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Historic New York City Warehouse Protected Forever by Preservation Easement

December 19, 2008, Washington, DC -- After a long journey including public hearings and unsuccessful efforts by community groups and preservation organizations, another piece of New York City's architectural heritage has been saved. On Thursday December 11th, the 95-year old Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse located at 184 Kent Avenue in Williamsburg was formally protected by the donation of a historic preservation deed of easement to the Trust for Architectural Easements. The easement prohibits destruction of the warehouse, prevents use of development rights extinguished by the easement, and preserves the building's height, bulk and irregular rectangular box shape in perpetuity.

Cass Gilbert, one of the most influential of American architects, designed the building for Austin, Nichols & Co., the largest grocery wholesaler in the world at the time. When he received the commission for the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse in 1913, Cass Gilbert had already received critical acclaim for design of the state capitol of Minnesota and the U.S. Custom House, and was completing the design of his most famous work – the Woolworth Building.

The Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse first drew the attention of community and preservation groups in 2004 when the owner announced plans to dramatically alter the building by building a large rooftop addition and modifying the window pattern. Due to public interest in preserving the structure, in 2005, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission recommended that the building be added to the city's list of registered landmarks but the City Council reversed the landmarks decision. Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the Council's reversal but was subsequently overridden by the Council – leaving the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse completely unprotected. In 2007, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Brooklyn Industrial Waterfront, which includes the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, on its list of 11 most endangered places.

A new owner – 184 Kent Fee LLC - purchased the building in 2006. The rehabilitated building will feature a 60,000 square foot courtyard that will serve as event space for artists, a riverside walkway, a water taxi, hip retail space and cutting edge living lofts. Residential and retail space will be available in the summer of 2009.

“This building had plans and permits for demolition and high rise development. If it wasn't for the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program, this national treasure would be sitting in a landfill somewhere,” explains Trust for Architectural Easements representative Dan Reardon.

“Federal historic preservation tax incentives made saving the building as economically feasible as tearing the building down,” adds Trust for Architectural Easements president Steven McClain. In addition to providing rehabilitation tax credits, the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program encourages owners of buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places and those contributing to registered historic districts, to make historic preservation easement donations to qualified organizations such as the Trust for Architectural Easements. Owners who participate in the program are eligible to receive federal income tax deductions in exchange for the contractual assurance that they will preserve the building in perpetuity.

The Trust for Architectural Easements is one of the nation’s largest not-for-profit organizations dedicated to voluntary preservation through easement donations. The Trust protects more than 800 historic buildings across the United States and approximately 550 historic properties in New York. For more information about the Trust’s local preservation efforts, the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program and the donation process, contact the Trust at 1-888-831-2107 or visit www.architecturaltrust.org.

To obtain a photograph of the Austin, Nichols & Co. building, please contact:

Gabriel Seiden, Trust for Architectural Easements – 888-831-2107

Media Brief: Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse Building

Location

184 Kent Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY

Building History

- Designed in 1913 by Cass Gilbert as a warehouse for Austin, Nichols & Co., the largest wholesale grocer in the world at the time. The company grew quickly to occupy 9 buildings in Manhattan before moving to Brooklyn to take advantage of water and rail transportation available at the site.
- Havemeyer & Elder, which owned the land and the nearby American Sugar Company, financed the warehouse and commissioned Cass Gilbert to design the building and the Turner Construction Company to build it.
- 1934: Austin, Nichols entered the liquor business, and the building remained its headquarters until the late 1950s.
- 2001: The Kestenbaum and Hirsch families purchased the building, ending years of abandonment by previous owners, rented out illegal loft space, and submitted proposals to change zoning status.
- 2002: The Kestenbaum and Hirsch families obtained a variance to make residential occupancy legal, and pursued a two-year rehabilitation project to convert upper floors to luxury condos.
- 2004: Developer Moishe Kestenbaum presents a proposal to the Board of Standards and Appeals and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to construct a rooftop addition and transform the 72-unit rental building into 256 condos.
- 2005: The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission added the building to the city's list of registered landmarks but the City Council reversed the landmarks decision. Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the City Council's revocation of landmark status and the City Council subsequently overrode his veto.
- 2006: 184 Kent Fee LLC purchases the building from the Kestenbaum and Hirsch families.
- 2007: The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Brooklyn Industrial Waterfront, which includes the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, on its list of 11 most endangered places.
- 2008: 184 Kent Fee LLC donates preservation easement to the Trust for Architectural Easements.

Building Characteristics

- Constructed of reinforced concrete by the Turner Construction Company, the major builder of concrete buildings in New York.

- The building was described at the time of its construction as a “model of modern construction and efficiency.”
- The structure integrates piers, two railway tracks through its first floor, freight elevators, conveyor belts and pneumatic tubes.

The Architect

- Gilbert believed a building should convey the spirit of its use and to that end avoided excess ornament in a building that had a utilitarian purpose.
- He studied architecture at MIT and worked for the office of McKim, Mead & White before establishing his own practice.
- He was a pioneering American architect, an early proponent of skyscrapers in works like the Woolworth Building. He also was responsible for many museums, libraries, college campuses (Oberlin College and the University of Texas), state capitol buildings (Minnesota, Arkansas and West Virginia), as well as public architectural icons like the United States Supreme Court building.
- Gilbert served as president of the American Institute of Architects in 1908-1909.

The Easement Donation

- Historic preservation deed of easement donated to the Trust for Architectural Easements on Thursday December 11, 2008.
- Easement prohibits destruction of the warehouse, prevents use of development rights extinguished by the easement, and preserves the building’s height, bulk and irregular rectangular box shape in perpetuity.

- FOR A PHOTO OR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, CALL 888-831-2107 -