

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name R.C. Williams Warehouse

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 259-273 Tenth Avenue [] not for publication

city or town New York [] vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10001-7020

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] Signature of certifying official/Title SA/PO Date 12/18/04

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
[] see continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register
[] see continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper	date of action
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

R.C. Williams Warehouse

New York County, New York

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

n/a

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY/Industrial Storage

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY/Industrial Storage

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls concrete

roof

other copper; wrought iron

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

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R.C. Williams Warehouse
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7. Description

The former R.C. Williams Warehouse, at 259-273 Tenth Avenue in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, is a ten-story concrete warehouse located on the western blockfront of Tenth Avenue between West 25th and 26th streets, backing up on the west to the High Line, an elevated section of the New York Central. It was built in 1927-28, to designs by architect Cass Gilbert, for a wholesale grocery company. It occupies a block in a mixed-use area including warehouses backing up onto the High Line as well as other building types.

Exterior

The building's three major concrete façades are broken up by broad piers into bays comprised of three rectangular windows – eight bays on Tenth Avenue and three on the side streets – flanked by projecting tower-like corner bays with narrow slit windows, creating the effect of a fortified concrete fortress. Each set of three windows is deeply recessed behind the broad piers. The original casement windows survive, each in three sections: a stationary upper section with six lights; a middle section, also with six lights, that tilts open; and a bottom section of three lights. Above the ground level, the facades are generally devoid of ornamentation – the visual effect is derived from the geometry of the window bays and the color and texture of the concrete. The fourth, westernmost, façade of the building backs up onto the High Line. It is similar in design to the Tenth Avenue façade, with the addition of four rectangular openings, set in alternating bays, that originally served as loading docks – at the building's third story level – but are now closed up with concrete block; one such area has a single doorway inserted into it, to provide access to the High Line. There is a concrete siding along the rail line. The building's roof is plain, with a tall concrete parapet; in its center stands a three-story-tall utility penthouse. On the west side, the penthouse has an airshaft that goes down through the building. On the east side, faded letters can still be seen spelling out "Royal Scarlet Food Products," a reference to a line of groceries once sold by the Williams company.

At ground level, the building has 14 loading docks along all three facades. The docks are closed by metal gates. The entrances to the loading docks are sheltered by concrete overhangs. On the Tenth Avenue façade, at the center, flanked by loading docks, is the building's main entrance, currently not in use. The entrance is comprised of three doors, each framed in copper with a large plate glass window; to the north of the three doors is a closed copper door with no glass. The doors are surmounted by a transom of stationary multipaned windows. The entrance is flanked on either side by a decorative bronze lantern. Additional lights have recently been added above each entrance bay. Additional ornament is provided by a series of elaborately molded ornamental wrought-iron window grilles.

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Interior

Entrance vestibule and lobby

The entrance vestibule and small lobby are currently not in use.

The Tenth Avenue entrance doors lead into a shallow vestibule. The vestibule is separated from the lobby by three glass doors with copper frames, identical to the entrance doors; these are currently covered over with sheetrock for use as informal exhibition space for local artists.

The lobby walls are faced in travertine up to approximately eight feet, with plaster above. There are two elevator doors, each with a decorative circular annunciator panel above. Only the north elevator shaft has ever had an elevator cab; the south shaft has never been used. The original lobby light fixtures have been removed, and are currently in storage.

First floor and basement

The first floor is an open area stretching from the loading docks on West 25th Street to the loading docks on West 26th Street. The open space is supported by concrete "mushroom" columns with flared capitals. The ceiling height is approximately 20 feet. The basement has a much lower ceiling, but is also supported by "mushroom" columns.

Upper floors

All the upper floors share an identical plan, with minor exceptions on the third and seventh floors.

Typically, each upper floor is a completely open space, except for a central shaft area containing the elevator shafts, staircases and fire towers. The ceiling on each floor is supported by concrete "mushroom" columns with flared capitals. There are nine such columns running north to south (except in the center area, interrupted by the shaft, where there are seven), by four such columns going east to west. The size of the capitals on the columns on each floor appear identical, but the width of the columns decreases from one floor to the next higher floor; the resulting column silhouettes express the different loads carried by the columns from floor to floor. Walls are concrete block; floors and ceilings are also concrete.

The original casement windows on each of the upper floors are as described above for the exterior, each in three sections: a stationary upper section with six lights; a middle section, also with six lights, that tilts open; and a bottom section of three lights.

The ceiling heights of the upper floors are 11 feet, with the exception of the third floor – which has access to the High Line – which has a ceiling height of 15 feet.

