also, Lee de Forest, an American inventor and early pioneer in the radio, was inspired by the opera performances at Pabst Restaurant; he said that he used to go to Pabst Harlem to listen to a seventy-piece band playing the music of famous German, Hungarian and Italian composers such as Weber, Offenbach, Liszt and Rossini.⁷ Also, Broadway Madame Sherri and her husband Andre Sherri performed and staged musical reviews at Pabst restaurant (See figure.4,5).⁸

The Owner: Frederick Pabst

The owner of Pabst Harlem was Frederick Pabst, the founder of the Pabst Brewing Company. Frederick Pabst came to America from Germany in 1848. He settled with his family in Milwaukee and then Chicago. He worked as a waiter, a cabin boy and then he had become captain of the Goodrich steamer Huron.⁹ Later, Pabst met Maria Best, daughter of Milwaukee brewer Phillip Best and they got married. One year later, he decided to join his father-in-law in the brewing business, and subsequently, he became a partner. Since he didn't have a background in the brewing business, he started to study the details of this business and mastered the art of brewing. After that, he wanted to expand in the market, not only limited to Milwaukee but also

⁶ William A. Everett, *Sigmund Romberg* (Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷ Timothy D. Taylor, *Music in the World: Selected Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁸ National Endowment for the Humanities, 'The Sun. [Volume] (New York [N.Y.]) 1916-1920, April 29, 1917, Image 10', 29 April 1917.

⁹ 'Frederick Pabst and the Pabst Brewing Company', Wisconsin Historical Society, 3 August 2012, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS538>.

extend to cover America. Pabst had a goal of opening venues as part of a nationwide program for promoting his beer. In 1874 Best had become the largest brewery in the United States, and then later, between 1879 and 1893, the corporation opened 40 offices around the country. In 1889, Best became Pabst Brewing Company. His constant endeavour to develop his brews was matched by a comparable desire to better Milwaukee's social and cultural life. He owned several buildings that are listed under National Register, such as Pabst Hotel and Pabst Theatre. In 1904 Captain Pabst died in Milwaukee, leaving the brewery to his sons.¹⁰

The architect: Otto Strack

Pabst Harlem was built by the architect and the builder Otto Strack. Like Pabst, he was of German origin. He was familiar with German architecture since he trained as a carpenter, mason, and blacksmith. He studied at the building school in Hamburg; after that, he pursued his architectural degree in the Berlin and Vienna polytechnical schools. In 1881, he moved to the United States and settled in Chicago, where he worked as an architect and civil engineer. Two years later and after receiving his citizenship, he moved to Milwaukee to pursue his career.¹¹ He designed multiple buildings for German-origin barons who found Strack the right person to create styles reminiscent of their homeland. According to one of his pupils, "much of the old-world charm of many older Milwaukee buildings was due to Strack's influence."¹² During his time in Milwaukee, he also became the supervising architect for the Pabst Brewery for five years. After that, he opened his own architecture and building firm with the Pabst company and

¹⁰ 'The Family | Pabst Mansion | Milwaukee, Wisconsin', Pabst Mansion, accessed 22 January 2022, <https://www.pabstmansion.com/history/pabst-family/>.

¹¹ 'Otto Strack', *Back Bay Houses* (blog), 22 January 2019, <https://backbayhouses.org/otto-strack/>.

¹² *Gregory K. Filardo; Katherine E. Hundt (1977-01-06). National Register of Historic Places.*

family as major clients. He moved to New York City in 1899, where he built NY Strack Realty Corporation and continued to work as an architect and builder.¹³

He is mainly known for his commercial work. He designed several buildings such as the Pabst Theatre, 1895 in Milwaukee; the Pabst Union Hotel, 1897 in Chicago; the Pabst Hotel, 1899 in New York City and the Empire State Dairy Building, 1913 on Atlantic Avenue in New York City. He also has a couple of residential works, including the home of Frederick Pabst's daughter built in 1893 and the Joseph B. Kalvelage home of 1896. Otto Strack died in 1935 in his penthouse. Some of his commercial and residential designs are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹⁴

1920-1930+: S. H. Kress & Co

After Pabst Harlem closed due to alcohol prohibition in 1920, New York's first Kress store opened there (See figure. 6). Kress was a store established by Samuel Henry Kress. S.H. Kress & Company, founded in 1896, was a chain of five-and-ten-cent stores that sold cheap, durable, and cheerful domestic goods. Kress stores were cherished for their quality merchandise and as famous local landmarks. The downtown Kress's were celebrated beacons of progress. It was a model of urban architectural design and a source of civic pride.¹⁵ In 1935, the Harlem riot started at that store. Because of the racial injustice and economic hardship, a misunderstanding surrounding the treatment of a 16-year-old Puerto Rican boy exacerbated tensions. People

¹³ 'Otto Strack Dies; A Noted Architect: Owner and President of the New York Realty Corporation Which Bears His Name.', accessed 16 December 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/101340772?accountid=10226&parentSessionId=BwGK4RiHDeWc1bdfcLdCuwwwvhSCu8MVTuhr%2BmXEjd0%3D>.

