

GOELET BUILDING (now SWISS CENTER BUILDING), first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule at Fifth Avenue, the outer lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, elevator cabs, elevator doors, vent grilles, light fixtures, doors, and ornamental metal panels; 606-608 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1930-32; architect Victor L.S. Hafner; engineer Edward Hall Faile.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 40.

On September 11, 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the first floor interior of the Goelet Building consisting of the entrance vestibule at Fifth Avenue, the outer lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, elevator cabs, elevator doors, vent grilles, light fixtures, doors, and ornamental metal panels; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was no opposition to the designation. Four letters were received supporting the designation. The owner and the long-term lessee are not opposed to the designation.¹

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Goelet Building, built in 1930-32 on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 49th Street, was designed by the architect Victor L. S. Hafner and the engineer Edward H. Faile. The entrance vestibule, the outer lobby and the elevator lobby and the interiors of the three elevator cabs of the Goelet Building were designed by Victor L. S. Hafner and conceived in the Art Deco style. The design and craftsmanship within this sequence of spaces make this among the finest of Art Deco commercial interiors. The marble polychromy, the horizontal and vertical decorative battens, the inlay, and aluminum leaf, characteristic components of the Art Deco, effectively define the sequence of these spaces. The client, Robert Goelet, acting for the Estate of Ogden Goelet, wished a building that would be comparable in architectural merit and prestige to the family mansion it replaced and would also complement the use and appearance of the buildings of the adjacent Rockefeller Center, then under construction. These spaces play an important role in establishing that architectural merit and prestige. The decoration of the ceilings, covered with aluminum leaf, offers a broad range of stylized and geometricized Art Deco elements, with the exception of the Goelet swan -- a specific and realistic referent to the client. The plan and location of the lobby spaces are a result of the multi-use nature of the building.

The Client

Robert Goelet (1881-1966), who commissioned the Goelet Building, was a member of a family that has owned property in Manhattan since the seventeenth century. The Huguenot Francis Goelet emigrated from Amsterdam to the colony of New York in 1676, bringing with him his son Jacobus.² Prominent among their descendants were the brothers Peter Goelet (1800-1879) and Robert Goelet (1809-1879), both of whom accumulated large fortunes based on real estate and banking -- both brothers were founders of the present day Chemical Bank. Their two estates were inherited by Robert's sons, Robert (1841-1899) and Ogden Goelet (1846-1897), who, in 1880, commissioned the architect Edward Hale Kendall (1842-1901) to design them handsome residences at 589 and 608 Fifth Avenue respectively.³ Ogden Goelet married Mary Rita Wilson,⁴ and they had two children, Mary Wilson Goelet (1878-1937) and Robert Goelet (1881-1966).⁵ Upon Ogden Goelet's death, the house at 608 Fifth Avenue and "Ochre Point" at Newport were left to his widow.⁶ His real-estate holdings were to be administered through an office, the Estate of Ogden Goelet, of which his son Robert Goelet became one of two principal trustees. In 1920 Robert Goelet as a trustee commissioned a two-story commercial art gallery building at 606 Fifth Avenue on the vacant lot immediately south of Mrs. Goelet's house. Designed by John H. Duncan, it was faced with limestone and Tinos green marble.⁷ It was leased to the art dealers Henry Reinhardt & Son, a commercial establishment but suitable to a still partially residential neighborhood. Mrs. Ogden Goelet retained the family mansion at 608 Fifth Avenue until her death in 1929. Then aware of the Rockefeller Center project being developed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on the same block and blocks north, Robert Goelet, acting as a trustee of the Estate of Ogden Goelet, determined to replace his mother's mansion with a commercial structure. On November 13, 1929, the first of four sales of the contents of the house was held.⁸ The following March the house was razed along with the Reinhardt art gallery next door. In December 1930, plans for a new ten-story building were announced.⁹

Fifth Avenue

In 1852 the advent of the horse car pushed the city's northern limit to 59th Street. Originally

Fifth Avenue was developed as an exclusive residential thoroughfare, but in the late 1870s the dwellings from 23rd to 42nd Streets were rapidly being displaced by taller commercial structures. By 1935, five years after the Ogden Goelet house was razed, there were only five residences left on Fifth below 59th Street. The important retail shops had relocated from the Union Square area. By 1918 Tiffany's had moved to its new palazzo designed by McKim, Mead & White, at Fifth and 37th. Stern's had moved up from 23rd to 42nd, W. & J. Sloane to 46th, and Davis Collamore & Co. to 48th. Among the art dealers were Ehrich at No. 707, Duveen Brothers at No. 720 and Kleinberger at No. 725 Fifth Avenue. Fioret, Inc. (Parfums de Distinction) at No. 677, advertised its location "on the site of the old Cornelius Vanderbilt mansion." While many of the booksellers and publishers remained around 23rd Street, Charles Scribner's Sons moved into its new location at No. 597, (a designated New York City Landmark), designed by Ernest Flagg in 1913. However, in the wake of the attendant florists, jewellers and silversmiths came the inevitable office buildings and hotels, and after World War I these were being constructed on both sides of Fifth up to 59th Street.