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The seventh floor, unlike the other upper floors, included office space. Here, as a result, the windows are double-hung, rather than casements, in sets of three between the wide piers: six-over-six on either side, eight-over-eight in the middle of each set. There was once a conference room at the northeast corner of the floor, facing the High Line. The room has been dismantled; all that survives are smaller windows and the flue of a removed fireplace.

A set of dumbwaiters near the western edge of the building served the second through sixth floors. A pneumatic tube system serving the entire building still survives but is not in use.

R.C. Williams Warehouse

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B. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Architecture

Engineering

Period of Significance:

1927-1928

Significant Dates:

1928

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Significant Person:

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect/BUILDER:

Gilbert, Cass

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: New York Historical Society -
Cass Gilbert Papers

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8. Statement of Significance

The R.C. Williams Warehouse, at 259-273 Tenth Avenue in Manhattan, is significant under Criterion C for its architectural and engineering design as an example of an intact reinforced-concrete warehouse designed by the nationally prominent American architect Cass Gilbert.

Summary

The R.C. Williams Warehouse was built in 1927-28, to be the new headquarters of a wholesale grocery company that had grown from small beginnings in 1809 into a major corporation with branches around the world. The company hired Cass Gilbert to design the new building. Gilbert was nationally known for such major, high-style, New York monuments as the U.S. Custom House (NHL 12-08-76) and the Woolworth Building (NHL 11-13-66), but he was also a pioneer in industrial buildings made from reinforced concrete. His design for the Williams Company is a smaller version of his U.S. Army Military Ocean Terminal, also known as the Brooklyn Army Terminal (NR-listed 09-23-83), one of the earliest reinforced-concrete complexes in the world. Like the Terminal, the Williams Warehouse was designed for maximum efficiency, and a seamless flow of goods from the adjoining High Line rail line, through the warehouse, into delivery trucks. The building makes use of the Turner system of reinforced concrete slab construction, including its hallmark "mushroom" columns. Its design reflects the concrete aesthetic of simplicity that Gilbert articulated: "There is something very fine about a great gray mass of building, all one color, all one tone, yet modified by the sunlight or shadow to pearly gray of wonderful delicacy."

R.C. Williams & Company

R.C. Williams & Company began as a modest grocery store in the early 19th century, but by the mid-1920s had grown into a major wholesale grocery corporation with branches in the southern states and several foreign countries.¹

The company traces its history back to 1809², when Richard S. Williams and his partner John Mott, both from North Hempstead, Long Island, opened a small grocery store at 167 Fly Market, at what is now Maiden Lane and South Street. In the words of the company's history published on the occasion of its 125th anniversary:

A dealer in food in that era of limited produce, even of scarcity, was perforce an importer. He could hope to sell his neighbors in New York only those things they could not produce themselves.³

¹ This account of the company is based on its own publication, *One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1811-1936* (New York: R.C. Williams & Co., Inc., 1936), except where otherwise noted.

² The company's researchers discovered that the traditionally accepted date of 1811 for the company's founding was incorrect.

³ *One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1811-1936*, p. 7.

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By 1811 the firm was importing

...cane sugar, rum and molasses from the West Indies.... coffee, salt, pepper, cinnamon, rice, spices, bananas, oranges; wines, ales, brandies and liquers; French bonbons, dates and raisins.⁴

Mott and Williams made the first of half a dozen moves in 1814 when they left the Fly Market to be closer to the new Fulton Ferry. In 1820, Mott died, and the business became R.S. Williams & Company. By 1867, after several more moves and changes in name and partners, the company was joined by Roswell C. Williams, a cousin of the founder. In 1881, the company became R.C. Williams & Company, and in 1888 moved to quarters at 56-58-60 Hudson Street at the corner of Thomas, in the Washington Market area, now part of the TriBeCa neighborhood. The company remained on Hudson Street for almost 40 years.

R.C. Williams & Company continued to grow, and incorporated in 1923. By 1926 it had outgrown its quarters on Hudson Street. Those buildings were demolished, and the property incorporated into the site for a new skyscraper for the Western Union Company. R.C. Williams & Company moved again – but for the first time moved out of the confines of the Downtown area, acquiring the entire blockfront on the west side of Tenth Avenue between West 25th and West 26th Streets. In the company's words:

Not long after the firm celebrated its 115th anniversary, the Board of Directors decided that the time had come to build a proper dwelling for its great variety of interests, one worthy of its position in the industry.⁵

The company chose the new site for its size, but also, and especially, for its location. According to the *New York Times*:

The site was selected on account of the proposed removal of the New York Central Railroad tracks now on Tenth Avenue and the substituting of an elevated electrified freight line on a private right of way owned by the railroad immediately adjoining the parcel just sold.⁶

And according to the author of a contemporary article:

When the tracks of the New York Central are elevated, as planned, they will pass through the block in the rear of the building, and provision has been made for spur tracks to lead directly into the building on the third floor, making the unloading and shipment of foods most convenient.⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁶ "10th Av. Site Sold to R.C. Williams Co. Wholesale Grocers Acquire the Block Front From 25th to 26th Streets, Plan 10-Story Building," *New York Times*, December 12, 1926, p. E.21.