¹⁴ 'Otto Strack'.

¹⁵ 'About Our Founder, Samuel H. Kress Foundation', accessed 16 December 2021, <https://www.kressfoundation.org/About/Our-Founder>.

thought, incorrectly, that he was beaten and killed because he stole from Kress store, a white-owned shop. The confusion caused the rumor to spread, resulting in a crowd of enraged Blacks and the vandalizing white-owned shops on the street.¹⁶ It is not clear when and why the Kress store closed, but there is a theory that the store closed in 1935 because of the riot.¹⁷

1997-2017 Commercial:

After Kress closed, different commercial stores opened. According to the Department of Buildings records, in 1997, the place was occupied by Dr. Jay's store, which sells streetwear. The architectural drawings of the store show alterations to both exterior and interior. Originally the building has a mezzanine floor, however, the drawing shows that Dr. Jay add a full new story. In Addition, the elevation on 125th Street has been redesign (See figure 7,8). It is not clear if the building had Pabst's Harlem elevation before Dr. Jay's one; however, according to Google maps' images over time, it shows that the 1997 elevation was there until 2017. After that, the building became occupied by Spectrum and the Cliffs at Harlem. The main elevation changed to look like a simple commercial storefront made of Redbrick in a common bond and consists of four bays and two different entrances, one entrance for Spectrum company and the other one for Cliffs at Harlem. However, they didn't change the back elevation on 124th street, which is being utilized as storage.

¹⁶ 'The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem – 1935', NYC Department of Records & Information Services, accessed 16 December 2021, <https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2019/3/1/the-mayors-commission-on-conditions-in-harlem-1935>.

¹⁷ Carolyn, 'Pabst Harlem, Harlem, 1900-1917'.

Interior:

The Cliffs at Harlem did a major renovation on the building in 2017 (See figure. 9). Since it is a rock-climbing gym, a big central space was needed. Thus, the second floor was removed, but the mezzanine level is still there. The company responsible for the renovation decided to expose structural and non-structural elements as well. The ceiling was exposed; thus, a person can witness the sophisticated huge vault that Otto Strack designed. All the finish layers became exposed as well. The different layers of materials, including brick, plaster, stucco, or any other materials that have been added to the building's walls over the years, can be seen (See figure. 10). The interior space shows respect to what the building went through in the past 100 years, and it contributes to preserving some of the building's history and narrative. All windows on the gym area are bricked up except for one that has been open in order to allow light to the interior space.

Materials and Conditions:

Along with its great interior, it once had great exterior. The back elevation is the only exterior element that is intact from Pabst Harlem. It originally had a German Renaissance Revival architecture; however, it lost a lot of its features through the years. I will discuss the materials, the conditions and suggest possible treatments (See figure. 11). The back elevation is very wide with a huge vault and stepped gable at the top. Brick is the dominant material with limestone trims. The stepped gable on the top shows a thick cementitious coating layer and bricks underneath. Cracks were found in several locations around the windows and on the stepped gable. Almost all cracks appear not to be serious except for the one crack found on the top part. It seems like a big crack and needs more investigation and maybe intervention (See figure 12). Parts of the elevation were covered with a cementitious coating on the east and west

sides. It looks inconsistent with the rest of the brick elevation. According to Google map images over the years, the building had a corroded sheet metal cornice which appears to be original element that was eventually removed in 2017. Instead of replacing the cornice with the new one, the area was covered with a thick coating layer (See figure 13). The corrosion of the sheet metal cornice and the steel roof cap causes brick's discoloration in many areas. Along with the brick discoloration, multiple anchors, paint over brick and bricked-up windows all affect the aesthetics of the elevation. The windows are bricked up with different materials, some of them match the red brick, and some other windows are bricked up using CMU blocks.

