

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 19, 1981, Designation List 143
LP-2001

EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, ground floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance hall, the 33rd Street entrance halls, the 34th Street entrance halls, the lobby and elevator bank halls, the escalator halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall leading to the second floor, the staircases and halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall descending to the lower lobby concourse; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the lobby and Fifth Avenue entrance hall and the bridges extending from the second floor elevator halls across the upper part of the lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, light fixtures, murals, wall plaques, elevator doors, and staircase railings; 350 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. Built 1930-31; architects Shreve, Lamb & Harmon.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 835, Lot 41.

On September 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Empire State Building ground floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance hall, the 33rd Street entrance halls, the 34th Street entrance halls, the lobby and elevator bank halls, the escalator halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall leading to the second floor, the staircases and halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall descending to the lower lobby concourse; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the lobby and Fifth Avenue entrance hall and the bridges extending from the second floor elevator halls across the upper part of the lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, light fixtures, murals, wall plaques, elevator doors, and staircase railings (Item No.15). The item was again heard on December 11, 1979 (Item No.2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provision of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were three speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Empire State Building is today the best-known symbol of New York City. Its name, its profile, and the view from its summit are familiar the world over, and a visit to New York is generally conceded to be incomplete without a trip to the Empire State Building's observatory. The symbolic welcome of its chapel-like Fifth Avenue lobby, and the concourse-like effect of its lobby walls with long rows of elevator banks and interior storefronts, still provide an appropriate grand entrance.

The Empire State was the final and most celebrated product of the skyscraper frenzy produced by the economic boom of the 1920s, a boom which gave midtown a new modernistic skyline and a series of new Art Deco lobbies. The building's opening in May, 1931, on the former site of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, marked the transformation of midtown from New York's pre-eminent residential area for the social elite into the commercial center of the metropolis.

The design of the Empire State Building, in many ways shaped by the constraints of time, cost and structure, was the finest work of architect William Lamb, chief designer for Shreve, Lamb & Harmon. The building's interiors were designed with concerns similar to those guiding the design of its exterior: simplicity of detail, long unbroken lines, beautiful materials. Like that of the exterior, the design of the interior was a product of the extraordinary practical requirements of the size and scope of the building, and of Lamb's stylistic leanings towards a spare, somewhat utilitarian elegance, with the addition of striking modernistic details.

The interiors of the Empire State Building were designed to be "imposing and of great scale," in order to be "in keeping with the importance of the building." The grand Fifth Avenue entrance lobby, arranged as a long, narrow hall focusing on the aluminum silhouette of the Empire State Building on the far wall, symbolically welcomes visitors before they turn down the long corridors leading to the elevators. The corridors, elevator banks, and inner store entrances and windows create a sense of a grand concourse, an appropriate entrance to the enormous office building housing a working population of many thousands. Modernistic details such as the aluminum silhouette wall, aluminum mezzanine bridges, zig-zag ribbed ceilings, and silhouetted elevator doors, symbolically suggest the technological future foreshadowed by the creation of the world's tallest building. The interior continues to be a welcoming and overwhelming introduction for the millions of visitors drawn annually to the Empire State Building.

The Site: Development of Midtown Manhattan into the commercial center of New York

The site of the Empire State Building was part of a farm, owned by John Thompson, which was acquired in 1827 by William B. Astor.¹ The site remained in Astor hands over a hundred years of development until its purchase, in 1929, by the Empire State Building Interests.

Astor was the second son of John Jacob Astor, founder of the Astor dynasty in America. Using the family fortune, he acquired a great deal of undeveloped property in Manhattan, foreseeing that the northward expansion of New York along the island would eventually make his property worth many times its original price. Over the next fifty years, the area around 34th Street and Fifth Avenue developed first into an outlying rowhouse neighborhood of New York, and then into the city's most fashionable residential area. By the 1850s, Fifth Avenue was lined with the palaces of the Vanderbilts, A.T. Stewart (the "merchant prince," one of New York's wealthiest men), and other millionaires. The Astors themselves moved from Astor Place up to Fifth Avenue in 1859, when John Jacob Astor, Jr., built his house at the northwest corner of Fifth and 33rd Street; shortly thereafter his brother William Backhouse Astor built an adjoining house at the southwest corner of Fifth and 34th Street. The Astor houses soon became known as the central meeting place of New York society, and home to the famous balls thrown by Mrs. Astor for "the four hundred," New York's social elite.²

Following the traditional pattern of Manhattan growth, the city's hotels, theaters, clubs, and restaurants followed the residential development up Fifth Avenue. By the 1890s, guides to the city identified "the great hotel district" as lying "between 23d and 59th Streets, and Fourth and Seventh Avenues.... In that territory, which is little less than two miles long by a half mile wide, are half of the leading hotels of the metropolis."³ In 1890, William Waldorf Astor, son of John Jacob Astor, Jr., having decided to move to London, tore down his house and filed plans for the Waldorf Hotel, a thirteen-story building designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh and completed in 1893. In 1897, the neighboring Astor house having been demolished, the Astoria Hotel was erected by Astor's aunt, and connected to the Waldorf to form the Waldorf-Astoria. The new hotel soon became a major social institution of New York.⁴

Forty years later the area was changing again, largely because of the influx of department stores just before and after World War I. During the final decades of the 19th century New York's fashionable stores had clustered in the area called the "Ladies Mile," along Fifth and Sixth Avenues and Broadway between 11th and 23rd Streets. Altman's started the new trend northward by moving in 1906 from Sixth Avenue and 18th Street to Fifth Avenue at 34th Street. Others followed, and by the early 1920s Fifth Avenue was lined from 34th Street north by stores such as Best's, Tiffany's, Franklin Simon, Bonwit Teller, Lord & Taylor, and Arnold Constable.⁵ Along with the department stores came several tall

office buildings, beginning in 1902 with the Flatiron Building at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street. Rider's New York City Guide noted that "Hotels and restaurants that have long been landmarks, such as the Manhattan, the Buckingham and Sherry's, have disappeared and tall office buildings are multiplying even on the side streets."⁶ Newspapers picked up on the changes taking place in the area. Capt. William J. Pedrick, executive vice-president of the Fifth Avenue Association, was quoted extensively on the development of Fifth Avenue; he noted in particular the avenue's new tall commercial buildings: the 15-story New York Trust, the 34-story Squibb Building, the 58-story Salmon Tower (500 Fifth Avenue), and the plans for the Empire State Building.⁷

To demonstrate the rate of change on Fifth Avenue, Rider's Guide gave a capsule history of the site across Fifth Avenue from the Waldorf-Astoria: a house belonging to Dr. "Sarsaparilla" Townsend, popularizer of soft drinks, was replaced in 1867 by the "marble palace" of A.T. Stewart; in the 1890s the house was converted for use by the Manhattan Club; in 1901 it was demolished to make way for the four-story Knickerbocker Trust Building, to which, finally, in 1920-21 were added another twelve stories to create the Columbia Trust Building.⁸ The changeover of midtown Manhattan from social to commercial center was finally consummated by the demolition in 1930 of the Waldorf-Astoria itself, and the opening on its site the following year of the Empire State Building, a speculative office building and the tallest in the world.