⁷ O.W. Cooley, "A Veteran Firm's New Home," *The Edison Monthly*, September 1928, p. 198.

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That elevated freight line is today known as the High Line. Building on an adjacent lot allowed the company's new headquarters to include a freight depot on its third floor. Construction of the new building lasted through 1927; the company moved into its new quarters on February 27th, 1928. The freight line began operations five years later. Initial plans called for "running the spur rack into the warehouse,"⁸ but in the end the tracks ran outside and adjacent to the building. In 1933, the company added a concrete shipping platform outside the building's third story "to take the freight off the new elevated R.R. structure,"⁹ and, according to the company's history:

...on August 1, 1933, the first carload of freight to use the overhead or elevated structure of the New York Central was consigned to R.C. Williams & Company.

The company's new building had to meet the requirements of a business on an entirely different scale from the original grocery in the Fly Market. R.C. Williams had become a huge wholesale grocery operation. The company described its economic role:

In the complex organization of modern society the problem of greatest difficulty has not been that of production, but of distribution.... Sometimes there is a short-sighted question: "Why doesn't the producer sell and deliver direct to the retailer?" The answer is that it has been proven more economical and efficient to have one large distributor handle the products of hundreds of producers. It would cost the producer far more to place his product on the retailer's shelves if all he had to sell was one or two items, and the retailer would be burdened with the cost of each salesman who called upon him, tremendously increasing the overhead on each article.... So long as goods are produced by many people in foreign places and in large lots, and so long as the users of these goods are as numerous as all mankind, covering the entire globe and consuming in frequent, relatively infinitesimal quantities, just so long will there be required a wholesaler performing the essential service of bringing the producer and the consumer together in the market place.¹⁰

R.C. Williams shipped goods up and down the Atlantic seaboard, throughout the south, and overseas.

When a customer in Moscow, Russia, cabled the contract department for carpet sweepers and silverware, R.C. Williams & Company secured those articles for inclusion with their regular shipment of merchandise.... The export department supply many missionary posts in Africa and Asia... Canned corn on the cob and shrimp are regularly shipped to one of the largest cattle and sheep ranches in the Argentine.... R.C. Williams & Company are proud of... meeting the exacting requirements of explorers and engineering parties trekking to the far places of the world.... The heart of Asia and Africa, the jungles of South and Central America, become familiar through a glance at the invoices of the export department... sauerkraut shipped to South Africa; powdered sugar to Peru...vacuum packed coffee to South America; canned oysters and brown bread to the Netherlands West Indies...; maple sugar and table

⁸ John R. Rockart, Report, December 31, 1926, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

⁹ New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department. Alteration application No. 535 of 1933.

¹⁰ *One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1811-1936, op. cit.*, p. 26.

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salt to Germany; pimentos, American rye whiskey, and canned sweet potatoes to Greece.... The large demands of hotels, restaurants, and institutions early received the attention they merited from R.C. Williams & Company, and in this exacting field they have achieved one of their greatest successes.¹¹

Their new building was designed to facilitate the company's huge and complex operations.

An indication of the company's wealth, and its own sense of its place in the world, was the choice of Cass Gilbert – nationally renowned architect of such prominent monuments as the U.S. Custom House and the Woolworth Building – to design the new building.

Cass Gilbert

Cass Gilbert (1859-1934)¹² was one of the most important architects to work in New York. His commissions include several of the city's major landmarks; the two most important of these, the U.S. Customs House and the Woolworth Building, are National Historic Landmarks.

Gilbert was a Midwesterner who trained and later practiced in the East. His career falls roughly into two parts: a local practice in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the 1880s and 1890s, and a national practice, based in New York City, from 1900 until his death in 1934. His work has been described as a synthesis of architectural trends in the two regions,¹³ and both his buildings and the language in which he discussed them seem to combine a Midwestern belief in structural expression with an Eastern respect for tradition.

Gilbert was born the son of an engineer in Zanesville, Ohio, a town in part laid out by his grandfather. While still a child, he and his family moved to St. Paul, where he completed his secondary education. In 1876 he entered the office of A.M. Radcliffe, a local architect. Two years later he went east to study at the architectural school of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then headed by William R. Ware; his teacher was a Frenchman, Eugene Letang.¹⁴ After two years of study, Gilbert went to Europe; he had hoped to work for an English architect – G.E. Street, Alfred Waterhouse, Norman Shaw, or William Burges – but was unable to find employment. After traveling briefly through France and Italy, chiefly to see Gothic cathedrals, he was obliged to return to the United States later the same year. In New York he joined the firm of McKim, Mead & White, which had been formed barely a year earlier in September 1879.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30-32.