Suggestions

To enhance the look of the back elevation and restore some of the great history that the building once had. I suggest restoring the back elevation to look close to its original appearance which is like German and Milwaukee buildings which I believed was the inspiration of Pabst Harlem back façade. I would like to do the following: first, open all the bricked-up windows. This step will enhance the appearance on the exterior and also will allow more light to the interior. Second, add the cornice back to its original place. And finally, renovate the top part to look like German and Milwaukee buildings which I believed was the inspiration of Pabst Harlem back façade. (See figure. 14)

The bricked-up windows resonate some negative feelings to the area and to the people walking by. The back elevation on the 124th Street is now facing an empty land and a new residential development. The street will not be a back street anymore, therefore, I would like to do some interventions to make the building on the street level visually aesthetic and interactive. I will introduce two options. The first will be to turn the ground level elevation into an art wall of something expressing the musical industry of Harlem culture. It also will be responsive to the art

wall located on the other side of the same block. The second option is to open up the ground level and change its current function. Instead of storage, I would like to change the function to be more interactive and transparent for people walking by. The function will be determined based on what the community needs.

Conclusion

256 W 125th has gone through a lot of changes through the years. The building is significant because of the following. It is an example of superior interior and German Renaissance Revival Baroque architecture and one of Otto Stack's masterpieces. The German references on the design represent the demographic of the neighborhood at the time the building was built. Pabst beer also was a big part of the culture and the history of the United States, and Pabst Harlem was the only restaurant that Pabst owned in New York in 1900. In addition, the building contributed to the music industry where big performances and major orchestras played, and it influenced and inspired major figures in the music industry. In 1935 the Harlem riot was also a major event that happened inside the Kress store, representing a significant part of Harlem's history of racial injustice and an unemployment crisis. The building also contributed to the commercial industry, where it served as a commercial and retail store from 1920 to 2017.



Figure.1. 1905 shows the front entrance of Pabst's Harlem Restaurant. Photograph from The New York Public Library.



Figure 2. Interior Image of Pabst Harlem. Photograph from Museum of the city of New York, 1913



Figure 3. Christmas Greeting from Pabst Harlem shows the interior. Photograph from worthpoin.com



Figure 4. Advertisement of a Music and dance part at Pabst Harlem. Photograph from The New York Public Library, 1917



Figure 5. Advertisement of Andre Sherri Revue at Pabst Harlem. Photograph from newyorkalmanack.com



Figure 6. Tax photo of 256 west 125th street shows Kress store. Photograph from New York City Municipal Archives Online Gallery, 1940

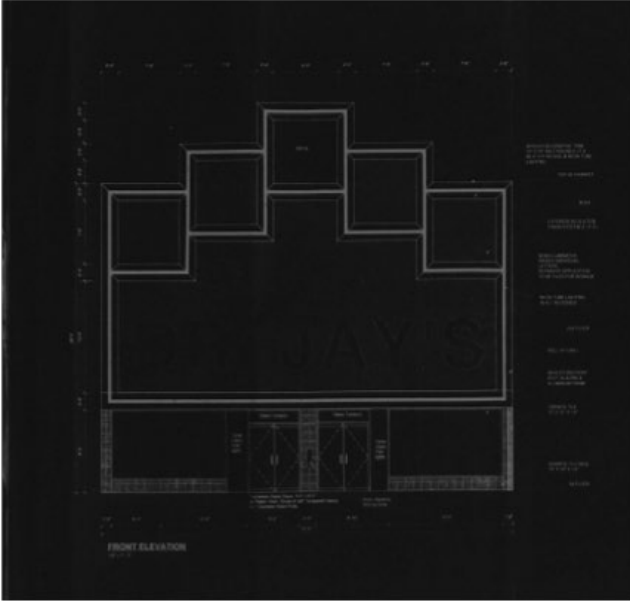


Figure 7. Dr. Jays architecture drawings shows the front elevation, 1997. Scan from DOB



Figure 8. The main elevation of the building Photograph, 2015 from Google map

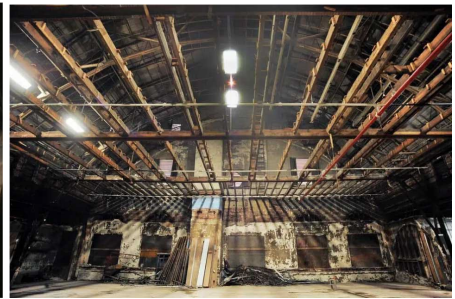


Figure 9. Left: the current interior space. Right: the renovation of the interior place by Cliffs at Harlem, 2017. Left Photograph by the author. Right Photographs gothamto.com



Figure 10. Interior images show the exposed materials, 2021. Photograph by the author