Midtown: A New Modernistic Skyline and New Modernistic Public Spaces

The progressively larger office buildings being erected in midtown Manhattan during its commercial transformation in the 1920s brought the area two new architectural presences: a new skyline, and a new series of public interiors.⁹

Since the beginnings of skyscraper development in New York in the last decades of the 19th century, architects had tried to adapt historical styles to the modern American invention of the skyscraper. The most successful and famous of these attempts produced the Woolworth Building (Cass Gilbert, 1913), a sixty-story Gothic tower, with an extravagant two-story Gothic lobby, christened the "Cathedral of Commerce." Towards the end of the 1920s, however, under the influence of a "modernism" derived in part from the European Art Deco, New York architects created a new "skyscraper style" which, it has been argued, more fully expressed the nature--the verticality, the metal structure, the sense of an industrial and technological future--of the skyscraper.¹⁰

The series of skyscrapers constructed in midtown, including the Chrysler, Daily News, McGraw-Hill, Chanin, RCA (now GE), Fuller, and Empire State buildings, helped introduce the new modernistic Art Deco style to urban America, and their modernistic towers defined midtown's

characteristic look for the next several decades. The lobbies of these buildings, major public interior spaces serving as a welcome to the office floors, continued the modernistic design of their towers, and a number of highly decorative lobby spaces were created. The triangular lobby of the Chrysler Building, with nickel-chrome-steel details, indirect lighting, and ceiling murals of the history of transportation, continued the metallic design and automobile symbolism of that building's exterior, identifying it as the home of the Chrysler Corporation.¹¹ The popular-science display lobby of the Daily News Building, centering on a vast globe and detailed scientific charts, expressed the conviction of the publishers of the Daily News that its aim was the education of "the common people," referred to in an inscription on the building's exterior!¹² Less pointedly symbolic, the McGraw-Hill Building's lobby continued the blue-green and gold metal tubes of its entranceway into its green-walled interior, as many other modernistic towers carried their design into their lobbies.¹³ All these were designed as grand entrances to buildings with highly idiosyncratic physical presences in the skyline.

The Empire State Building, a speculative office building planned by General Motors executive John J. Raskob, was intended to be the tallest and grandest of all the 1920s skyscrapers. As it was not built for any specific corporation, its imagery was based on its unrivalled height, and on its achievements in engineering and construction. Because of the special requirements of the building's construction, its interior spaces divide the lobby functions into two parts: a symbolic welcoming space entered from Fifth Avenue, and an enormous concourse leading to the elevator banks along West 33rd and 34th Streets.

John Jacob Raskob and Al Smith.

The man who conceived the idea for the world's tallest speculative office building was a self-made multi-millionaire industrialist named John J. Raskob.¹⁴ Born into a poor family in Lockport, New York, Raskob went to work early in life to support his widowed mother and family. He found work as a secretary for a small street railway company in Lorain, Ohio, that happened to be owned by Pierre Du Pont, of the Du Pont chemical industry family. When Du Pont bought the Dallas Street Railway Company in Texas, he made Raskob treasurer, and eventually he took Raskob with him to Wilmington, Delaware, where Du Pont became president of E.I. Du Pont de Nemours and Raskob became vice president in charge of finance.

Early in the century, Raskob invested heavily in the newly formed General Motors Corporation, and convinced Du Pont to do the same. In 1915, Du Pont became chairman of General Motors, and in 1918 Raskob became chairman of its Finance Committee. The spectacular growth of the value of General Motors stock made Raskob a multi-millionaire, and one of the wealthiest men in the country. Shortly before the Depression Raskob co-authored an article in the Ladies' Home Journal entitled "Everybody Ought to be Rich."¹⁵ Aside from his organizational abilities, Raskob's chief contribution to General Motors was the invention of the installment plan for buying automobiles.

Like many businessmen of the time, Raskob was interested in politics, and like most millionaires he was a Republican. His entry into politics, however, was as a contributor to the gubernatorial campaign of populist Democratic governor Al Smith. Raskob was introduced to Smith in New York City in 1926.¹⁶ The two men came from similar backgrounds--poor Irish Catholic families--and shared a dislike of the Prohibition amendment, an issue in Smith's later campaign for the presidency. They became friendly, and Raskob volunteered generous contributions to Smith's 1926 gubernatorial re-election campaign. Although many of Smith's closest aides distrusted Raskob, they were unable to prevent his appointment two years later as campaign manager for Smith's unsuccessful 1928 race with Hoover for the Presidency, an appointment which resulted in the anomaly of a conservative Republic millionaire becoming Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. (One of Raskob's first actions as Chairman was to move the committee to offices in the General Motors Building on West 57th Street.)

Although Raskob was blamed by some Smith aides for the loss of the 1928 election, and by others for Smith's gradual shift towards a more conservative political philosophy, the relationship between the two men remained strong. When Raskob decided to get into the real estate business, and to build the tallest building in the world, he offered Smith the \$50,000 a year job of President of the Empire State Corporation.

Al Smith and the World's Tallest Building: Public Relations at the Highest Levels.

Raskob's rationale for building the world's tallest building, and for making Governor Smith its president, was never clearly stated, although several explanations have been offered. Unlike its immediate predecessors--the Woolworth Building for Frank W. Woolworth and his company, the Manhattan Company Building for the Bank of Manhattan, and the Chrysler Building for Walter Chrysler and his company--the Empire State was not built to symbolize one man or company: it was not the General Motors Building or Raskob Tower, for instance. The Empire State Building was instead simply a speculative office building, and it was named for New York State, home of the building and the state of which Al Smith had been four times governor. Rather than being a corporate symbol, the building became identified as the world's tallest building and a venture of Al Smith's.