¹² The following account of Cass Gilbert's career is drawn almost in its entirety from the *Woolworth Building* designation report prepared by Anthony Robins for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (New York: City of New York, 1983). That account, in turn, is based on Robert Allan Jones, *Cass Gilbert, Midwestern Architect in New York* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1976), except where otherwise noted.

¹³ This is Jones's main thesis, outlined p. viii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

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Gilbert was one of the few major architects of his era who did not study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His architectural education, however, reflected the American interpretation of Beaux-Arts ideas as promulgated through academic institutions and architectural apprenticeships. Eugene Letang had been an Ecole student; William R. Ware was one of the five architects who had studied in the New York atelier of Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to attend the Ecole. McKim, who was an Ecole student, and White, who was not, had both worked in the office of the second American to attend the Ecole, H.H. Richardson.

Returning to St. Paul in 1882, Gilbert set up his own practice. Mead had suggested he open a St. Paul branch of McKim, Mead & White,¹⁵ but instead Gilbert formed a partnership with fellow M.I.T. graduate James Knox Taylor, which lasted eight years. During the last two decades of the century he built a solid reputation in St. Paul designing residences, churches, and office buildings; most of his designs were in the Shingle Style or the Richardsonian Romanesque.¹⁶ When John Welborn Root died in 1891, Mead wrote to Gilbert from New York urging him to go to Chicago to become Daniel Burnham's new partner; Gilbert, however, chose to remain in St. Paul. He became president of the Minnesota chapter of the A.I.A., and was invited to sit on various juries -- he was the only Westerner on the jury for the New York Public Library competition.

In 1895, Gilbert won the competition for the new Minnesota state capitol, a commission that established a national reputation for him.¹⁷ Clearly reflecting the impact of the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, Gilbert's design was an elegant Beaux-Arts building, which, in its monumental composition, classical style, and elaborate decoration, laid the groundwork for his 1899 winning entry in the New York Customs House competition.¹⁸ In 1900, Gilbert moved permanently to New York City.

Throughout his later career, Gilbert produced similar Beaux-Arts governmental buildings, including the Detroit Public Library (1914), the West Virginia state capitol in Charleston (1928-32), the Federal Courthouse in New York City (1934; NR-listed 09-02-87)), and the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. (1933-35) among many others. These public monuments comprised a major portion of his national work, and a major part of their design was their lavish decoration with sculpture and murals.

Another of Gilbert's major contribution to architecture was in the field of skyscraper design. As a Midwestern architect working during the last two decades of the 19th century, he was familiar with the technological developments in skyscraper construction in Chicago. His training in Eastern schools, on the other hand, enabled him to develop a style along the conservative lines current in New York when he moved to the city at the turn of the century. The unique combination of Midwestern technology, Eastern training, and Gilbert's personal design talents and beliefs helped him move away from the "base-shaft-capital" formula of early office buildings

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.63 ff.

¹⁷ "The New Minnesota State Capitol at St. Paul," *The Western Architect*, 4 (Oct. 1905), 3-32.

¹⁸ See *United States Custom House Interior* designation report (LP-1022) prepared by Ruth Seldin Sturgill for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (New York: City of New York, 1979). The Custom House commission was hotly contested by local architects, who considered Gilbert an outsider with no claims to it and charged collusion between Gilbert and his former partner Taylor who sat on the jury.

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(including his Broadway-Chambers Building of 1899, which contemporary architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler considered the best of its kind) to the full-blown romantic skyscraper conception of the Woolworth Building, his most famous tall building.

Gilbert's skyscraper designs reflected his clear belief in the value of studying the architecture of the past, not to copy it, but certainly to adapt it. Speaking on the occasion of the presentation to him of the Gold Medal of Architecture by the Society of Arts and Sciences in honor of the Woolworth Building design, he said:

...as in language new words are coined to express new meanings and old words become obsolete, as old uses are abandoned so new forms to meet new needs are developed (I almost said invented) as the necessity requires... My plea therefore is for beauty and sincerity, for the solution of our own problems in the spirit of our own age illuminated by the light of the past; to carry on, to shape new thoughts, new hopes, and new desires in new forms of beauty as we may and can; but to disregard nothing of the past that may guide us in doing so.¹⁹

Gilbert also believed, however, that his approach to skyscraper design was based on structural expression and the aesthetic treatment of materials. He argued that since commercial buildings required thin surfaces, these therefore had to be treated decoratively, and that a thin, decoratively treated surface expressed the structural fact that the skyscraper was a steel-cage structure, clearly not supported by its terra-cotta or stone cladding. One of the prime devices he used in this decorative treatment was proportion; another was color.

