

## 5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: Educational Alliance

### **Executive Summary**

The Educational Alliance building, at 197 East Broadway on the corner of Jefferson Street, opened in 1891. It was designed by Brunner & Tryon in a style that combines Renaissance Revival and Romanesque Revival elements. The materials are brick, with terra cotta and molded brick trim. The building is primarily intact.

The Educational Alliance is a strong candidate for landmark designation not only for its architectural significance, but also for the cultural impact of its services on the Lower East Side neighborhood. In fact, the building's architectural design—its eloquent communication of dignity, solid purpose, cutting-edge modernity and light and enlightenment—reinforced the Alliance's historic mission of educating and integrating new immigrants into American life.



*Educational Alliance, 2020*

### **The Educational Alliance as An Engine of Assimilation**

From its beginning in 1889, the Educational Alliance was more than a settlement house. It was a driving force for pluralism, an argument that immigrant Jews could be and were proud Americans, capable of distinguished contribution to civic life and culture.

It was news when the Educational Alliance—a joint effort of several German Jewish philanthropies—first incorporated. As reported by the *New-York Tribune*, the Alliance constituted “A New Local Education

Society” for “the promotion of free education...The society will maintain in the building a library, reading and class rooms, and lecture and music halls.”

The *Jewish Messenger* put the group’s mission more bluntly. The deluge of poor Eastern European Jews to the Lower East Side was fueling desperation, prejudice, and Christian missionary efforts. The “Educational Alliance” coincided with the need for “more day schools downtown, to check the conversionists and save the children from the gutter.”

The Alliance’s handsome and dignified corner building, deliberately devoid of flourishes, reflected this quest for acceptance and respect. The building, at first named the Hebrew Institute, was heralded in advance of its construction for its fine design, impressive use of light and space, and distinctively up-to-date features.

When the Alliance building was dedicated November 8, 1891, again it was news, a celebration of patriotic pluralism and modern technology. The ceremony featured an orchestra playing the Star Spangled Banner while the American flag was displayed on stage. The *New-York Tribune* noted

that the building was “heated by steam, and lighted by electricity.” Equally modern, the library “contain[ed] 10,000 volumes, the free use of which was offered to Jew and Gentile, black and white.”

Alliance goals were equally high-minded, aspiring to educate and acculturate poor Lower East Siders with offerings educational, physical, cultural, and moral. The building embodied that aspiration, a refuge of light, air, and enlightenment for the Lower East Side’s literally teeming masses. When the roof garden opened in 1897, it was, as the *New-York Tribune* reported, “a



*Educational Alliance, 1895*

success in every way—over two hundred and thirty-five thousand visitors” over the course of six weeks, with an average daily attendance of over six thousand.

In its efforts to promote assimilation, at first, the school did not offer religious education and allowed only English and German to be spoken on site, banning Yiddish—but school practices rapidly evolved, demonstrating a keen responsiveness to community needs. Soon enough the Alliance was competing with the *cheders*, the unregulated and sometimes unhygienic religious schools it despised, in 1894 offering free Hebrew lessons to 2,200 daily. This flexibility has been a hallmark of the

Alliance, allowing it to serve shifting immigrant and ethnic populations through to the present day, at this location and its satellites.

Time and again, pioneering Alliance programming was replicated and ultimately subsumed by New York City. The reading room at the Alliance was “by far the most assiduously used library in the city”, with an annual circulation of 140,000 and an average attendance of 500 people a day in 1894. By 1904, the collection was taken over by the New York Public Library, becoming the core of its Seward Park division.

The English classes, in the evening for adults and in the day for children, broke new ground—predating adult education or mandatory public schooling in New York City. By 1900, more than 5,500 children had enrolled in public school directly upon completing prerequisite English classes at the Alliance. By 1904, New York City had taken over the English classes and passed a compulsory education law. The adult education classes became models, with the Breadwinners’ College providing the direct inspiration for the establishment in 1909 an evening baccalaureate program at City College.

As the neighborhood changed, the commitment to cutting-edge service remained. Operation Street Corner, the Alliance’s program for troubled youth, established in 1956, spurred and was incorporated into the groundbreaking 1962 federal juvenile delinquency program, Mobilization for Youth. The Alliance launched a Head Start program in 1965 (at first at a satellite site) the same year that pioneering federal preschool program began.

In addition to its social service programs, the Educational Alliance was and continues to be well-known for its arts program. Among the celebrated visual artists who studied or taught there, are Louise Nevelson, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Also of note, the Alliance once boasted a children's theater that won praise from Mark Twain and that reportedly rescued former gang member and future entertainer Eddie Cantor from a life of crime.

### A Historic Setting Offers A Window on the Past

The Educational Alliance is immediately across East Broadway from the Seward Branch Library, which opened in 1909, and is a designated landmark. The two institutions have shared origins and have had shared programming from the earliest years.

