

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-1447

MANUFACTURERS HANOVER TRUST COMPANY BUILDING (formerly 600 Fifth Avenue Building), 600 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1950-52; architects Carson & Lundin.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 30.

On September 20, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nineteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Rockefeller Center, Inc., expressed support for a limited designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building (originally the 600 Fifth Avenue Building), built in 1950-52, was the last addition to the Rockefeller Center complex, east of Sixth Avenue, replacing the building of the Collegiate Reformed Church of St. Nicholas. Designed by the firm of Carson & Lundin to complement the original Center Buildings, the building takes the form of a 28-story tower set on an I-shaped seven-story base. In its scale, use of materials, major design details, and setbacks, the architects created a design which is integral with the Rockefeller Center complex. The first major tenant was the Sinclair Oil Co., and the building was known for many years as the Sinclair Building.

Rockefeller Center is one of the most important architectural projects ever undertaken in America. It was unprecedented in scope, near visionary in its urban planning, and unequalled for its harmonious integration of architecture, art, and landscaping. The complex grew out of an ill-fated plan to build new midtown quarters for the Metropolitan Opera Company. When the original scheme collapsed, the project was transformed into the private commercial enterprise of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Construction of the original complex began in 1931 and ended with the completion of the fourteenth building in 1939.

When Rockefeller drove home the last rivet in the Rubber Company Building on November 1, 1939, he marked the official completion of the fourteen-unit complex. The structural form of the self-contained city had emerged. Now, said master of ceremonies, Nelson Rockefeller, "The Center really begins." [1] Actually, it had already begun some years prior. Early ridiculed as "Rockefeller's folly," the Center was now celebrated in a Broadway show tune, [2] by hundreds of locals and tourists, as well as by increasingly more appreciative architectural critics. It was the "world of tomorrow," [3] -- one which by 1938 had begun to show its first return on investment.

Unlike the 14 units in the original complex, the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building was privately constructed in 1950-52 and purchased by Rockefeller interests only in 1963.[4] It was, however, linked to the Center from the start.

Initially the developers of Rockefeller Center had hoped to purchase the site and thus extend the Center's 48th Street property all the way east to Fifth Avenue, but it was occupied by the Collegiate Reformed Church of St. Nicholas and its wardens preferred to stay put. The church was admired as "a very human thing" by Raymond Hood, and he hoped it would be preserved.[5] It was until 1950. Before that time it provided the Center, at smaller scale, with the same complementary contrast as St. Patrick's Cathedral across Fifth Avenue.

With a dwindling midtown congregation, church authorities decided in 1949 to lease the property to the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company. The latter then leased three contiguous land parcels from Rockefeller and thus pieced together an I-shaped site for the construction of a 28-story tower.[6] As part of the settlement the developers agreed not to block any windows in the nearest Rockefeller building (La Maison Francaise) and to respect its general massing. As a result, the new tower was moved forward to Fifth Avenue where zoning laws required its setbacks to stop at the eleventh floor instead of continuing up to the 18th.[7] The tower was placed atop a seven story block which maintained the low-rise elevations of Rockefeller Center's four international units along Fifth Avenue. In return for these concessions, the new building was connected to the Center's subterranean concourse and given access to sub-basement servicing.

The building moreover was the work of Carson & Lundin, the Center's resident architects. It was one of two structures which they designed to complement Rockefeller's complex, the other being at 666 Fifth Avenue (1956-57).[8] Robert Carson (1906-1960) and Earl H. Lundin (1900-1975) had established their partnership in 1939, the same year they were appointed the Center's resident architects, succeeding the Associated Architects.

Carson, born in Marion, Illinois, and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania in 1928, joined the firm of Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux. Lundin, a graduate of the University of Michigan, joined the Associated Architects as a job captain in 1930 on the Rockefeller Center project. The firm remained resident architects for the Center until 1957, designing the Esso Building (1946-50), now Warner Communications Building, for which it received the award of the Fifth Avenue Association, the glass walls which opened up the skating rink to the surrounding restaurant, two of the largest studios for NBC, and the offices of the Rockefeller Brothers. The firm specialized in the design of tall office buildings, an outgrowth of their Rockefeller Center work, in New York and other major cities.[9]

An even greater connection with Rockefeller Center, if less happy, was established when Sinclair Oil moved out of its offices in the International Building and into the new tower. It occupied floors 2-9 and gave the building its name.[10]

The company was incorporated by Harry Sinclair in 1916. It prospered during World War I, especially because the navy converted from coal to oil.

It also boomed from the craze for automobiles, the number of which trebled between 1915 and 1919. The airplane brought even greater prosperity and raised the company's assets from \$50 million to nearly a half billion within its first three decades.[11] Thriving in the 1930s, Sinclair Oil was solicited as a Rockefeller tenant in 1935. It was lured away from its former headquarters at 45 Nassau Street which Rockefeller interests took over as part of the relocation deal.

