

CHANIN BUILDING, 122 East 42nd Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1927-29; architects Sloan & Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 14.

On March 14, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Chanin Building, 122 East 42nd Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing was continued to May 9, 1978 (Item No. 2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation. A number of letters were received on this item.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Chanin Building, built in 1927-29, rises 56 stories at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street. Designed by the architectural firm of Sloan & Robertson with sculptural decoration by Rene Chambellan, it is a major example of Art Deco architecture in New York City. Erected under the supervision of the Chanin Construction Company, the building still serves as the organization's headquarters.

Irwin S. Chanin (b.1892) established his firm in 1919 to build one-family houses in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, after studying engineering at Cooper Union, working on subway construction in New York and Philadelphia, and participating in the construction of a poison gas factory for the U.S. Army during World War I. His first venture in Bensonhurst was so successful that he brought his brother Henry I. Chanin (1893-1973) into the firm, and they proceeded to build more houses and also apartment buildings in Brooklyn and then erected an office building in downtown Brooklyn. Extending their activities to Manhattan in 1924, they constructed the Fur Center Building. That same year the Chanins expanded into the theater business, eventually building eight theaters, including the fabulous 6000-seat Roxy. The Chanins also managed a number of these theaters. The 1400-room Hotel Lincoln on Eighth Avenue between 44th and 45th Streets was completed and opened by the Chanins in 1928. Following the completion of the Chanin Building in 1929, the firm expanded its activities into the Manhattan apartment field, building the Majestic and Century apartment houses on Central Park West. Extensive suburban building activity occupied much of the firm's time during the 1930s and 1940s. A notable example was Green Acres, a residential park community in Valley Stream, Long Island, begun in 1936. During World War II the firm built 2000 pre-fabricated dwellings in Newport News, Virginia, five hangars at National Airport in Washington, the Naval Ordnance Laboratory in White Oak, Maryland, and five Navy powder magazine buildings in Indian Head, Maryland. The firm has also built numerous manufacturing buildings in the New York City area and the impressive Coney Island Pumping Station for the City of New York. By 1952 when Irwin S. Chanin was profiled in the National Cyclopaedia of American Biography,¹ the Chanin Organization was composed of approximately 25 firms and corporations engaged in architecture, engineering, and construction, and in ownership and operation of real estate.

In August 1926 the Chanins acquired a 105-year leasehold on the site of the Manhattan Storage Warehouse on the west side of Lexington Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets in order to build their new office tower. Plans were filed and work begun in 1927. When the steel structure work was completed on July 2, 1928, the Chanins followed their traditional practice of driving two gold rivets into a column on the uppermost floor. On January 23, 1929, exactly one year after Irwin S. Chanin drove the first rivet into the steel frame, construction was completed--testimony to the skill of the workmen and the efficiency of the Chanin Construction Company. It was opened for business that January 29 and was hailed as "another step in the evolution of the skyscraper."² At that time, it was the first major skyscraper to have been built in the area around Grand Central Terminal, anticipating a major shift in the business district of the city. Other notable skyscrapers such as the Chrysler and Daily News Buildings soon followed. Its 680-foot height was then exceeded only by the Woolworth Building and Metropolitan Life Tower in New York and the Cleveland Terminal Building in Cleveland. Irwin S. Chanin was not, however, interested in creating the world's tallest office building but rather in building an efficient, up-to-date, progressive structure that would attract the modern business man and be a credit to the Chanin firm. To create this image, he commissioned the architectural firm of Sloan & Robertson.