That approach to design informed all Gilbert's work. He chose the architectural expression of each project to suit its underlying purpose. A grand public monument like the United States Custom House should be classically adorned and draped in statuary, because such a building would honor the nation and educate the public. A privately built skyscraper like the Woolworth Building should soar in Gothic, because an aesthetically pleasing building would earn a greater return for its owner. In line with that approach, Gilbert – surprisingly, considering the design of most of his buildings – felt perfectly comfortable designing reinforced concrete industrial buildings in such a way as to express the simplicity and strength of the material.

His most extraordinary work in concrete was the Brooklyn Army Terminal – one of the country's finest early Modern monuments. But he also designed two smaller warehouses built of reinforced concrete – the Austin-Nichols warehouse in Brooklyn (1909-13), and the R. C. Williams warehouse at 259-273 Tenth Avenue in Manhattan (1927-28).

¹⁹ Cass Gilbert, "Response on the occasion of the presentation of The Gold Medal for Architecture of the Society of Arts and Sciences to Cass Gilbert, New York, January 16, 1931," an address reprinted in Julia Finch Gilbert, *Cass Gilbert: Reminiscences and Addresses* (New York: privately printed, 1935), p. 115.

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Gilbert, reinforced concrete, and the R.C. Williams Warehouse

R.C. Williams's official history proudly described Gilbert as "architect of the Woolworth Building,"²⁰ but since the company wasn't building a skyscraper it can't have been the Woolworth Building that recommended him for the job. Much more relevant would have been Gilbert's industrial structures built of reinforced concrete.²¹

Twentieth-century architecture in both America and Europe is marked by the development and use of new construction materials, primarily steel and concrete. Steel-cage construction made possible the development of the skyscraper – America's great contribution to world architecture. Reinforced concrete also created a major architectural revolution, but predominantly, at least at first, in industrial architecture.

In the words of historian Reyner Banham:

Around 1900...the action and the excitement were not in iron and steel but in concrete, which was about to take off into the most spectacular stage of its development in the United States. The new men...were above all specialists in concrete, and their subject matter – the Daylight factory and the grain elevator – was to be (along with bridge building) concrete's primary province.²²

Banham argued that these structures constituted

...some of the true sources of the International Style, which will remain, as far as anyone can yet see, the dominant style of the high art of architecture in the twentieth century.²³

The architects of these structures – the "specialists in concrete" – tended to be lesser known practitioners, often working in industrial districts far from the major metropolitan areas of New York and Chicago. Surprisingly, however, one of the earliest such practitioners (whom Banham tellingly neglected to include in his study) was a high-profile, high-style architect, based in New York City, who had a prominent national practice better known for traditional styles and materials: Cass Gilbert.

By 1923, Gilbert's work in concrete was well recognized in America. In that year, the *Architectural Forum* devoted its September issue entirely to the subject of concrete construction, and invited Cass Gilbert to write the opening essay, "Industrial Architecture in Concrete." The premise of the entire issue, according to an "Editorial Comment" at the end, was that such buildings had the potential to create an "original" American architecture:

²⁰ *One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1811-1936, op. cit.*, p.35.

²¹ Williams initially considered Gilbert too expensive for the job; Gilbert eventually took a smaller commission than usual – 5% of the total cost instead of his standard 6%. John R. Rockart, Report, January 19, 1927, p.3, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

²² Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture 1900-1925* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986), p. 106.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.107.

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The great outstanding promise that industrial building holds for the profession is the opportunity of creating a style of architecture that will truly interpret modern conditions. Without precedent to fetter the hand of the designer, the simple requirements of industrial buildings should suggest appropriate forms that may eventually lead the way to the long sought American style.²⁴

Gilbert, in his opening article, took a less ideological stance, discussing not what opportunities concrete offered American architecture, but rather how American architects ought to design concrete structures. His approach was quite straightforward:

It may be taken as an axiom in concrete construction that the simpler the form the better the design. The nature of the material dictates the form of all its parts, and assuming that the purpose of the structure is kept in mind, as it should be, this purpose is necessarily expressed in very simple terms.²⁵

Coming from the designer of such grand, high-style and highly decorative buildings as the Custom House and the Woolworth Building, such sentiments might sound surprising. But Gilbert was, among other things, a pragmatic architect, who once defined a building as "a machine that makes the land pay." He believed economy of cost to be an unavoidable consideration in architecture:

As we build with a primary view to low cost (a matter which concerned the ancients very little, as they had slave labor for their larger enterprises), we are forced to consider economy at every stage.²⁶

If economy led to the use of concrete, then so be it. And if so, then rather than attempting to adapt concrete to existing architectural notions, architects needed to adapt their designs to the nature of concrete:

If concrete, after full trial, proves to be the economical material for use, it will in time be well designed. One thing we may be sure of, and that is that for the present at least the evidence before us points toward simplicity as the basic principle of design in concrete, and that is a lesson much needed in this complex, restless age. Why not make simplicity, then, the keynote, and welcome it as a help and not an obstacle to good design? Why attempt to adorn this simplicity with trinkets and gewgaws and patterns and raw bits of colored tiles or panels of brick, or fictitious corbels, cornices, capitals or other details culled from traditional architecture constructed of other materials? In short, the logic forbids such intrusions.²⁷

This approach did not make Gilbert an ideologue for concrete, or, by extension, for the Modern movement:

"I hold no brief," as the phrase is, for concrete as against other useful materials. In other words, I do not prefer it above others, except in certain specific cases where the nature of the structure or economic

²⁴ "Editorial Comment," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 39, September 1923, p. 152.

²⁵ Cass Gilbert, "Industrial architecture in concrete," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 39, September 1923, p.83.

²⁶ Gilbert, "Industrial architecture in concrete," *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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reasons imply its use. It is not always the most economical material, though it frequently is so, and as a structural material it requires very expert handling. Bad concrete is not only worthless; it is dangerous, and concrete buildings should not be attempted by incompetent or negligent builders. I remember my old friend George B. Post's making a brief speech on the subject of reinforced concrete some years ago in London, in which he summarized the whole matter by saying: "Concrete is, as Sam Weller said of veal pies, 'veal pies is werry good things when you knows the lady as made 'em.'"

But even as he proposed "simplicity" as the guiding principle for designing in concrete, he also believed in the material's aesthetic possibilities:

There is no reason why our industrial buildings should be ugly. It is not necessary for a building to be ugly in order to be useful. That's why skillful architects should design these buildings.... In the fact that it is difficult to design an industrial building and make it look well, lies the very reason why a highly expert architect should be retained, and most of the best concrete construction contractors know this and prefer to work under, or with, such an architect.²⁸

How then should concrete buildings be designed?

There are great possibilities of texture in concrete, as yet untried, and texture is needed to dispel a barrenness of effect in broad surfaces. In stone masonry or in brickwork the joints alone would give a certain quality of "texture" in the surface of a wall, but while there are no joints in concrete (except those widely spaced for expansion) there is no reason why the texture of the surface may not be made beautiful.... I have seen a concrete bridge where the aggregate was of a trap rock or granite that gave a rich, warm color and a beautiful texture to the surface that could scarcely be rivaled by any other material.... There is something very fine about a great gray mass of building, all one color, all one tone, yet modified by the sunlight or shadow to pearly gray of wonderful delicacy. It is the big simplicity of the thing that counts, and if there may be projections for necessary fire towers or elevator shafts, or other salients, if there may be low roof structures for tank houses or machinery, and if the glass surfaces are kept in scale, there may be silhouette, and light and shade and shadow and reflected light that will make a picture not easily to be forgotten. Such effects may occasionally be seen in concrete industrial buildings.²⁹

In 1923, the year of Gilbert's article, three years before he designed the Williams Warehouse, Gilbert's most prominent work in concrete was his design for the huge complex of the Brooklyn Army Terminal (NR-listed 09-23-83) on the Brooklyn waterfront, and he referred to it in his article:

It was this sort of thing [the aesthetic effects possible with concrete] I sought to achieve in the Army Supply Base in Brooklyn, and these are among the considerations that dictated its design.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84-85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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Built in 1918-19, Gilbert's Army base was in fact one of the world's first poured-concrete industrial complexes – rivaling anything being designed by the European Modern masters. Le Corbusier himself used the buildings to illustrate modern industrial architecture in his book, *Towards a New Architecture*. It was also by far the world's largest such complex, including two enormous warehouses linked by a series of bridges to each other, to adjoining structures, and, originally, to three two-story covered piers. An idea of the size of the complex may be had by noting that the 980-foot-long facade of Building A was longer than the Woolworth Building is tall. Gilbert broke up the facade of Building A by using projecting tower-like bays with narrow slit windows, creating the effect – appropriately enough – of a concrete fortress.

Gilbert designed the entire facility – completed in just ten months – to be built with a recently patented method of construction, developed by Claude Allen Porter (C.A.P.) Turner.³¹ Turner's system, which he developed in 1905 and patented in 1908, used concrete slabs supported by specially reinforced concrete columns – called mushroom columns because of the shape of the flared column capitals.