The explanation of its height offered by the company in its various promotional brochures was simply that of a human adventure, carrying on "the Pharaoh's dream":

Down through the ages, men have yearned and toiled and planned, that they might build a structure nearer to the skies than ever had been built before. Something of this great desire burned in the souls of the Pharaohs of Egypt, when the Great Pyramid of Gizeh was erected, 451 feet high, equal to thirty-four stories. St. Peter's, at Rome, lifts its dome 435 feet toward the sky. That slender and marvelous minaret in Cairo spears the heights at 280 feet and the Cremona Campanile in Italy rises 396 feet above the earth. The famous Cathedral of Cologne attains an altitude of 512 feet; the Washington Monument is 555 feet high.

Then came the era of steel, heralded by the world-famous Eiffel Tower in Paris, 984 feet high, useless except as an awe-inspiring demonstration of what men, steel and machinery can accomplish. The Woolworth Tower was for long the world's tallest building, rising in beautiful Gothic design to a height of sixty stories, 792 feet. The Bank of Manhattan at last surpassed it with its height of 838 feet, only to be in turn surpassed by the 1046 foot elevation of the Chrysler Building's topmost spire. But Empire State is higher than all these. It carries to triumphant completion the vaulting ambition of the Pharaohs, of Pope Julius when he began the building of St. Peter's.¹⁷

As for bringing ex-Governor Smith into the project, Raskob apparently suggested at the time that he was going to build the Empire State Building to give his old friend a job. Smith, having lost the presidential election and retired from the governorship of New York, faced an uncertain future. His friend, actor and producer Eddie Dowling, recalled being present at the moment of Raskob's offer, the occasion being a dinner thrown by the New York State Democratic party for newly elected Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. Smith and Dowling had gone to the men's lounge during a lull in the proceedings, and Smith was telling him of his worries, when Raskob appeared and announced, "Don't worry, Al, I'm going to build a new skyscraper--biggest in the world--and you're going to be president of the company," maintaining that he was doing it all to give Smith a high-paying job.¹⁸

The key to understanding the actual motives behind the height of the building and the involvement of Governor Smith seems to involve a newly developing science that was becoming more and more important to the art of architecture: advertising.

Advertising seems to have become an accepted function of office buildings in the 1920s. Arthur Tappan North, writing on the subject, noted:

The incorporation of publicity or advertising features in a building is frequently an item for consideration.... This feature, when possessing intrinsic merit, is consonant with and is a legitimate attribute of good architecture. It stimulates public interest and admiration, is accepted as a genuine contribution to architecture, enhances the value of the property and is profitable to the owner in the same manner as are others forms of legitimate advertising.¹⁹

The Empire State Company in fact launched an extensive advertising campaign capitalizing on several features of the building: its "historic site," formerly that of the Astor Mansion and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel; its convenience of the two rail terminals in midtown; "a board of directors that inspires confidence;" and its advertising campaign, run by the public relations firm of Belle Moscowitz, former political aide to Al Smith, hit all the leading New York newspapers week after week with very clever ads.²⁰

The value of advertising for the Empire State Building was picked up by the Real Estate Magazine, in an article entitled "Good Publicity Something More Than 'Hitting' Front Page," in which the Empire State Building was singled out as an excellent example of how it should be done:

The Empire State Building has received extensive newspaper attention because of former Governor Smith's connection with the enterprise and through a number of clever creative publicity stunts, notable the mast which will top the building as a mooring spot for Zeppelins duly authorized by official Washington with reporters and cameramen obligingly on hand.²¹

The two primary subjects of the advertising, however, the two attributes most closely identified with the building, were the involvement of Al Smith, and the building's unmatched height.

Al Smith's relationship to the enterprise was frankly stated in the booklet released on May 1, 1931, for the building's opening ceremonies:

/Raskob and his associates/ selected a leader, a man so well known to the public that his very presence placed the seal of integrity upon their undertaking. He was Alfred E. Smith, four times Governor of New York State, Presidential candidate of the Democratic Party....known and beloved by his countrymen. He became president of Empire State, Inc. even while the mighty structure was only a dream.²²

Lists of the building's board of directors invariably began with Alfred E. Smith, and ended humbly with John J. Raskob. A New Yorker article of early

1931 noted that the building was "inevitably associated with ex-Governor Al Smith. In its earlier stages his picturesque statements made excellent publicity and drew all New York's attention to the steelwork as it grew to dizzy heights."²³

Smith's biographers have noted that his functions at the building were "largely ceremonial.... The staff handled all the rental and maintenance problems, while Smith served as attention getter, greeter, and publicity man deluxe."²⁴ To the public, however, the building was Al Smith's, and from the opening ceremonies, when his grandchildren, as representatives of "posterity," cut the ribbon at the main entrance, through the following years of giving tour upon tour to visiting royalty, politicians, sports heroes, and celebrities of every kind, he remained the building's symbol.²⁵

Similarly, the building's height played a major role in the company's public relations campaign. Besides constantly comparing the building's height to other tall monuments, the company emphasized the extraordinary daring of the construction workers involved in erecting the world's tallest building by commissioning photographer Lewis Hine to document the work. The Company arranged for a special mechanical cage that would enable Hine to be swung out into the air to photograph the most difficult feats. The photographs were then used in advertisements, and put on display in the ground floor store windows.

The publicity value of tall buildings was apparently considered to be great enough that it could actually be figured in as a legitimate "expenditure," designed to bring increased prestige and, presumably, income. R.H. Shreve, one of the Empire State Building's architects, wrote in 1930 that the constraints of zoning, wind-bracing, and general costs of a very tall building determine a point...

...where the balance begins to swing back and the rate of return on capital investment begins to diminish as the building goes higher, unless the owner gets a markedly greater unit return for the higher space, or charges the decrease in the direct net return to "advertising."²⁶

Justification for this approach was probably found in the tremendous public interest which developed during the late twenties in skyscraper heights. The New York Sun published a list of the fifty tallest buildings in New York, arranged by height, and shortly afterwards the architectural journal Pencil Points found it necessary to reprint it, in January 1931, noting that "interest in the heights of New York skyscrapers does not seem to abate, if we may judge by the inquiries concerning them received in this office."²⁷ A cartoon in the same issue showed an architect with a rendering of a pointed skyscraper and a caption reading: "Enthusiastic Architect: 'You See, This Spike Runs Down the Entire Length of the Building and If Anyone Builds a Taller Building We Can Jack Up the Spike and Still Be the Tallest!'"²⁸

In short, Raskob's strategy was based on an aggressive advertising campaign to market the Empire State Building, a speculative real-estate venture, as the world's tallest building, headed by the world's most popular former politician, with the world's most competent board of directors, on the world's most prestigious site, and the world's most

daring engineering feat, with Al Smith personally conducting the world's famous to see the world's most overwhelming view.