When in 1929 Robert Goelet had the opportunity to build, he was confronted with Fifth Avenue's very transitional character and the rapidly rising value of his property. The Saks department store building (1923-24) occupied the block diagonally opposite. Just across 49th Street, though still in the planning phase, would loom the immense and multi-functioned presence of Rockefeller Center. To offset the high real-estate tax rates, Goelet had to determine what kind of building would give him maximum return.

Goelet took his cue from his neighbors. Anxious that a specific use might limit the building's greatest return and hasten its obsolescence, he elected to be as flexible as possible and to take advantage of all contingencies. His building would have to function both as a retail establishment and as an office building, uses not always structurally compatible especially in a relatively small building.¹⁰ Retail stores, which produced more revenue per square foot than office space, required broad show window space, while offices did not. Show windows themselves added significantly to revenue. Indeed, when the Goelet building was projected, its show window space was worth \$3000.00 per front foot.¹¹

Founded in 1907 to safeguard the highest standards of this section of the city, the Fifth Avenue Association actively proselytized for civic

improvement. Convinced that art and industry were mutually beneficial, the Association promoted architectural harmony along the Avenue. Robert Goelet was sympathetic to the Association's goals. He planned to have his own office in his new building and was eager to maintain the site's prestige. These sentiments and the need for a flexible building were, in large part, the program he presented to Edward H. Faile and his associate, the architect Victor L.S. Hafner.

The Architects

The Goelet Building was designed by Victor L. S. Hafner (1893-1947), an architect then associated with the engineering firm of E.H. Faile & Co.¹² Hafner graduated from the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1917. After the war he worked as a designer for three firms in quick succession, McKim, Mead & White, that of William Baumgarten, and Frederick G. Frost, Jr. & Associates. In 1921 Hafner won the three-year Fellowship in Architecture to the American Academy in Rome.¹³ He joined the Faile firm in 1929, staying but a year and a half.¹⁴ Hafner was associated with other firms as designer of other structures in New York, but only the Goelet Building took pride of place and was mentioned in his obituary.¹⁵

Edward Hall Faile (1884-1947) earned a master's degree from Cornell in engineering in 1906. He served as construction engineer on large industrial and transportation projects -- the Symington Malleable Iron plant in Rochester, New York, and the Third Avenue Railway Company in New York -- but buildings appear to have been his chief interest.¹⁶ He was chief engineer for the thirty-two story, steel-framed Adams Express Building (1916, Francis H. Kimball) 61 Broadway at Exchange Place. In 1925 Faile started an independent practice which he enlarged the following year. Just prior to the Goelet commission, the firm's major work was the steel-framed, twenty-eight story building, No. 270 Broadway (1929) on the southwest corner of Broadway and Chambers Street.¹⁷

Robert Goelet himself claimed a participatory role in the building's design and construction.¹⁸ The green and white marble combination recalls the first story treatment of the Reinhardt art gallery which Goelet had commissioned on behalf of the Estate of Ogden Goelet ten years before. Further, the heraldic swans and entwined "G's" are

displayed proudly both within the building and incised on the exterior.

The Design of the First Floor Interior -- Entrance Vestibule, Outer Lobby, and Elevator Lobby

The location of this sequence of lobbies along the southern side of the Goelet Building's ground story plan (Plate 1) is a result of the multi-use nature of the building which, on the ground and second, or mezzanine, stories required the retention of a maximum of the building's corner frontage -- Fifth Avenue and 49th Street -- for commercial tenants and lucrative show window space. It is here in these lobbies that Victor Hafner's fluency in the vocabulary of Art Deco motifs and their use is strongest.¹⁹ The design and detailing of the lobby spaces make them among the finest of their kind anywhere. Despite the unusual framing of the building's lower two stories, Hafner was not required to modify his Art Deco conception for the lobby spaces (as he had been required to modify the facades).²⁰ In these lobbies the marble polychromy is richer and subtler than on the building's exterior and the horizontal and vertical elements even more descriptive.