Besides the extensive use of Turner's system, Gilbert's other practical achievement at the Army Terminal was its carefully planned integration with a transit system. Railroad tracks were laid directly into the building's enormous enclosed atrium. Trains pulled into the building to be unloaded by traveling cranes, which swung the goods up to the cantilevered concrete balconies – loading docks in the air. The diagonal balcony arrangement allowed the cranes access to each floor, a system suggested by an expert lent by assembly-line pioneer Henry Ford. The result was a seamless internal transportation system – from train to crane to warehouse to pier to ship.

Gilbert's first use of Turner's system was at a smaller warehouse complex in Brooklyn – the Austin-Nichols Warehouse at Kent Avenue and North 3rd Street, a complex begun in 1909 – built for a grocery wholesaler. The R.C. Williams Company undoubtedly knew of Cass Gilbert from his national reputation, but the company also knew about his earlier warehouse – built for another grocery wholesaler. Gilbert's work at the Brooklyn Army Terminal must have especially recommended him as the expert in planning efficient, economical concrete warehouse space integrated into a transportation system – just the sort of thing that R.C. Williams was looking for, if on a substantially smaller scale, in its new headquarters adjacent the newly constructed High Line. Just as the Brooklyn warehouses were part of a system that moved soldiers and materiel from train to warehouse to ships, the R.C. Williams warehouse moved groceries from High Line to warehouse to trucks. In January 1927, in discussions with the current Mr. Williams about the height of the floors at the Williams Warehouse, John Rockart, of Cass Gilbert's office, cited the floor heights of both Austin Nichols and the Brooklyn Army Terminal.³² And a week later, as part of the planning process for the Williams warehouse, Rockart took Williams on a tour of the Austin Nichols warehouse, where they inspected everything from tanks for olive oil

³¹ For a fuller account of Gilbert's use of Turner's methods at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, see Sharon Irish, "Great Gray Buildings," Chapter 11 of *Cass Gilbert, Life and Work: Architect of the Public Domain*, edited by Barbara S. Christen and Steven Flanders (New York: W.W. Norton, c.2001), on which this description is based.

³² John R. Rockart, Report, January 4, 1927, p.3, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

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storage to peanut butter machinery to the caviar room.³³ Gilbert recommended that Williams retain the Turner Company for the work, and Williams did indeed consider the company, but in the end instead retained the Barney-Ahlers Construction Company.³⁴

The R.C. Williams Company warehouse is a ten-story building occupying the entire blockfront of Tenth Avenue between West 25th and 26th streets, and backing up on the west to the High Line, which separates it from the rest of the block.³⁵ Its design makes it a miniature version of the enormous warehouses at the Brooklyn Army Terminal – like those, it has a broad concrete façade broken up by broad columns in bays comprised of three rectangular windows – eight bays on tenth avenue and three on the side streets. Those bays are flanked by projecting tower-like corners with narrow slit windows, creating the effect of a concrete fortress – almost identical to the Army Terminal design.

Perhaps because of the building's location in Manhattan – rather than in an industrial section on the Brooklyn waterfront – Gilbert allowed a certain amount of more traditional-minded architectural ornament, including spiky bronze lanterns and handsome wrought-iron window grilles. But for the most part, the architectural effect is determined by the same “great gray mass of building, all one color, all one tone, yet modified by the sunlight or shadow to pearly gray of wonderful delicacy” that Gilbert created at the Brooklyn Army Terminal.³⁶

Inside, the warehouse was designed for the maximum efficiency of the R.C. Williams operation. As described in the company's official history:

...the design [gives] the greatest amount of light with the highest degree of efficiency in operation. All elevators, staircases, and fire towers are centered in a square set in the middle of the building, so that all aisles and floors are clear for the movement of goods over the shortest possible route to the freight elevators. The third floor level of the building accommodates the track switch of the New York Central Railroad for incoming and outgoing freight shipments.³⁷

Inside the loading docks, Gilbert's signature reinforced-concrete mushroom columns can be seen supporting the structure.

³³ John R. Rockart, Report, January 9, 1927, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

³⁴ John R. Rockart, Report, December 31, 1926, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

³⁵ See also New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department, New Building application No. 63 of 1927.

³⁶ On January 9, Rockart reported a discussion with Williams about the exterior design: “I showed him perspective of the exterior. He thought it was too plain and suggested a termination at the top. I told him I would make some further studies thereof. I told him that the design as presented would work very well and he stated that he would be willing to accept my judgment but I told him I would make further studies.” Clearly, the impetus for a simple industrial design was Gilbert's, and the client had to be persuaded of its appropriateness. John R. Rockart, Report, January 9, 1927, in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New York Historical Society.