Sloan & Robertson was one of the major New York architectural firms of the 1920s and '30s. John Sloan (1888-1954) studied architecture at New York University, then supervised construction for the U. S. Army in various capacities between 1908 and 1920. In private practice in 1920, he received the commission for the Fershing Square Building, 100 East 42nd Street. He formed a partnership in 1924 with T. Markoe Robertson (1878-1962) who had been educated at Yale University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In addition to the Chanin Building, the firm was responsible for the Graybar Building, 420 Lexington Avenue; the Maritime Exchange Building, 80 Broad Street; the 29 Broadway Office Building; the Plaza Building, 625 Madison Avenue; apartment buildings at 1 Beekman Place and 895 Park Avenue; and alterations, modernization, and an annex for the St. Regis Hotel. The firm was also active in the design of buildings for hospitals and institutions, including the House of Detention for Women at 10 Greenwich Avenue, the Ward's Island Sewage Disposal Plant, the Rikers Island Penitentiary, buildings for the Harlem Hospital, and the Southampton Hospital. Architectural plans for the West Side Elevated Highway between Canal and 72nd Streets and the New York State exhibit building, marine amphitheatre and stage at the 1939 New York World's Fair were also carried out by the firm. In the Chanin Building as in so much of their work during the 1930s, they created a striking example of Art Deco architecture, using that most characteristic Art Deco building type, the skyscraper.

The Chanin Building rises 56 stories in a series of setbacks culminating in a tower, designed in accordance with the 1916 zoning ordinance. The site itself, which was bounded by streets on three sides, was governed by three sets of zoning rules. This made the tower rather than the street frontage the controlling factor in regard to massing.³ Critic Matlack Price praised the Chanin Building as "an impressive realization of the most hopeful predictions that were made years ago, when the zoning laws first imposed the set-back restrictions on tall structures. At once it became necessary to design in

masses rather than in facades."⁴ The design of the tower was also influenced by the widely-publicized entry submitted by Eliel Saarinen in the competition for a new building for the Chicago Tribune (1922).⁵ The Saarinen design proved a fertile source for many Art Deco architects.

The first 17 stories completely cover the plot except on the center of the Lexington Avenue facade which is recessed above the fourth story. Major setbacks begin above the seventeenth story, forming a pyramidal base for the tower which rises uninterrupted from the thirtieth to the fifty-second story. The upper four stories of the tower are further recessed and accented with buttresses. The steel frame is clad with buff brick, terra cotta, and limestone, and is ornamented in such a way as to emphasize some of the special functions within.

As was the customary in skyscraper design, the architects were interested in establishing a clearly-defined base for the composition and a strong interest at and relationship to the street. The first floor was intended for shops. Originally the plate glass shop windows were enclosed by bronze enframements set in Belgian black marble. Later alterations have obscured some of the original detail. Also at first floor level are major entrances on Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street. Above the first floor runs a bronze frieze telling the story of evolution. It shows different kinds of plant and animal life, beginning with low marine forms, then more complex forms, and finally birds and fish. At the second and third floors, which were intended for financial institutions, are triple window groups framed in bronze and divided between the floors by bronze spandrel panels with characteristic Art Deco ornament. Each window group is flanked by limestone piers with ornamented terra-cotta capitals. The windows above the entrances are given a distinctive treatment with ornamental spandrel panels of a different design. Incorporated into the window framing are curved bronze supports holding canopies above the entrances. The canopies themselves have been altered. The fourth story is completely covered with an elaborate pattern of stylized plant forms executed in terra cotta. The use of such stylized forms is a characteristic associated with Art Deco design.

The ornament on these floors was designed by the noted architectural sculptor Rene Chambellan (1893-1955) in collaboration with Jacques Delamarre (b. 1907), head of the architectural staff of the Chanin Construction Company. Among the buildings for which Chambellan executed architectural sculpture were Radio City Music Hall and other buildings at Rockefeller Center, the East Side Airline Terminal, the Russell Sage Foundation Building, the Tribune Tower in Chicago, the Sterling Library at Yale, and the Pershing Stadium in Vincennes, France. In the Chanin Building Delamarre was responsible for many of the details of the interior design and through the years supervised the many projects which the Chanin organization chose to design "in-house." Chambellan and Delamarre also collaborated on the design of the sculptural reliefs and bronze grilles adorning the vestibules inside the building entrances. They symbolically portray various aspects of the theme "the City of Opportunity," telling "the story of a city in which it is possible for a man to rise from a humble station to wealth and influence by sheer power of his mind and hands."⁶ This, in fact, was a tribute to the success and achievement of Irwin S. Chanin.