If advertising was indeed the goal of the builders of the Empire State Building, they were extraordinarily successful. Twenty years later, Collier's described the effect of the building on the publicity-minded:

Douglas Leigh, who makes those superspectacular signs for Broadway, is itching to transform the top into a giant soft-drink bottle, or a glowing cigarette. Human flies want to walk up the front, flagpole sitters want to sit on the lightning rod, and high-wire artists want to tralpse through space over to the Chrysler tower at Forty-second Street.²⁹

The effort spent on public relations paid off much sooner than the building's promoters imagined. Two weeks after the project was announced the stock market crashed, and throughout the early years of the Depression the building remained seriously undertenanted. The Empire State Building was saved from bankruptcy, in part, by the million or so visitors to the observation decks each year who paid one dollar a piece admissions.³⁰

Shreve, Lamb & Harmon

John J. Raskob was no doubt attracted to Shreve, Lamb & Harmon by their business-like approach to architecture. Raskob first encountered Shreve & Lamb in 1926 when his company, General Motors, commissioned a new headquarters on West 57th Street from the firm. He must have been impressed by their performance; he may also have considered it an advantage that Shreve, Lamb & Harmon had been called in as consulting architects for the Bank of Manhattan Building, and therefore had some experience in races for the "tallest building" title, as well as experience working with the Starrett & Eken construction company which built the Bank of Manhattan and which was later awarded the Empire State contract.³¹

Richmond Harold Shreve (1877-1946) was born in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia, son of a former Dean of Quebec Cathedral. He studied architecture at Cornell University, graduated in 1902, and spent the next four years on the faculty of the College of Architecture there. While at Cornell he supervised construction of Goldwin Smith Hall, designed by the prominent New York firm of Carrere & Hastings, and at the conclusion of the work he joined the firm.³² William Frederick Lamb (1883-1952), son of New York builder William Lamb, was born in Brooklyn. After graduating from Williams College in 1904, he studied at the Columbia University School of Architecture, and then went to Paris to study at the Atelier Deglane. Having received his diploma from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1911, he returned to New York and joined Carrere & Hastings.³³ In 1920, both Shreve and Lamb became partners in the new firm of Carrere & Hastings, Shreve & Lamb. Four years later they broke away to form Shreve & Lamb, and in 1929 they were joined by Arthur Loomis Harmon (1878-1958) to form Shreve, Lamb & Harmon.³⁴ Harmon, born in Chicago, had studied at the Art Institute there, and graduated from the Columbia University School of Architecture in 1901. From 1902 to 1911 he was a designer in

the office of McKim, Mead & White, in 1912-13 an associate of the firm of Wallis & Goodwillie, and then practiced under his own name until joining Shreve & Lamb. His work alone included battle monuments at Tours, Cantigny and Somme-Py in France, a YMCA in Jerusalem, and the award-winning Shelton Hotel in New York.³⁵

Of the three architects in the firm, Lamb was generally acknowledged to be the designer, and Shreve the administrator. Shreve was also active as a planner outside the firm's work; he was the director of the Slum Clearance Committee of New York after its formation in 1933, and chief architect of the group preparing plans for the Williamsburg Housing Project, as well as chief architect of the Vladeck Houses on the Lower East Side and also of Parkchester in the Bronx.³⁶

Shreve, Lamb & Harmon worked principally on commercial office buildings, although they also designed a number of estates and residences in the New York suburbs, and a few apartment houses in Manhattan. Their residential work largely in the neo-Tudor and other popular styles of the 1920s, while their commercial work tended to be spare and functional, reflecting little of the Beaux-Arts ornament for which Carrere & Hastings had been famous. Their buildings in New York, including 500 Fifth Avenue, 14 Wall Street, the Lefcourt National Building, and the Mutual of New York Building, and also their commissions outside the city, such as the Standard Oil Building in Albany, the Reynolds Tobacco Company building in Winston-Salem, and the Chimes Building in Syracuse, are all similarly designed with unadorned limestone cladding, metal framed windows, and simple set-back massing, occasionally with Art Deco or Streamlined ornamental motifs.³⁷

The spareness and economy of the firm's designs were a reflection of several architectural notions gaining currency in the 1920s. As office buildings grew larger and their engineering and financing more complex, the nature of architecture had to adapt to new conditions. Many architects in the 1920s and 1930s, recognizing new constraints, adapted the language of the International Style and functionalist schools of thought and wrote about a new art of architecture.

All three architects in the firm wrote on the subject of the changing nature of architecture. Harmon listed the various forces at work on design as: steel construction, congested business areas, the need for light and air, property shape, internal lighting, zoning, the ratio of rentable area to overall area, the cost of steel, wind bracing, and elevators.³⁸ William Lamb, the partner concerned least with organization and most with design, concurred:

An interesting development in the planning of present day office buildings is the change in the conception that the architect has of his work. The day that he could sit before his drawing board and make pretty sketches of decidedly unecconomic monuments to himself has gone. His scorn of things "practical" has been replaced by an intense earnestness to make practical necessities the armature upon which he moulds the form of his idea. Instead of being the intolerant

aesthete, he is one of a group of experts upon whom he depends for the success of his work, for the modern large building with its complicated machinery is beyond the capacity of any one man to master, and yet he must, in order to control the disposition and arrangement of this machine, have a fairly accurate general knowledge of what it is all about. Added to this he must know how to plan his building so that it will "work" economically and produce the revenue for which his clients have made their investment.³⁹

Lamb's design inclinations corresponded very well to the kind of work that Shreve brought into the office. Mrs. Lamb recalls that his tastes in most matters tended to the simple and classical. The architecture he loved best was the spare Romanesque of the southern French cathedrals. Among his contemporaries he greatly admired Raymond Hood, particularly his spare, vertical Daily News Building; Hood also wrote about the practical side of architecture, dismissing fantastic design as unnecessary. The two men were close friends. Although Lamb's work had much of the Modernistic to it, his opinion of the flamboyant variety of Moderne represented by the Chrysler Building was rather low--he referred to it once as the "Little Nemo school of architecture," meaning fancy and fantastic, like the comic strip. He never considered his work to be in any way describable as "Art Deco."⁴⁰

Precisely because the firm was a well-organized producer of practical and unadorned office buildings, it was able to organize the myriad elements involved and produce a striking, handsome, but still economical design for the Empire State Building, which was above all a creation of business considerations and an unrivalled engineering feat.