Across the street is Seward Park, opened in 1909, with what was the first municipal playground in the U.S. All three places represent the goals of the Progressive Era in its attempts to deal with the effects of rampant urbanization, immigration and industrialization.

Also, just west of the Educational Alliance, is the Forward Building from 1912, another designated landmark. It was part of the celebrated Yiddish Newspaper Row. A few steps further west is what is now called Straus Square, formerly Rutgers Square, a gathering place for protest by the community.

It is not surprising that the majestic pavilion (now demolished) in Seward Park was designed by Arnold W. Brunner—one of the partners of the Educational Alliance's architectural team, Brunner & Tryon. Additionally, Brunner is responsible for the once-elegant Schiff Fountain that graced Rutgers Square before being moved to Seward Park in 1936, and now much in need of repair.



*Educational Alliance, 1901-06*

### The Building as a Neighborhood Beacon, Beckoning Through Decades

The striking 5-story Educational Alliance building occupies the corner of East Broadway and Jefferson Street; its main entrance is at 197 E. Broadway. In style, it has been called both Romanesque Revival and Neo-Renaissance, with the abundance of arches connoting the Romanesque, and the symmetrical design, grand cornice, and belt courses between stories signifying Renaissance revival. Built of buff colored brick, the street level is slightly darker and uniform in color whereas the upper stories are lighter with some variation, giving the arcade-like base an added sense of solidity.

The ornamentation is subtle, but with a rich selection of forms, including what appears to be molded brick trim around the spandrels, and a variety of Classical terra cotta elements such as arches with egg-and-dart molding, vertical channels with bead-and-reel molding, pilasters with decorative capitals, and cartouches and rondels.

Although alterations have occurred over the years, the overall impact of the architecture remains as impressive and dignified—yet accessible to all—as it did upon the building’s opening in 1891.



*Educational Alliance, c. late 1960s*

**1901-1906:** Sometime between the building’s opening in 1891, and 1906, an addition in a matching style goes up to the East. The addition is topped with a roof story, above the cornice, in a compatible style.

Perhaps at the same time a modified pediment was added above the cornice on the opposite corner of the building; it was ultimately removed.

**c. 1969:** The classical portico entrances on East Broadway and on Jefferson Street were removed and replaced with bold archway entrances compatible with street level rows of arches.

**late 1960s:** A senior residence and gym

were added on the corner of Jefferson and Henry Streets. The residence was sensitively constructed away from the headquarters building and indented in from the street.

**c. 2013:** A roof top pavilion in black is added for entertainment purposes. It is only visible from a distance.

**2014:** The entrance on East Broadway is renovated again to add a canopy and lighted sign, but the result does not distract from the building’s original architectural design.

### Brunner & Tryon, Architects of Distinction

The Educational Alliance design by Arnold W. Brunner and Thomas Tryon was included in the sixth annual exhibition of the Architecture League of New York in 1890, a juried selection that the *New-York Tribune* touted as displaying “designs of exceptionally fine quality.” Among an array of stars that included McKim, Mead and White, Brunner was singled out for praise.

Brunner, with and without Thomas Tryon, designed at least six buildings that have already been designated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, including one on the Lower East Side: the former public bathhouse at 538 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street from 1905 (by Brunner alone).

In [the designation report for Brunner & Tryon’s 144 West 14<sup>th</sup> Street building](#), architectural historian Matthew Postal elaborated at length on the firm’s distinguished work, observing in part:

“During the early 1890s, this firm designed many buildings for Jewish institutions....Brunner & Tryon were partners for eleven years, from 1886 to 1897. Born in New York City to German-Jewish parents, Arnold W[illiam] Brunner (1857-1925) attended public schools and received his architectural training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology[....]Thomas Tryon (1859-1920) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Little is known about his architectural training...”

"At the time of his death, he [Tryon] was described as a 'man of genuine culture and many accomplishments . . . best known for the many country houses to which he brought a refined taste in design and decoration.'"

"Brunner, in contrast, continued to build synagogues, educational buildings, and civic structures. One writer described "his activity in the designing of appropriate and impressive public buildings [as] absolutely tireless."

When the Lower East Side was the most densely populated place on earth, the Educational Alliance played a unique and powerful role in spotlighting and remediating the plight of impoverished Eastern European Jews packed into the surrounding tenements. A driving force for civic betterment, the Alliance and its pioneering programs helped shape the neighborhood and the city. The impressive and accessible building—still serving the surrounding community—remains a vital reminder of an extraordinary past, and an architecturally distinguished anchor of the vicinity around Seward Park, resonant with history.

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**Selected References** (beyond the contemporary newspaper articles cited within):

- Bellow, Adam. 1990. *The Educational Alliance: A Centennial Celebration*. Edited by W. Keens. New York: The Educational Alliance.
- Rischin, Moses. 1970. *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.