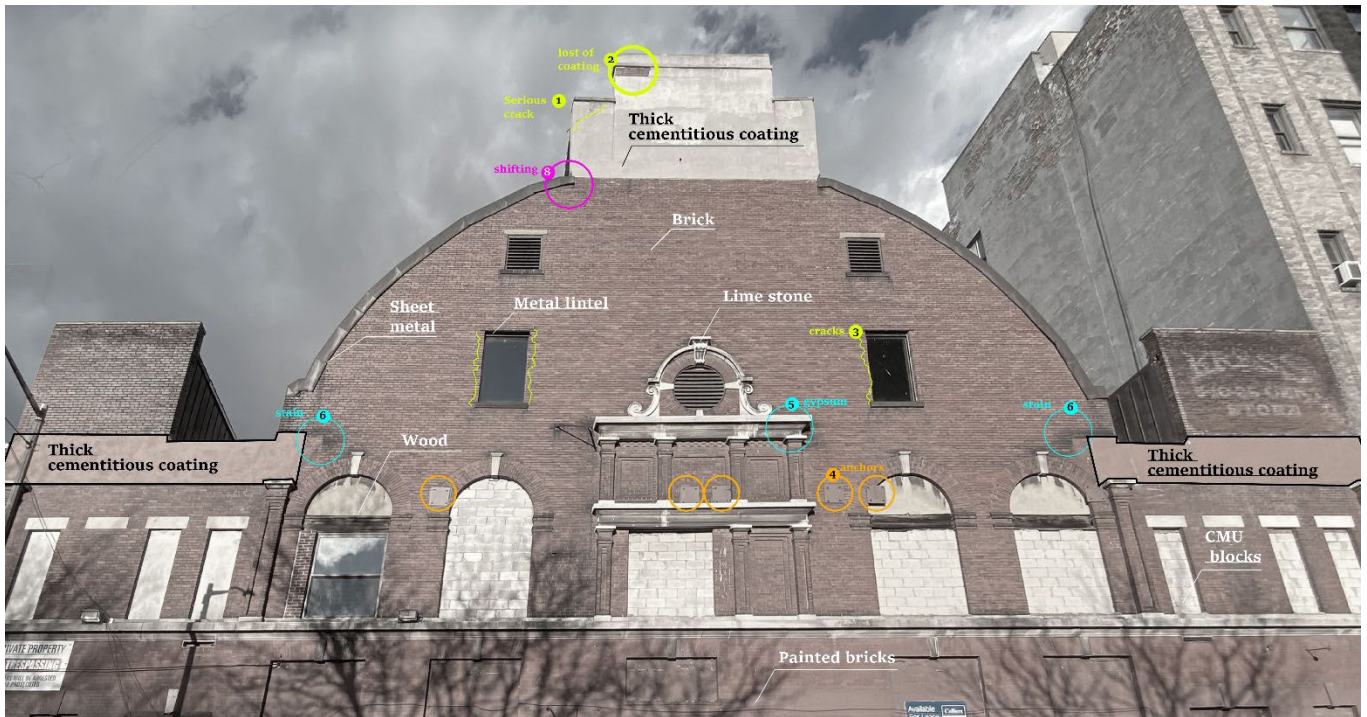


Figure 11. illustration shows the materials and conditions of the back elevation. Photograph by the author



Figure 12. Left: Crack on the top part of the building with lost of coating. Middle: Minor crack around the window. Right: Anchors and Discoloration. Photograph by the author



Figure 13. Left: Shows the original sheet metal cornice of the building. Corrosion caused discoloration to the surrounded bricks. Right: Shows cementitious coating on where the cornice was originally placed. Photographs by the author