Conception and Design

The design of the interior lobby of the Empire State Building is based very much on the same perceptions of needs and aesthetic notions as the design of the exterior of the building. The spare, elegant design of the tower outside corresponds to the simple marble walls with long horizontal lines in the lobby inside.

Lobbies of contemporary office buildings generally combined two functions: a grand entrance and public space, and a passageway to the elevator system. The Chrysler Building's lobby is a prime example: a highly ornamental triangular-shaped lobby, whose vertex is the entrance and whose base is a wall opening with two sets of elevator banks. The size and layout of the Empire State Building, however, required the separation of these two functions. The grand entrance is a chapel-like space entered from the main Fifth Avenue front, while the passageway to the elevators is a series of corridors stretching down either side of the building in a long concourse.

The logic of the lobby floor was in large part dictated by the solution of the general office floor plans and layout. The architects had found

it necessary to place the elevator banks in the center of the building, surrounding them with corridors and then with offices. Lamb wrote:

The logic of the plan is very simple. A certain amount of space in the center, arranged as compactly as possible, contains the vertical circulation, toilets, shafts and corridors. Surrounding this is a perimeter of office space 28 feet deep. The sizes of the floors diminish as the elevators decrease in number. In essence there is a pyramid of non-rentable space surrounded by a greater pyramid of rentable space.... 41

Consequently, the lobby had to be laid out in a similar manner:

In the design of the entrance halls and lobbies much thought was given to the problem of adequate and easy access to the elevator system.their compact layout, which proved very economical throughout the rest of the building prevented the usual ground floor central corridor with the elevator groups on each side. Two great lateral corridors were therefore planned, each about 16 ft. wide, directly adjacent to the elevators. The side entrances lead into these corridors at about their third points, bringing these entrances close to the elevator groups. Thus travel from street to elevator is reduced to a minimum and accomplished with as little confusion as possible. 42

Lamb's plan surrounded the central core of elevators and other utilities with circulation corridors and then a ring of shops. The effect of the long corridors and elevator banks is that of an enormous public concourse: seemingly endless corridors, elevator banks, stores, and marble walls. The layout left little room for a grand symbolic entrance; instead, a separate such entrance was placed at the Fifth Avenue front of the building.

The symbolic Fifth Avenue entrance lobby is in fact laid out rather like a chapel. A long, high, narrow rectangular space is entered through revolving doors. At the end, where the walls narrow slightly, is an aluminum image of the Empire State Building, with the rising sun behind it, superimposed on a map of New York State. The effect of the lobby is to offer a visible iconographical welcome to a self-defined monument.

The adornment of the spaces thus created was approached in the same spirit as the design of the building's spare, vertical, metallic exterior:

In order to be in keeping with the importance of the building, the treatment of the hall, or this series of halls, had to be imposing and of great scale. The final choice of marbles used was made after a long investigation, which included an inspection of many of the European quarries. 43

The quarries chosen had to meet the same strict requirements of time that had affected many aspects of the building itself.

These investigations resulted in the use of two German marbles, very rich and highly colored in tones of gray and red: Estral-lante, with its rich, dark-gray background flashed with deep red, for the lower portion and above it Rose Formosa, with a pinkish-gray background, and the same deep red markings.⁴⁴

Then, as the exterior was simple and elegant, so, wrote Lamb:

...these marbles were used with the utmost simplicity, the effect of the entire scheme being dependent upon their own beauty, relieved by the use of bright metal and simply decorated silvered ceilings.⁴⁵

The other major decorative element used in the interiors--aluminum--continued the metallic design of the exterior:

The inlaid aluminum map at the end of the Fifth Avenue hall, the aluminum bridges which cross the center of the two-story side corridors and give access from the elevators to the second floor, and the further introduction of aluminum in the stair rails and in the interior show windows that line the halls accentuate the simple color scheme of gray, red and silver, which is dominated by the great ceilings that serve as the source of light.⁴⁶

One of the themes emphasized during the conception of the building was the contributions by the various groups of skilled craftsmen, financiers, engineers, and architects towards creating the world's tallest building. The decorative scheme of the lobby incorporates this theme by including plaques and medallions on the walls listing craftsmen and representing the different crafts and industries represented by the building. A dozen and a half industries are represented in abstractly designed bronze medallions; plaques include lists of the board of directors, the architects, and workmen who received awards for their efforts.

Despite Lamb's restraint, and protestation against the excesses of Art Deco, the Empire State Building interior is handsomely designed with strictly modernistic details. The aluminum silhouette wall in the Fifth Avenue lobby is a classic Art Deco creation--the motif of the sun rising behind the building can be seen on the front of the Daily News Building, and the Chrysler Building lobby's mural includes a portrait of that building. The narrowing of the Fifth Avenue hall towards the silhouette is consciously dramatic. The modernistic emblems of crafts and industries connected to the building are symbolic of the technology celebrated by Moderne design. The aluminum bridges crossing the corridors at the mezzanine level are suggestive of futuristic multi-level travel, while the zig-zag ribbed ceilings and silhouetted elevator doors suggest rapid modern transportation. The result is a handsomely designed Art Deco lobby, suitably suggestive of the technology which made possible the erection of the world's tallest building.

In front of the wall is an information desk with a black marble base, a light marble body, and an aluminum-banded top. Each side of the hall comprises, from east to west, a narrow bay with a large store window framed by molded marble; a wide blank marble wall with two narrow doors and one narrow store window enframing two wide windows, all set off by sets of modernistic tubular molded marble; an escalator entrance; and an entrance leading to the elevator corridors. These four wall divisions are set off from each other by five wide, slightly bowed marble piers. A black marble base runs along each wall, interrupted by metal vent grilles in front of the store windows. The floor is terrazzo, in a zig-zag pattern pointing towards the map wall. The ceiling of the entrance hall is a flat translucent surface lit from above; its shape follows the shape of the hall, narrowing slightly at the western end. The escalator halls leading to the second floor are sheathed with the same marble as the lobby. The staircases beneath them, entered from the corridors, have black marble walls and modernistically patterned aluminum railings.

