

Blumstein's Building

Endangered

230 West 125th Street



Perspective view of Blumstein's Building.

Blumstein's is significant because of its unique architectural style, its role in the development of 125th Street as Harlem's primary commercial corridor, and the development of the nascent African American Civil Rights Protest Movement.

Blumstein's was founded by German Jewish immigrant Louis M. Blumstein in 1886. In 1888 he moved the store to Harlem, which at that time had a large German Jewish population. Shortly after Louis Blumstein's death on January 25, 1920, his heirs started making plans for a bigger store on 125th Street. That same year architect Robert D. Kohn (who designed Macy's 19-story addition in 1923) filed plans on behalf of L. M. Blumstein, Inc. for an 8-story brick store at 230 West 125th Street. The estimated cost was \$1,000,000, the equivalent of \$17,077,710 today.

Mr. Kohn designed the Art Nouveau building with Art Deco influences. The limestone building has three window bays and top-floor balconies articulated by copper ornaments. 230 West 125th is one of the few Art Nouveau buildings in Manhattan; another is 20 Vesey Street, also designed by Mr. Kohn

A July 3, 1921, *The New York Times's* "New Buildings in Harlem's Main Street Attest to Steady Commercial Expansion" reported on the building prior to its construction stating, "The most important building operation which has been started in that neighborhood for some time will

begin this week with the tearing down of four old five-story structures at 235 to 241 West 124th Street for the new Blumstein department store.

"The Blumstein store now occupies the plot fronting 6.2 feet on both West 125th and 124th Streets, being 230 to 236 West 125th Street, and 229 to 233 West 124th Street. It is a two-story structure. Plans were prepared several months ago by architects, Robert D. Kohn and Charles Butler, for an eight-story building to cover the entire site, 8.6 feet on 125th Street, and 62.6 feet on 124th Street. For the present the construction will only be five stories as the estimated cost of the completed building at that height is \$1,250,000. It will be the most ambitious structure erected in the Harlem area for many years...Among the features of the new store will be high ceilings, and a maximum of show window space of the type known as 'island windows, 'which are much more common in the middle west, and on the Pacific coast than in New York. There will be an arcade opening on 125th Street... The building will have eight or 10 elevators, of which five will be passenger elevators. The customers' restroom will be on the third floor on the 124th Street side and a cafeteria for public use will be in the basement on the 125th Street front."

Instead of the usual cornice at the roof, the architects installed two flagpoles on bases, reminiscent of the work of the Secession movement in Germany and Austria around 1910

According to the 1920 United States census, 33% of Harlem's population was black; by 1930, blacks were more than 70% of Harlem's population. Despite Blumstein's large black customer base, the store hired blacks only as menial labor, elevator operators, and porters. In 1934, Rev. John H. Johnson, vicar of the St. Martin's Episcopal Church, began a "Buy-Where-You-Can-Work" campaign. The campaign was supported by *The New York Age* newspaper, churches, and civic organizations.

Picketing began in July that year. Among the picketers were Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Arthur Schomburg, who said, "In years to come our children will look into our records to see if we have done our part. Do not let them find us lacking." On July 26, William Blumstein promised to hire 35 blacks for clerical and sales positions by the end of September. Later, Blumstein's would become the first store to have black mannequins and a black Santa Claus in its display windows. On September 20, 1958, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was stabbed at a book signing at the store. He was taken by ambulance to a wing of Harlem Hospital at 16 West 137th Street, which was demolished in 2021.