Sinclair Oil's growth after World War II was prodigious. It was one of the many tenants which clamored for larger quarters in Rockefeller Center. The need was such that by 1950 president P.C. Spencer decided to move, explaining that it was of "paramount [importance] that the company obtain the most modern air conditioned quarters available to take care of its rapidly growing organization and future expansion needs." [12]

It became the principal tenant in one of the newest and most exclusive office buildings in New York --- and, at that time, the smallest tower erected in America since 1930.[13] Like the Esso Building, now the Warner Communications Building, also a Carson & Lundin design, 600 Fifth Avenue echoes the design of the pre-War Rockefeller Center buildings in its scale, materials, major design details, and setbacks. The building's emphasis was not on height but usable open space. Modern lighting and air conditioning allowed its greater bulk as opposed to the slender slabs of Rockefeller Center which depended on a 27-1/2 foot corridor-to-window standard for natural illumination and ventilation. The building, moreover, attempted to surpass the Center's ground floor achievement which was largely one of circulation. Instead, the tower was restricted to a single entrance on 48th Street where a broad expanse of glass continues the interior-exterior aesthetic begun in the Eastern Airlines Building. By including only one access to the tower, the architects omitted the need for corridors between multiple building entrances and thus devoted most of the valuable ground floor space to profit-making shops, each with its own entrance from the street. The retail space was maximized by distributing girders which eliminated nearly half of the ground floor's structural supports. In addition, it featured large bronze-framed display windows with sills close to the sidewalk, producing in effect, one large glazed showcase. A portion of the commercial space was leased by Pan Am airlines and by Swiss business and financial concerns, both of which extended the transportation and international character of Rockefeller Center.[14]

The new building was equipped with the most up-to-date equipment and the first cellular steel floors in New York (which speeded construction and gave total electrical flexibility). It was selected in 1952 as the second best building erected on Fifth Avenue. It was preempted only by the Lever House.[15] Its purchase by Rockefeller interests in 1963 rounded out the Center's site while formalizing the sympathetic relationship which had existed from the very beginning. In more recent years the building has taken on the name of Manufacturers Hanover Trust, its current principal tenant.

Description

The Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building faces onto Fifth Avenue and extends westward on 48th Street, then wraps behind two lower-scaled buildings at 604 and 608 Fifth Avenue to create an I-shaped

structure which adjoins the Time and Life Building (1 Rockefeller Plaza). The limestone-faced building consists of a 28-story tower running east-west, set back from a seven-story base which preserves the scale of Fifth Avenue. The base is accentuated by a double-height ground floor, devoted to stores and display windows with large expanses of glass, faced with polished brown-gray granite on Fifth Avenue and 48th Street elevations. The recessed main building entrance is on 48th Street and marked by glass windows opening onto the lobby. This facade also has a recessed service door opening with modern doors. A continuous bronze band runs above the granite facing. Roof gardens -- the continuation of another Rockefeller Center theme -- on the base set off the three-story office tiers flanking the main tower. The office tiers also have roof gardens. The limestone facing, while more simplified than that on the other Rockefeller Center buildings, continues the theme of the earlier buildings. The stone spandrels below the windows are very slightly recessed from the vertical piers; this gives particular emphasis to the termination of the tower at parapet level. Because of the I-shaped site a relatively small portion of the building, seven stories in height, faces onto 49th Street and the plaza created by the Time and Life Building. Here the use of vertically ridged stone spandrels below the windows, a cabled cornice at the roof line, a low polished granite base, and display windows which closely resemble those in the Time and Life Building are features which link this building with its Rockefeller Center neighbors. Aside from the installation of new revolving doors and shop front changes, the building remains intact.[16]

Significant features include but are not limited to:

- Buff-colored smooth Indiana limestone cladding
- Slightly projecting piers of uniform width

FIFTH AVENUE FACADE

1ST FLOOR (Double-height):

- Polished granite facing
- Continuous bronze band above granite facing
- "600 FIFTH AVE ENTRANCE 48TH ST ," in bronze letters on corner pier

CORNER SHOPFRONT with:

- Beveled bronze frame
- Bronze awning frame (in concealed vertical housing)

DISPLAY WINDOWS with:

- Beveled bronze frames
- Bronze awning frames (in concealed vertical housing)
- Bronze planter at base of second window from south

UPPER FLOORS:

- 2/1 steel sash
- Rooftop gardens on setback and office tier
- Two wooden flagpoles with brass globe terminations and bronze anchors (3rd floor)

48TH STREET FACADE

1ST FLOOR (Double-height):

- Polished granite facing
- Continuous bronze band above granite facing
- "600 FIFTH AVE ENTRANCE ," in bronze letters on corner pier
- Recessed service door opening

MAIN ENTRANCE:

- Recessed, with two sets of revolving doors flanking a single-leaf door with sidelights; framed in brass, surrounded by glass subdivided by bronze mullions rising to height of granite facing
- "600 FIFTH AVENUE" in bronze letters above revolving doors
- terrazzo pavement with brass strips in recess
- granite planters flanking door frame

ONE SHOP FRONT with:

- Beveled bronze frame set below large sheet of black glass
- Bronze awning frame (in concealed vertical housing)
- Bronze planters at base

Footnotes

1. The Last Rivet: The Story of Rockefeller Center, a City within a City, as Told at the Ceremony in which John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Drove the Last Rivet of the Last Building, Nov. 1, 1939 (New York: Rockefeller Center, Inc., 1939).
2. George & Ira Gershwin, "They All Laughed," from Shall We Dance, copyright 1937, by Gershwin Publishing Corp. (Quoted in Carol Herselle Krinsky, Rockefeller Center (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 88.)
3. Henry R. Luce, 2/5/1941 (quoted in Alan Balfour, Rockefeller Center: Architecture as Theater (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1978), p. 221.)
4. "Sinclair Building on Fifth Avenue Sold," New York Times, 5/16/63; p.57:1.
5. NYT, 1/17/32, Section 2, p.2:4.
6. NB 180-49; Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Liber 4337, page 103f, Liber 4396, page 450f, Liber 4638, page 226; Index of Conveyances, New York County, Office of the Register. See also, Krinsky, p. 108.
7. "New Skyscraper," Architectural Forum, 96 (Jan. 1952), 121-125 (125).
8. "666 Fifth Avenue," Empire State Architect, 16 (Sept. - Oct. 1956), 61-85.
9. For further information, see "Robert Carson, Architect, Dies," NYT, 3/4/1960, p. 25:1, and "Earl H. Lundin, 74, Architect, Dead," NYT, 3/4/1975, p. 34:3.
10. "Sinclair is Moving to Skyscraper on Site of Old St. Nicholas Church," NYT, 8/4/1950, p. 23:2.
11. Percy C. Spencer, Oil and Independence: The Story of the Sinclair Oil Corporation, Newcomen Society of North America, New York, 1958.
12. "Sinclair is Moving...,"
13. "New Skyscraper," p. 125.
14. "Large Space in Fifth Avenue Area Leased for Development of Swiss Trade Center," NYT, 1/11/1951, p. 43:2.
15. "Skyscrapers Get 5th Ave. Awards," NYT, 10/1/1952, p. 57:1.
16. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, ALT262-53.

Report prepared by Janet Adams,
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DISPLAY WINDOWS with:

- Beveled bronze frames
- Bronze awning frames (in concealed vertical housing)
- Bronze planters at base

UPPER FLOORS:

- 2/1 steel sash
- Horizontally ridged sections above upper rows of windows in office tier
- Rooftop garden on office tier and setback

NORTHERN TOWER ELEVATION

FLOORS 8-28:

- 2/1 steel sash
- Horizontally ridged sections above upper rows of windows in office tier
- Rooftop garden on office tier and setback

49TH STREET FACADE

1ST FLOOR:

- Polished granite base

ENTRANCE OPENING with:

- Beveled bronze frame
- "10 West 49th Street," in bronze letters on sign band

TWO DISPLAY WINDOWS with:

- Beveled bronze frames

2ND-7TH FLOORS:

- Four bronze light hood (2nd floor)
- Two wooden flagpoles with brass globe terminations and bronze anchors
- 2/1 steel sash
- Vertically-ridged spandrels above windows
- Cabled cornice at roofline

WESTERN ELEVATION FACING TIME & LIFE PLAZA

1ST FLOOR:

- Display window with beveled bronze frame

2ND-7TH FLOORS:

- 2/1 steel sash
- Vertically-ridged spandrels above windows
- Cabled cornice at roofline

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company Building (originally 600 Fifth Avenue 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 Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building was the last addition to the Rockefeller Center complex, east of Sixth Avenue; that it was designed by the firm of Carson & Lundin, the Center's resident architects, to complement the original Center buildings; that the structure takes the form of a 28-story tower set on an I-shaped base and in its scale, use of materials, major design details, and setbacks is integral with the Rockefeller Center complex; that in return for these design considerations the building was connected to the Center's subterranean concourse and given access to sub-basement servicing; that it was intended to be one of the most exclusive office buildings in New York with the most up-to-date equipment; and that the design emphasizes usable open space rather than height, thus integrating it into the overall complex.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company Building (originally 600 Fifth Avenue Building), 600 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 30, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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For further references, see notes.

For additional bibliographic references, see Balfour, p. 243, and Krinsky,
pp. 214-217.

MANUFACTURERS HANOVER TRUST BUILDING

600 Fifth Avenue
April 1950 - Jan. 1952