The upper portions of the two long corridors consist of blocks of marble set to look like three horizontal bands stretching the length of the walls; the three bands are set off from each other by two long horizontal reverse-v-shaped incisions. The lower portion of the walls closest to the street comprise the inner storefronts, alternating doors and windows, some of which have been altered. Where the original elements survive, the doors and windows are enframed by modernistic metal strips. The doors and windows are set off from each other by vertical panels of modernistically rounded marble, and from the upper wall by a horizontal marble banding. The colors and veining of the lighter upper and the darker lower marble play off against each other to very handsome effect. The basic wall pattern is repeated on the inner walls framing the elevator banks, without the storefronts. Along these walls are five openings leading to the elevator banks. Above the central opening at the mezzanine level on either corridor is a striking modernistically designed aluminum bridge, giving access to the mezzanine offices from the second floor elevators. Each has slender horizontal metal banding, and each of the four corners of the bridges are extended out and down in three overlapping rounded metal sections. The aluminum railings on the bridge follow its configuration. The bridges are now glassed in. Originally, the corridor walls stepped up to a modernistically patterned ceiling, now obscured by the present suspended ceiling, but apparently still intact. The terrazzo floors of the corridors continue the zig-zag pattern of the main lobby floor. The one-story entrance halls leading in from West 33rd and 34th Streets continue the marble walls and store fronts; each has a zig-zag ribbed ceiling, and, where the ceiling meets the walls, there is a long horizontal lighting fixture with modernistic metal framing. At the far western end, the corridors lead to three large stores off a small north-south corridor, where some of the detail has been altered, and an escalator installed. A new escalator also leads from the southern corridor down to a lower level. Along the walls are a series of modernistically designed medallions symbolising various crafts and industries involved in the creation of the building including: ELEVATORS, DECORATION, MASONRY, METALS, STONE, HEATING, CONCRETE, MACHINES, CARPENTRY, EXCAVATION, PLUMBING, STEEL. Along the inner wall of the northern long corridor a series of eight lit glass panels of the Eight Wonders of the World has been added; they are not part of the original design and do not add to the qualities of the interior.

The openings at either end of the long corridors lead to single one-story halls with four low-rise elevators on either side. The walls continue the marble of the corridors, and the terrazzo floors are also continued; the walls are divided into three large sections by projecting vertical marble piers with a modernistic rippling effect. Each corridor has a zig-zag ribbed ceiling, and a horizontal light fixture, similar to those in the West 33rd and 34th Street entrance halls. The inner three openings off the corridors are north-south halls leading to two long inner east-west elevator corridors; the intersecting halls create eight walls of four or five elevators each, and a ninth north-south wall of elevators at the far eastern end. The door of each elevator is designed with a modernistic aluminum silhouette somewhat suggestive of a skyscraper. The original cabs do not survive. The walls, ceiling and floors of the elevator halls continue the marble, zig-zag ribbing, lighting, and terrazzo floors of the outer elevator halls. The overall effect is of a vast series of modernistic elevator banks and corridors serving an enormous working population.

Empire State Building: Symbol of New York

Following the uncertain first years of the Depression, during which the half-tenanted building was nicknamed "Smith's Folly," or the "Empty State Building," the Empire State became a successful commercial office building. The continuing northward trend of midtown took the prime corporate tenants whom Raskob had hoped to attract away to office buildings north of 42nd Street; the tenancy of the building therefore has since been largely drawn from the surrounding garment district. Among others housed in the building are the notions, shoe, shirt and hosiery industries, as well as many international corporations and banks.⁴⁷

The Empire State Building, however, went beyond the aspirations of Raskob for a prestigious and profitable commercial office building. The success of the observatory in drawing crowds of tourists, and the guided tours by Governor Smith for all visiting celebrities, started a process which helped make the building famous the world over. March 1940 saw the building's four-millionth visitor (actor Jimmy Stewart), and May 1971 its forty millionth.⁴⁸

For the millions of visitors to the building, the handsome modernistic interiors continue to provide a grand and overwhelming welcome to New York's most famous attraction. Although the building lost its "tallest" title in the 1970s, it has lost none of its original distinction or renown. Its design, its history, and perhaps also its position in the center of the city, have all helped it retain its symbolic significance. On the occasion of its 50th anniversary--May 1, 1981--a special proclamation was issued by the Mayor of New York, declaring the week of May 1-8, 1981, to be "Empire State Building Week."

The Empire State Building lobbies remain a handsome, modernistic creation in their own right, and the introduction to New York's pre-eminent landmark.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds. Liber 220 Page 327.
2. Theodore James, Jr., The Empire State Building (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp.22-26.
3. Moses King, King's Handbook of New York City (Boston: Moses King, 1892), pp.199-200.
4. Theodore James, Jr., Fifth Avenue (New York: Walker and Company, 1971), recounts that W.W. Astor had social aspirations for his wife, was jealous for her of his aunt's social position, and replaced his house with a hotel to spite his aunt. P.171.
5. Fremont Rider, Rider's New York City (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923), pp.250-1.
6. Ibid., p.242.
7. These clippings, and a great many others relating to the public relations activities of the Empire State Building Company, are now stored in the archives of the Avery Library at Columbia University, in a set of scrapbooks labeled "Empire State Building." Pedrick was quoted in the Evening Post, the Evening Telegram, and the Herald Tribune, on Sept. 27, 1930. Another interesting article is "Solid DeLuxe Fills All Fifth Ave. Area," in the World, Sept. 28, 1930.
8. Rider, p.250.
9. For a detailed list of the new commercial Art Deco skyscrapers in midtown, see Cervin Robinson and Rosemary Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
10. Ibid., for a discussion of the development of the style.
11. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Chrysler Building Interior (LP-0996), by Marjorie Pearson (New York: City of New York, 1978), pp.3-6.
12. Detailed information may be found in the Daily News Building file at the Landmarks Preservation Commission.
13. Landmarks Preservation Commission, McGraw-Hill Designation Report (LP-1050), by Anthony W. Robins (New York, City of New York, 1979), p.8.
14. Biographical details on Raskob are condensed from James J. Walsh, "John J. Raskob," in Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy & Science (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland Ltd.), 17 (1928), pp.465-70. Other accounts may be found in the various biographies of Al Smith cited below.