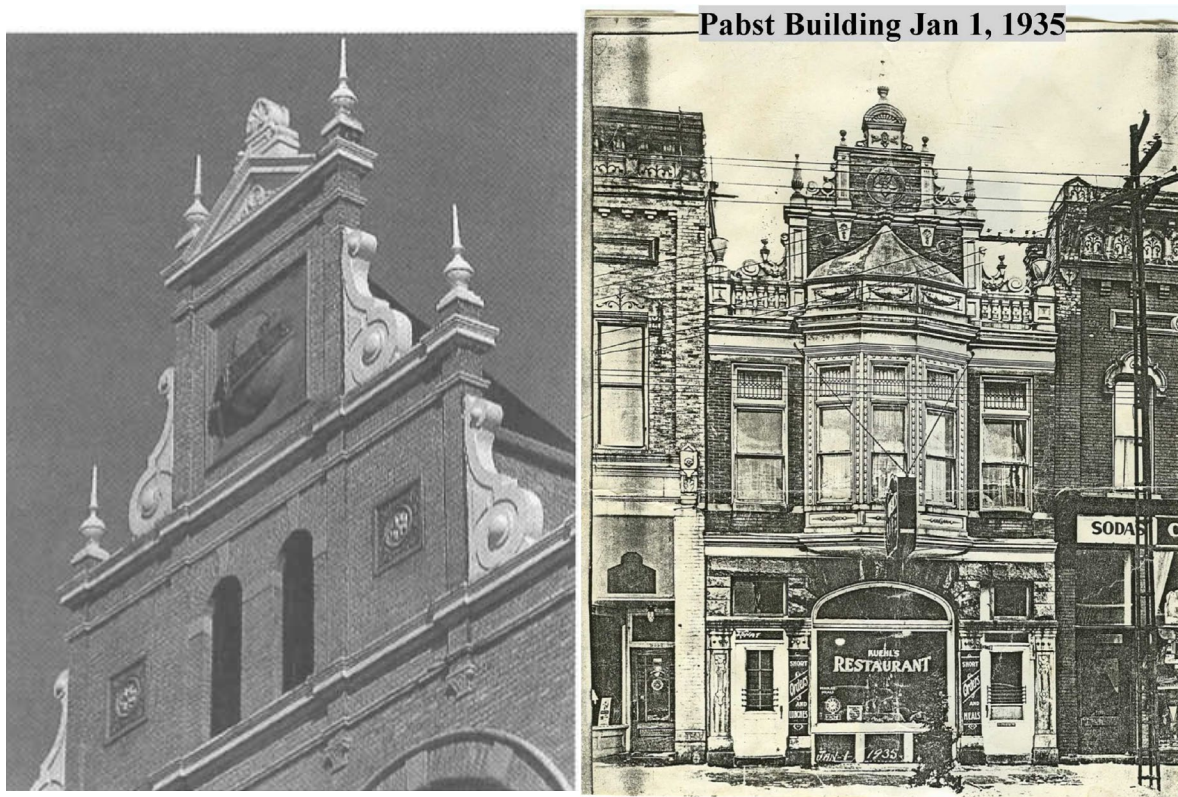


Figure 14. Left: Schlitz gables Brewing Co. Complex, in Milwaukee Photographs from Ethnic Commercial and Public Buildings - City of Milwaukee. Right: The Historic Pabst Building in Manistee, Michigan Photographs from the Historic Pabst Building Facebook page

Bibliography

- ‘1811 Commissioners Plan For New York’. Accessed 16 December 2021.
<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2566/20211028212005/http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/nyc1811.htm>.
- Carolyn. ‘Pabst Harlem, Harlem, 1900-1917’. *Harlem World Magazine* (blog), 8 April 2021.
<https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/pabst-harlem-harlem-1900-1917/>.
- Division, Columbia University Libraries Digital Program. ‘Columbia University Libraries: The Real Estate Record: Document View: *Real Estate Record and Builders*’ guide: v. 64, no. 1633: July 1, 1899’. Text. Columbia University Libraries, 2010. July 1, 1899.
https://rerecord.library.columbia.edu/document.php?vollist=1&vol=ldpd_7031148_024&page=ldpd_7031148_024_00000057.
- Everett, William A. *Sigmund Romberg*. Yale University Press, 2008.
- Wisconsin Historical Society. ‘Frederick Pabst and the Pabst Brewing Company’, 3 August 2012. <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS538>.
- Gill, Jonathan. *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America*. Open Road + Grove/Atlantic, 2011.
- Humanities, National Endowment for the. ‘The Sun. [Volume] (New York [N.Y.]) 1916-1920, April 29, 1917, Image 10’, 29 April 1917.
- Back Bay Houses. ‘Otto Strack’, 22 January 2019. <https://backbayhouses.org/otto-strack/>.
‘Otto Strack Dies; A Noted Architect: Owner and President of the New York Realty Corporation Which Bears His Name.’ Accessed 16 December 2021.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/101340772?accountid=10226&parentSessionId=BwGK4RiHDeWc1bdfcLdCuwwvvhSCu8MVTuhr%2BmXEjd0%3D>.
- ‘About Our Founder, Samuel H. Kress Foundation’. Accessed 16 December 2021.
<https://www.kressfoundation.org/About/Our-Founder>.
- Taylor, Timothy D. *Music in the World: Selected Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Pabst Mansion. ‘The Family | Pabst Mansion | Milwaukee, Wisconsin’. Accessed 22 January 2022. <https://www.pabstmansion.com/history/pabst-family/>.
- NYC Department of Records & Information Services. ‘The Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem – 1935’. Accessed 16 December 2021.
<https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2019/3/1/the-mayors-commission-on-conditions-in-harlem-1935>.