On the Lexington Avenue side, a series of buttresses at the fifth and sixth stories accent the recessed portion of the facade. The form of these buttresses echoes the form of those at the crown of the tower. Buttress forms extending from the thirtieth to the forty-ninth floor also accentuate the corners of the brick-faced tower. The termination of the buttress forms at the forty-ninth floor indicates some of the special functions in the floors above. The fiftieth and the fifty-first floors--now converted to office space--originally housed a theater which was to serve the theatrical division of the Chanin Organization. The Chanin offices continue to be housed in the crown of the tower which begins at the fifty-second floor. The most prominent features of the crown are the protruding buttresses which provide a distinctive termination for the tower. Projecting ornament executed in abstract patterns at the fifty-second floor adds further interest to the tower. Originally a battery of 212 flood-lights illuminated the crown of the tower at night adding to its dramatic effect of the skyline. This emphasis on dramatic illumination is another quality associated with Art Deco architecture, and it is characteristically displayed in one of Hugh Ferriss' noted renderings of the buildings.⁷

When completed in 1929 the Chanin Building was praised by architectural critic Matlack Price as being "a splendid contribution to twentieth century architecture...that...powerfully rationalizes all the novel features of this new style--and...a splendid contribution to the architecture of all time because it is a good design."⁸ The quality of the design and the ornament continue to delight and are now recognized as exemplifying the characteristics of the Art Deco skyscraper. It remains a striking visual asset to the Grand Central area and continues to function successfully as an office building.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Irwin Salmon Chanin," National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, Current volume H (1952), 254-255.
2. New York Times, January 30, 1929, p. 13.
3. "The Chanin Building, New York City," Architecture and Building, 61 (February 1929), 39.
4. Matlack Price, "The Chanin Building," Architectural Forum, 50 (May 1929), 699.
5. Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style, Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 19.
6. C. Adolph Glassgold, "The Decorative Arts," The Arts, 15 (April 1929), 273.
7. See: Dan Klein, "Chanin Building, New York," Connoisseur, 186 (July 1974), 163.
8. Price, 699.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Chanin Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Chanin Building is an impressive Art Deco skyscraper designed by the prominent architectural firm of Sloan & Robertson, that it was the first major skyscraper to be built in the area around Grand Central Terminal, anticipating a major shift in the business district of the city, that the building is distinguished by the form and massing of the tower which was designed in accordance with the 1916 zoning regulations, that elegant ornament, designed by the noted architectural sculptor Rene Chambellan in collaboration with Jacques Delamarre of the Chanin firm, enhance the base and crown of the Chanin Building, that when it was completed in 1929 it was praised as being "a splendid contribution to twentieth century architecture," that it was built by the Chanin Construction Company to serve as the Chanin headquarters and to be an efficient, up-to-date, progressive structure that would attract the modern business man, that it remains a striking visual asset to the Grand Central area, and that it continues to function successfully as an office building.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Chanin Building, 122 East 42nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 14, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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New York Times. February 27, 1973, p. 40 (Henry I. Chanin obituary).

New York Times. August 4, 1962 (Robertson obituary).

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New York Times. May 18, 1927, p.30; June 22, 1927, p.33; September 11, 1927, XI, p.1; January 20, 1928, p.38; June 29, 1928, p.45; July 2, 1928, p.36; July 3, 1928, p.37; August 16, 1928, p.38; January 6, 1929, XIII, p.1; January 23, 1929, p.44; January 27, 1929, XII, p.2; January 30, 1929, p.13; February 3, 1929, XI, p.1; February 24, 1929, XII, p.3.