15. Ladies Home Journal, August 1929; cited in Matthew and Hannah Josephson, Al Smith: Hero of the Cities (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p.357.
16. Josephson, p.354. Also, Richard O'Connor, The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1970), p.163. See both for further details on Smith and Raskob.
17. Empire State: a history (New York: Empire State Inc., May 1, 1931), p.30 ff. A promotional brochure for opening day.
18. O'Connor, p.227.
19. Arthur Tappan North, Contemporary American Architects: Raymond M. Hood (New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1931), p.11. Critic Douglas Haskell wrote of Raymond Hood's Daily News Building that it was an example of "architecture as an advertising art," Haskell, "The Stripes of the News," The Nation, Dec. 24, 1930, p.713.
20. The vast array of advertisements are collected in the Empire State Building scrapbooks at the Avery Library archive, op. cit.
21. Bernard A. Bergman, in Real Estate Magazine, undated clipping in the Empire State Building scrapbooks at Avery Library.
22. Empire State: a history, op. cit., p.13.
23. "The Skyline," in The New Yorker, January 10, 1931, in the Empire State Building scrapbooks at Avery Library.
24. O'Connor, p.292.
25. Smith's interest in the building, apparently, was not great. Frances Perkins, a close aide, wrote in her memoirs that his duties bored him, that it was not a real job, and that "his office was only a place to hang his hat." Josephson, p.414. His involvement proved invaluable, however, during the Depression, when he was able to use his personal prestige to convince President Roosevelt to move several new federal agencies into offices at the Empire State Building, to persuade the City to lower the building's taxes while it was taking huge losses, and to arrange for several banks to lower the building's mortgage rates.
26. R.H. Shreve, "The Economic Design of Office Buildings," in Architectural Record, Vol. 67, no. 3 (March 1930), p.359.
27. "Heights of New York Skyscrapers," in Pencil Points, 12 (Jan 1931), p.63.
28. Ibid., p.67.
29. Creighton Peet, "Peak of a Skyline," Collier's, Feb 5, 1949, p.32, 60.

30. James, The Empire State Building, op. cit., p.115.
31. "The Manhattan Company Building, New York City," Architecture and Building, 62 (July 1930), p.193.
32. "Richmond Shreve, Architect, 69, Dies," obituary, New York Times, May 11, 1946, 7:1.
33. "William F. Lamb, 68, Architect, is Dead," obituary, New York Times, September 9, 1952, 31:1.
34. Reminiscences by surviving member of the firm suggest a date of 1926; the Shreve obituary says 1924.
35. "Arthur Harmon, Architect, Dead," obituary, New York Times, October 18, 1958, 21:3.
36. Shreve obituary, op. cit.
37. Descriptions and illustrations of most of these buildings may be found in Shreve, "The Economic Design of Office Buildings," op. cit.
38. Arthur Loomis Harmon, "The Design of Office Buildings," Architectural Forum, 52 (June 1930), p.819.
39. William F. Lamb, "The Empire State Building: VII. The General Design," Architectural Forum, 54 (Jan 1931), p.1.
40. Interview with Mrs. William F. Lamb, May 6, 1981. Notes in the Empire State Building file at the Landmarks Preservation Commission.
41. William F. Lamb, "The Empire State Building: VI.I. The General Design," Architectural Forum, 54 (Jan 1931), p.5.
42. William F. Lamb, "The Empire State Building: XII. The Ground Floor Lobbies and Shops," Architectural Forum, 55 (July 1931), pp.42-46.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. James, The Empire State Building, op. cit., p.167 ff.
48. Ibid., p.169.

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 Empire State Building ground floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance hall, the 33rd Street entrance halls, the 34th Street entrance halls, the lobby and elevator bank halls, the escalator halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall leading to the second floor, the staircases and halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall descending to the lower lobby concourse; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the lobby and Fifth Avenue entrance hall and the bridges extending from the second floor elevator halls across the upper part of the lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, light fixtures, murals, wall plaques, elevator doors, and staircase railings; 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 that 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 ground floor interior of the Empire State Building provides an overwhelming grand entrance to the building which today is New York City's best-known symbol; that it is one of a series of modernistic interiors created for the midtown skyscrapers of the 1920s; that it is largely intact; that it was designed in the same spirit as the building's exterior: simplicity of detail, long unbroken lines, and beautiful materials; that this design, like that of the exterior, was a product of the extraordinary practical requirements of the size and scope of the building, and of architect William Lamb's stylistic preferences; that because of its size the interior was divided into two portions: an entrance lobby at Fifth Avenue, and long corridor lobbies encompassing the elevator banks; that the Fifth Avenue lobby, arranged as a long hall focusing on a modernistic aluminum silhouette of the Empire State Building on the far wall, symbolically welcomes visitors, while the corridors, elevator banks, and inner store entrances and windows create a sense of a grand concourse, suggestive of the enormous office building housing a working population of many thousands; that its striking modernistic details--especially the aluminum silhouettes in the Fifth Avenue entrance lobby, the aluminum mezzanine bridges in the corridors, the silhouetted elevator doors, the ribbed marble walls, and the zig-zag ribbed ceilings in the elevator banks and West 33rd and 34th Street entrances--are suggestive of the technological possibilities for the future promised by the world's tallest building; and that the interior continues to function as an outstanding space and provide a splendid introduction for the millions of visitors drawn annually to the Empire State Building.