Hafner planned these spaces with care. The first, the dark entrance vestibule, is a space independent of those that follow. The vertical articulation of the black marble wall surfaces is arresting and suggests that this space, between the hurried traffic of Fifth Avenue and the approach to the elevators, is a transitional one. The outer and elevator lobbies are linked, separated only by two right angled turns, right and then left, as one approaches the elevators. In the center of the outer lobby ceiling, covered with aluminium leaf, is the Goelet swan device -- a specific referent to the client. This is a ceremonial space where horizontal bands of polychrome marble and battens of aluminum are introduced to visually direct the visitor around and back to the elevator lobby and the elevator cabs within a richly ornamented prostyle motif. The opulent marbles reassure the visitor that this is no mere back hallway, but a lobby sequence appropriate to a first class Fifth Avenue office building. The rich colors of the marbles and the pattern of their arrangement prepare and direct the visitor. These lobby spaces are in response to Robert Goelet's charge that the building be of comparable architectural merit and reflect the prestige of the site's previous occupant as well as to complement the appearance of the adjacent Rockefeller Center, then under construction. This sequence of spaces, an

outstanding example of an Art Deco interior, has been maintained with care and pride and is intact today.

Description

The entrance vestibule is a distinct space defined by the street doors and the doors to the outer lobby (Plate 2). The walls are revetted from baseboard to cornice with strips of black marble, thinly veined with white, secured with narrow vertical aluminum battens. The baseboard is a sharp red marble. The floor is a geometric pattern of gray veined marble in radiating diagonals within rectangular borders of black and white marble. The cove ceiling is plaster, decorated with Art Deco motifs -- both geometric and stylized natural forms -- applied with aluminum leaf. The lighting of this small, dark lobby is quite dramatic. Electric light glows through four vertical, aluminum grilles, perforated with a floor to ceiling pattern of tightly curvilinear, stylized foliation and flower forms, placed across the lobby's corners. Hafner's overall decoration and his choice of dark marbles here effectively separate the street and the building's interior.

Three metal and glass swinging doors link the entrance vestibule and the outer lobby (Plate 3). The glass panels within the doors are framed in a symmetrical but unusual pattern: three triangles are superimposed across the top rail of each door, the central one with its point down; and both stiles of each door simulate the elongated step pattern terminating the ribs on the building's exterior elevations. Coupled pilasters of dark marble, thickly reeded and placed within the reveals of the lobby's eastern and western ends, define the outer lobby (Plate 4). The marble revetment in the outer lobby is applied horizontally; the aluminum battens separate alternating bands of dark and light brown marble, one beige with white and brown veining, the other brown with yellow veining. The travertine floor with two borders, one black and one deep red marble, continues round to the elevator lobby. The cornice fascia of aluminum, cast with stylized motifs, shields the lighting, directing it upward and downward, and continues around through to the elevator lobby as well (Plate 5). It is the ceiling treatment, a graduated cove of plaster with molded

geometric motifs applied with aluminum leaf, that further differentiates the outer lobby within this entrance sequence. In its center is the Goelet crest, the swan, a specific referent to the original client.

The elevator lobby itself is as intricately and finely detailed as the two spaces preceding it (Plate 6). Superimposed upon the horizontal marble bands and framing the three elevator entrances, Hafner placed thickly reeded pilasters of the darker marble. This enframing takes the form of a flattened prostyle. Four octagonal metal medallions, bearing stylized motifs are placed above each of the elevator doorways and the fire stair entrance. Each elevator doorway (Plate 7) is flanked by reveals cut back from the wall surface. An indirect light source hidden within each door soffit illuminates the polished cast metal of the elevator doors themselves. Each of these paired doors is striped with subtle vertical bands of yellow and white metal, though completely covered with a cast surface of stylized leaves. Each pair of doors carries an octagonal medallion portraying two lightly clad maidens, each attended by a gazelle. When the doors open this image divides. The interiors of the three cars (Plate 8) are lined with baked enamel, the color and pattern of tortoise-shell, and protected by a plastic laminate. The fittings within are aluminum and enriched with stylized motifs; the lighting is indirect. Back in the elevator lobby, the ceiling above the continuous cornice fascia is a graduated cove of plaster applied with aluminum leaf; an Art Deco floral motif runs along its center and highest plane.

Subsequent History

In 1964 the building was leased to the Swiss Center.²¹ In 1965 the Center's administrators commissioned Lester Tichy to undertake the remodelling of portions of the first and second stories both inside and outside. The majority of the work was on portions of the interior store and office space. Tichy's remodelling campaign did not touch this portion of the interior except for the front doors which were changed to full plate glass.