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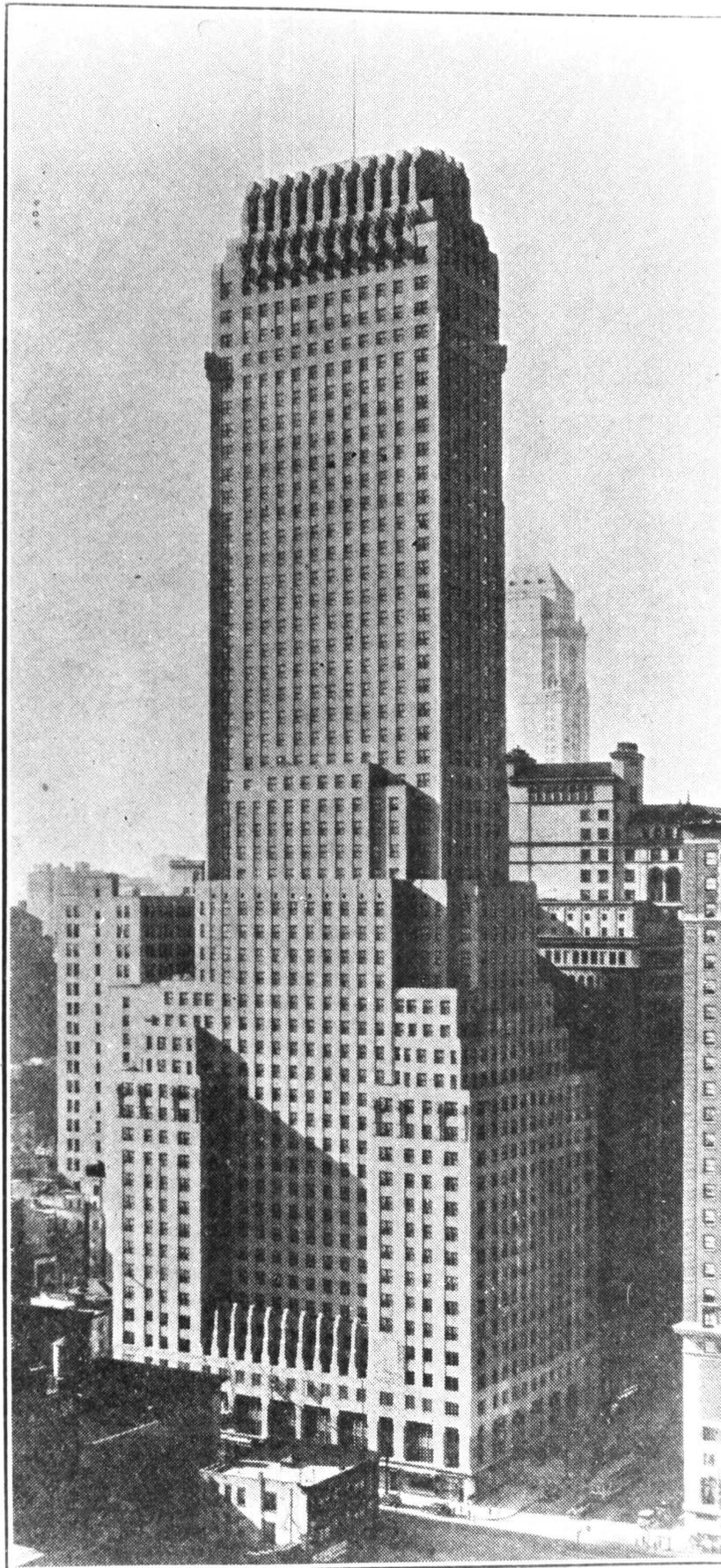
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CHANIN BUILDING 122 East 42nd Street
SLOAN & ROBERTSON BUILT 1927-29

Photo Credit: W.P. Chase, New York, the Wonder City