³⁷ *One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1811-1936, op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

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A contemporary writer acknowledged the building's industrial aesthetic:

Simplicity is the keynote of the building, and yet its solidity and symmetry of line bear witness to the skill of the architect, Mr. Cass Gilbert. No frills would be appropriate here, for the business of dispensing coffee and sugar, flour, cheese and pineapples is an intensely practical one. Everything for use, is the principle embodied in this building, and an example which is noted immediately is the great amount of window area provided for the sake of ample light and sanitation.³⁸

R.C. Williams no longer occupies Cass Gilbert's warehouse, but the building survives remarkably intact as one of Gilbert's three remarkable essays in reinforced-concrete Modernism, and the only one in Manhattan.

³⁸ O.W. Cooley, "A Veteran Firm's New Home," *op. cit.*, p. 197.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of this nomination is outlined on the accompanying map.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire lot on which the former R.C. Williams Warehouse was erected.

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11. Form Prepared By

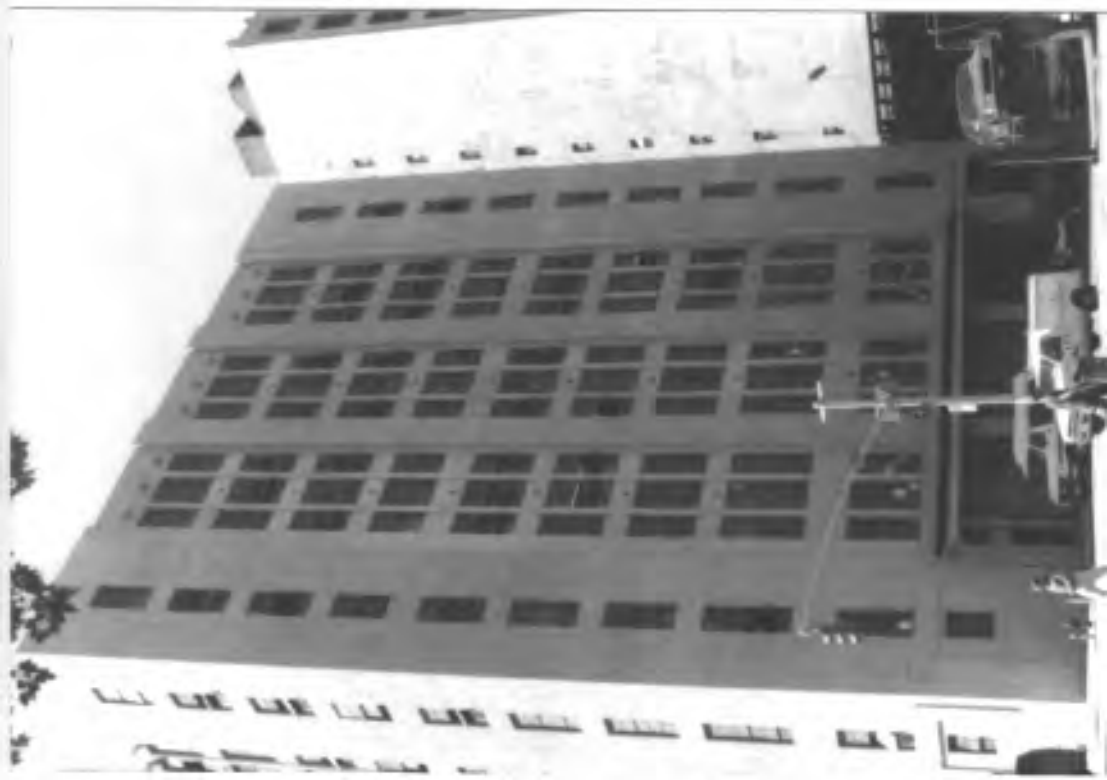
Anthony Robins
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Additional Documentation

Photo List of the R.C. Williams Warehouse

Photos by Anthony Robins, September 2004
Negatives stored with Anthony Robins
50 West 67th Street 1-F
New York, NY 10023

1. 259-273 Tenth Avenue, from West 25th to 26th streets, looking north, showing Tenth Avenue and West 25th Street facades.
2. West 26th Street façade, looking south.
3. Rear (western) façade, facing High Line, looking southeast.
4. Rear façade, detail lower floors, looking southeast.
5. Tenth Avenue façade, middle stories, detail.
6. Tenth Avenue façade, middle stories, windows detail.
7. West 25th Street façade, upper stories, detail, looking north.
8. West 25th Street façade, loading bays, looking northwest.
9. West 25th Street façade, first story, decorative metal window grille.
10. Tenth Avenue façade, loading bays at ground story, looking north.
11. Tenth Avenue façade, loading bays at ground story, decorative lighting fixture.
12. Tenth Avenue entrance lobby (currently not in use), elevator cab.
13. Typical upper floor, wall and window detail.
14. Basement.
15. Column on typical lower floor.
16. Tenth floor interior.
17. Tenth floor column.











THIS FLOOR WILL
SAFELY SUSTAIN
A LOAD OF _____
PER SQUARE FOOT

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