*Report prepared by
Charles Savage, Research Department*

*Report edited by
Marjorie Pearson, Director of Research*

NOTES

1. On January 11, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Goelet Building first floor entrance lobby interiors as an Interior Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing was continued to February 8, 1983 (Item No. 6) and again to March 22, 1983 (Item No. 2). All three hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The representative of the owner and the long-term lessee stated they would support the designation. The Commission has received several letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.
2. Goelet genealogical sources are Frank Allaben, "Goelet Genealogy, 1676-1911," (typescript), n.d., and the Washburn Genealogical Collection, Goelet #76, 1911, New York Public Library.
3. Other notable buildings designed by Kendall were the Equitable and Washington Buildings in the French Renaissance style and the Methodist Book Exchange (1888-1890, a designated New York City Landmark) in the style of the Italian Renaissance. The Gorham or Reiss Building at 889 Broadway (also a designated New York City Landmark), on the site of Peter Goelet's house, was designed by Kendall for the Goelets in 1883.
4. The Wilsons moved to New York from Georgia following the Civil War. Her brother Marshall married Caroline Astor, daughter of Caroline Schermerhorn Astor. Her sister Grace married Cornelius Vanderbilt.
5. Robert married Elsie Whelen of Philadelphia in 1904. Mary married Henry John Innes-Ker (1876-1932), eighth Duke of Roxburghe in 1903.
6. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, Liber 467, p.458.
7. Duncan Correspondence, Boxes 1, 2, and 4, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University. Initially American green serpentine marble was specified. But the Tinos, although much more expensive, was preferred for its greater exterior durability and deeper green color. Until his death in 1929, Duncan executed other commissions for Robert Goelet as well. Robert Goelet's own taste -- formed through wealth, privilege and precedent -- emerged slowly. Correspondence between Duncan and Goelet relative to the nine-story apartment houses (1923) at 204-218 East 48th Street reveals Robert Goelet's interest in certain details. For example, the marble squares of the lobby floor were to be the same size and pattern as those in the hall of Delano and Aldrich's Knickerbocker Club (1914). Relative to the Goelet Building commission is the drawing of a cartouche displaying the Goelet crest, a swan above a monogram of two entwined "G's," copied from the family stationery. Duncan carried out renovations to the Gorham Building, 889 Broadway, which Goelet's father and uncle had commissioned from Edward Hale Kendall in 1883 on the site of Peter Goelet's house. Duncan also was commissioned to design the renovation of Ogden Goelet's former stable at 7 East 52nd Street for new tenants, the British china and glassware firm of Davis Collamore, Ltd.(1925-26).
8. *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1929, p. 27:4.
9. *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1930, Sections 12 and 13, p. 1:1.
10. *Architecture and Building*, 63 (Dec. 1931), 158-160.
11. *Architecture and Building*, 159.
12. It is to E.H. Faile & Co., Engineers that credit for the building is given in both the daily and the architectural press, *New York Times*, *op.cit.* and *Architecture and Building*, 158-160. The architect responsible for filing the building permit was Roy Clinton Morris, New Building Permit 47, March 3, 1930,

(NB 47-1930). Hafner's participation is cited in an interview with Robert Goelet, *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung*, May 13, 1964, 8. The author thanks Mr. Helmut Klee, President of Swiss Air Transport for this citation. The attribution is corroborated in Hafner's obituary, *New York Times*, April 28, 1947.

Explanation for this triplication of authors lies in the nature of the engineering firm itself, where the more obscure associates, rather than the principals, are the registered architects. In 1930 Hafner and Morris, both architects, were listed individually in the telephone directory at 441 Lexington Avenue, the same address as E.H. Faile & Co., Engineers. The number listed was the same for all three.

13. *Pencil Points*, 2 (Sept., 1921), 35. The author thanks Carol Willis for this citation.
14. In 1936 both Hafner and Faile maintained offices at 608 Fifth Avenue, and each had individual phone listings. Perhaps Robert Goelet provided each of them with space during their collaboration on the four-story addition to the original Goelet building at 6 West 49th Street.
15. *New York Times*, April 28, 1947. In 1934 Hafner carried out alterations on both the Rectory and the School of Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church at 211 West 82nd Street and 212 West 83rd Street respectively, Alt.1121/34 and Alt.1664/34. At this time his address was Scarsdale, N.Y.
16. *Who's Who in Engineering*, ed. Winfield Scott Brown (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1931), p.404.
17. NB 500-1928. 270 Broadway echoes Kimball's Adams Express Building both in material--white brick--and in form--displaying an indented light well above the second floor on the unobstructed Chambers Street side. The client of 270 Broadway was the Chemical Bank. Robert Goelet was a Chemical Bank director and may thus have become aware of Faile's work.
18. *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung*, 8.
19. The Significant Interiors Survey (New York, American Society of Interior Designers, 1981) fact sheet for the Goelet Building (S.I.S. 1601/003) lists the interior designer as L.E. Lamb & Co. Lamb and his associates were painters and decorators, not designers. They are listed in the New York Telephone Company Manhattan directory only after 1931. Their association with the Goelet Building is cited in "Location Determines Design," *Architecture and Building*, 63 (December 1931), 158-160.
20. See Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Goelet Building Designation Report* (LP-1810). Report prepared by Charles Savage (New York: City of New York, 1992).
21. In 1962 ownership of the Goelet Building was transferred to the Chemical Bank as trustee. After Robert Goelet's death his trustees sold the building in 1967 to Sarah Korein who continued the lease to the Swiss Center. This lease can be extended until 2026.

The Center was an outgrowth of the Swiss Federal Railroads agency which first opened a New York information office in 1908. The S.F.R.R. agency opened an office at 475 Fifth Avenue in 1928. In 1951 it moved to Rockefeller Center at 10 West 49th Street as the Swiss National Travel Office, until it leased its own home across the street at 608 Fifth Avenue in 1964 as the Swiss Center. *Swiss National Tourist Office - 75 Years in the United States*, nd., np.

Additional References

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Landy, Jacob. "The Domestic Architecture of the 'Robber Barons' in New York City." Marsyas, 5 (1947-48), 63-86.

Swiss Center, New York. Illustrated pamphlet. New York, June 1966.

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Taylor, Alfred H. "Reconstructed Business House Fronts in New York." The Architectural Record, 16 (July 1904), 13-25.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Goelet Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule at Fifth Avenue, the outer lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, elevator cabs, elevator doors, vent grilles, light fixtures, doors, and ornamental metal panels; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Goelet Building, built on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 49th Street in 1930-32, designed by the architect Victor L. S. Hafner and the engineer Edward H. Faile, incorporates vestibule and lobby spaces and the interiors of three elevator cabs designed by Victor L. S. Hafner in the Art Deco style; that the design and craftsmanship within these spaces make this among the finest examples of an Art Deco commercial interior; that the marble polychromy, the horizontal and vertical battens, the inlay, and the aluminium leaf, characteristic components of the Art Deco, effectively define the sequence of these spaces; that the client, Robert Goelet, wished a building that would be comparable in architectural merit and prestige to the family mansion it replaced and would also complement the use and appearance of the buildings of the adjacent Rockefeller Center, then under construction; that these spaces play an important role in establishing that architectural merit and prestige; that the decoration of the ceilings covered with aluminum leaf, with the exception of the Goelet swan -- a specific and realistic referent to the client, offers a broad range of stylized and geometricized Art Deco elements; and that the plan and location of the lobby spaces are a result of the multi-use nature of the building.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Goelet Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule at Fifth Avenue, the outer lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, elevator cabs, elevator doors, vent grilles, light fixtures, doors, and ornamental metal panels; 606-608 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 40, as its Landmark Site.

**GOELET BUILDING
GROUND FLOOR INTERIOR
608 FIFTH AVENUE**

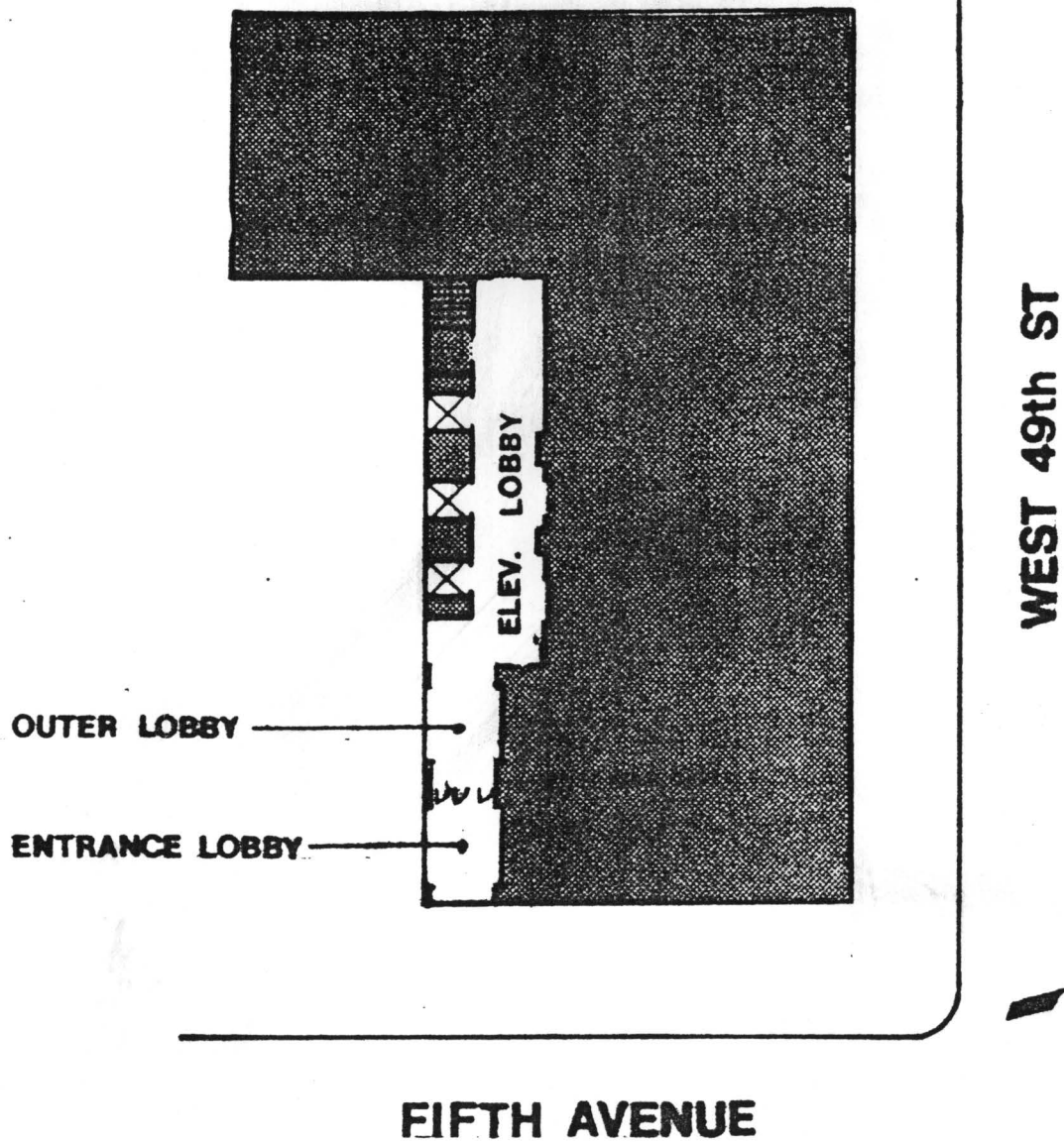


Plate 1. Ground floor interior, Goelet Building.



Plate 2. Vestibule, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)



Plate 3. Outer lobby, eastern end, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)

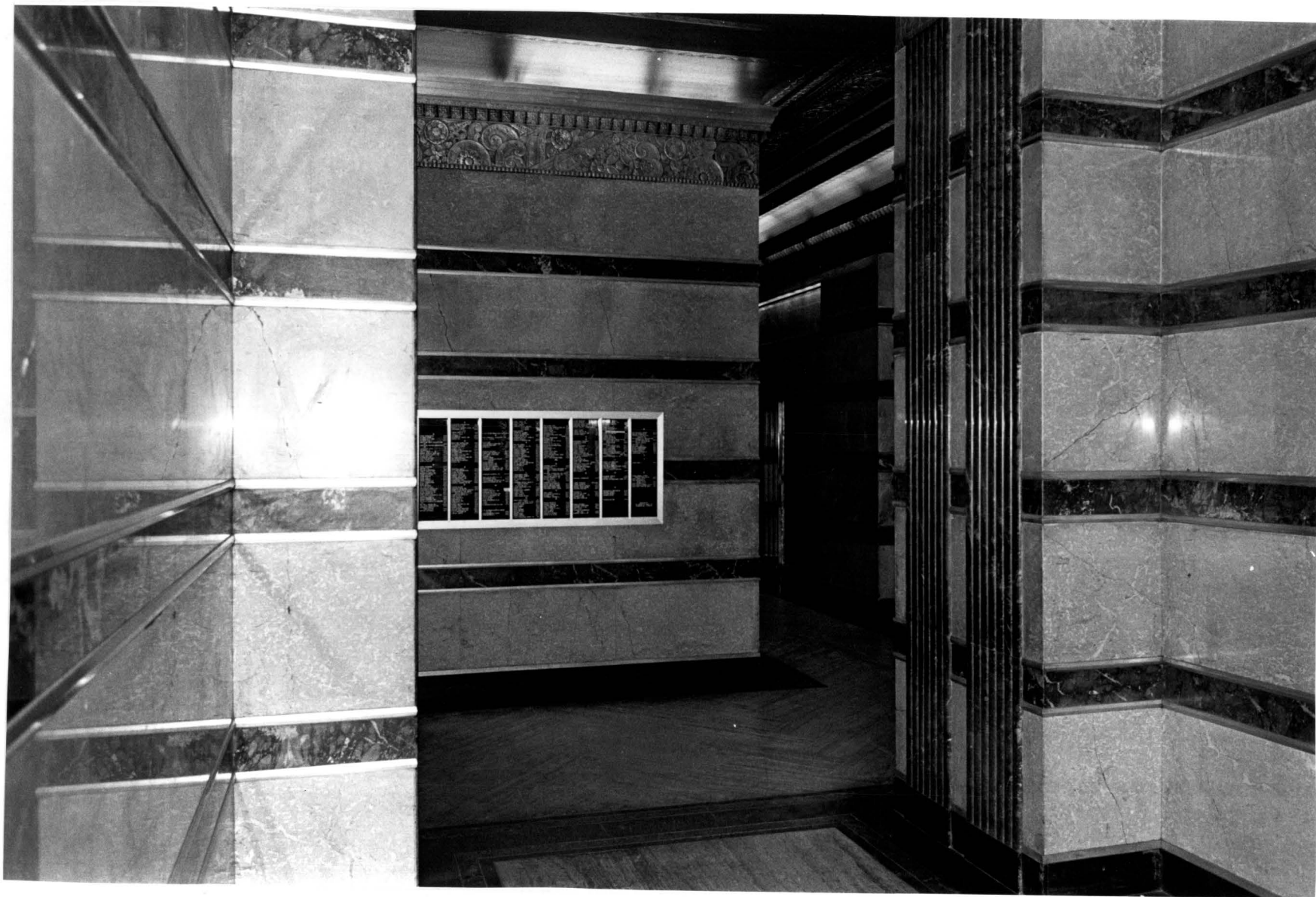


Plate 4. Outer lobby, western end and beyond toward the elevator lobby, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)

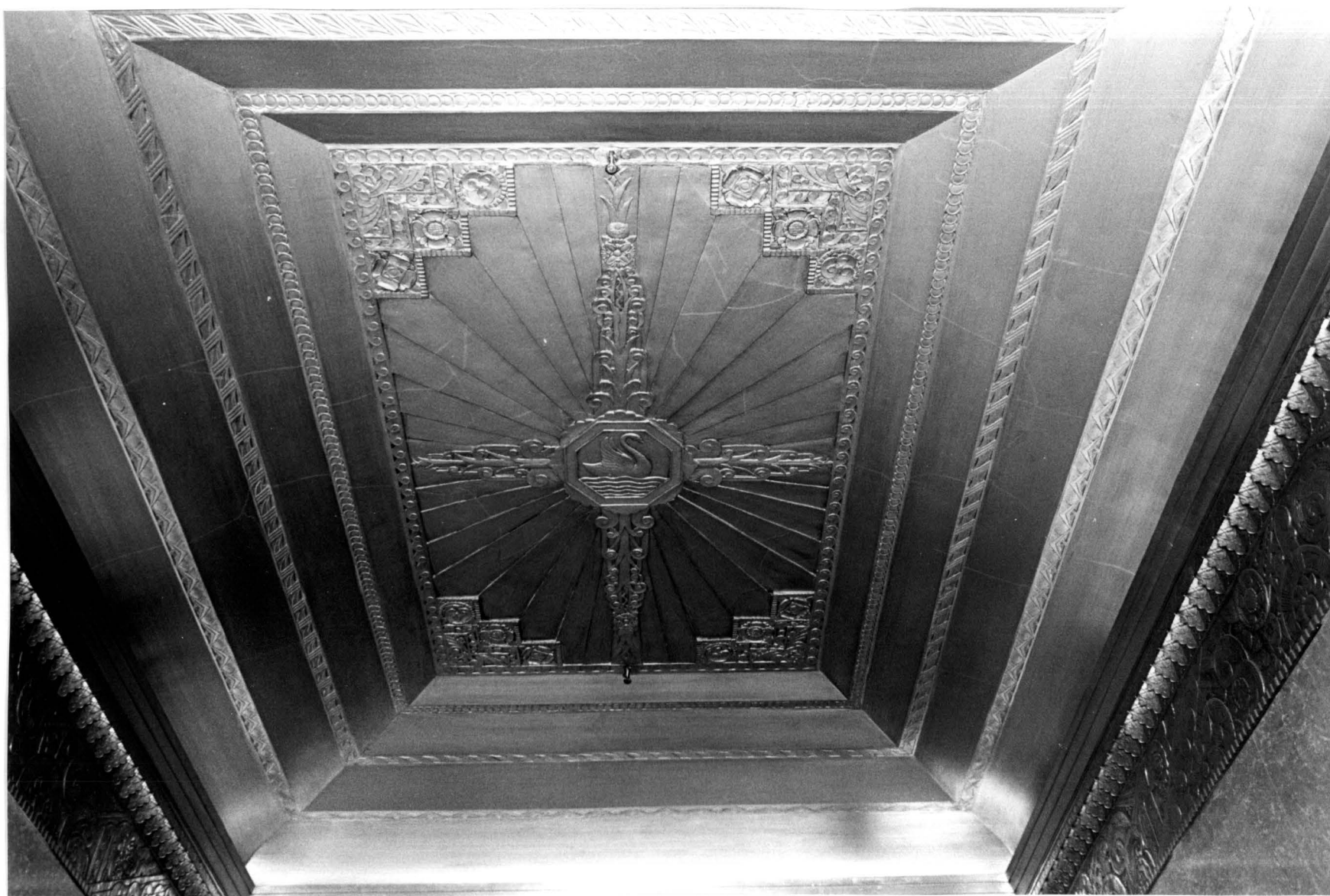


Plate 5. Detail, ceiling, outer lobby, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)

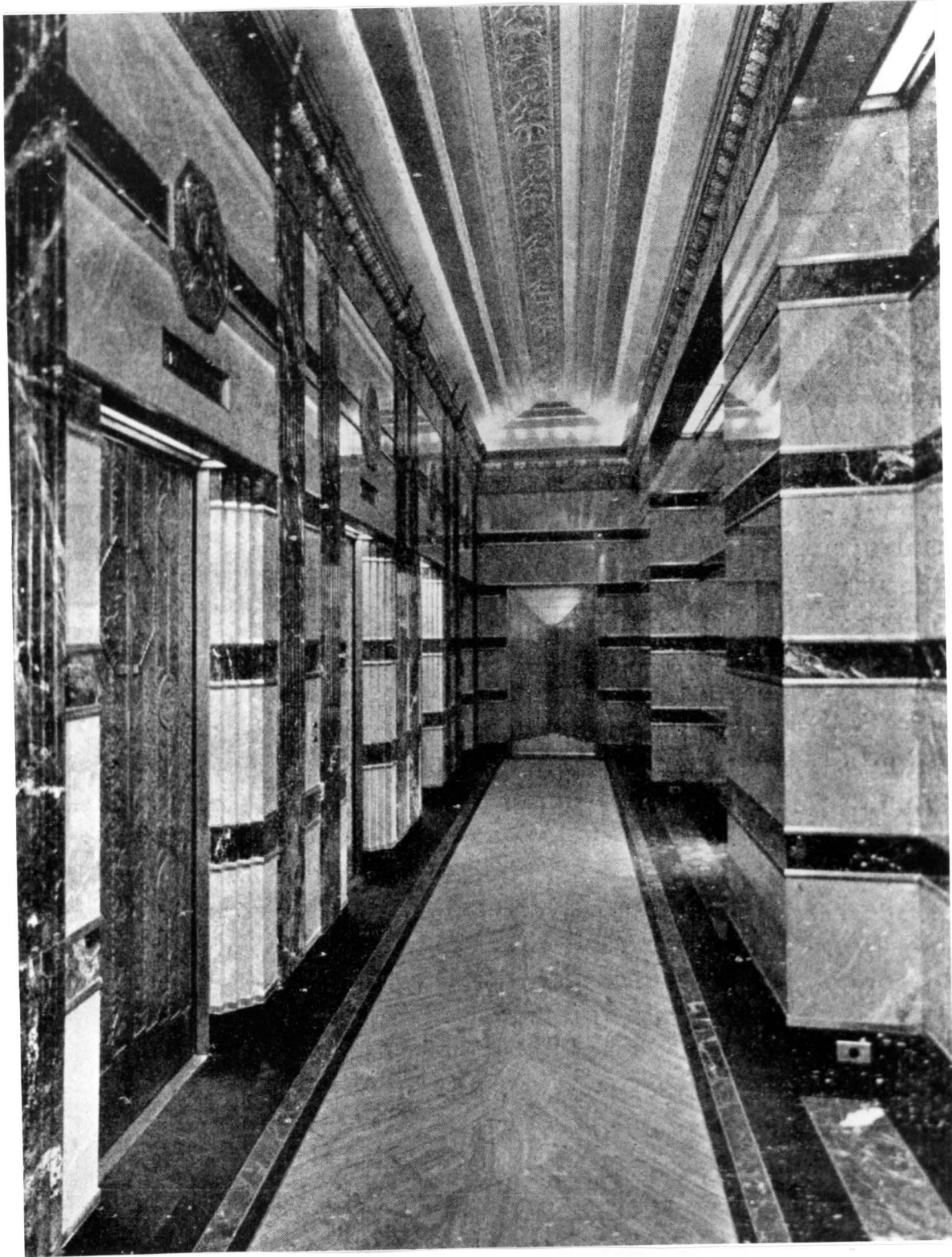


Plate 6. Elevator lobby, Goelet Building. *Architecture & Building*, 63 (December, 1931), 160.



Plate 7. Elevator entrance, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)



Plate 8. Elevator cab interior, Goelet Building. (Carl Forster)