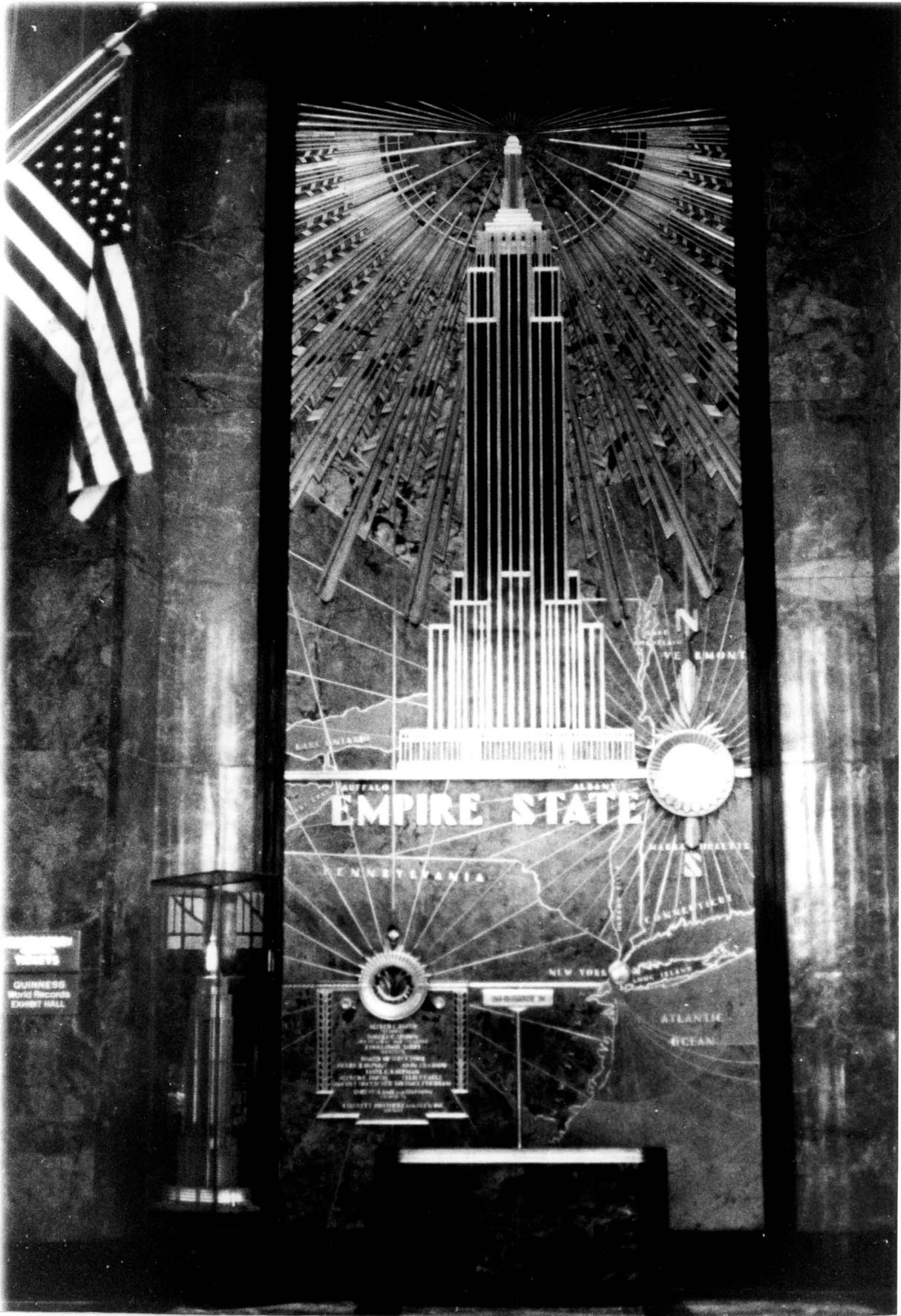
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the

Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Empire State Building ground floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance hall, the 33rd Street entrance halls, the 34th Street entrance halls, the lobby and elevator bank halls, the escalator halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall leading to the second floor, the staircases and halls adjacent to the Fifth Avenue entrance hall descending to the lower lobby concourse; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the lobby and Fifth Avenue entrance hall and the bridges extending from the second floor elevator halls across the upper part of the lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, light fixtures, murals, wall plaques, elevator doors, and staircase railings; 350 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 835, Lot 41, as its Landmark Site.

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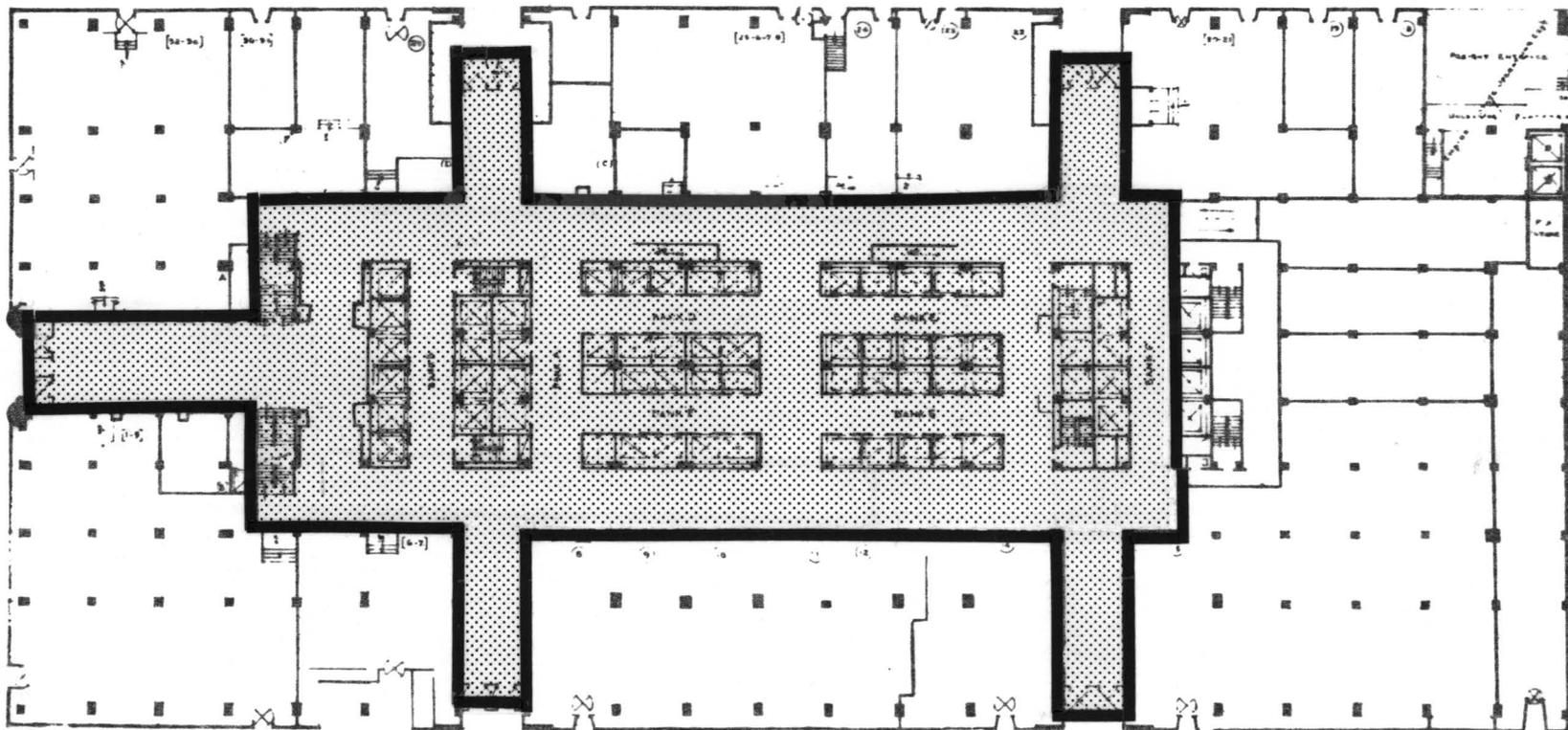
Empire State Building Interior
350 Fifth Avenue
Manhattan

Architect: Shreve, Lamb, & Harmon
Built: 1930-1931

Photo Credit: Elvis Negron

33rd STREET

FIFTH AVENUE

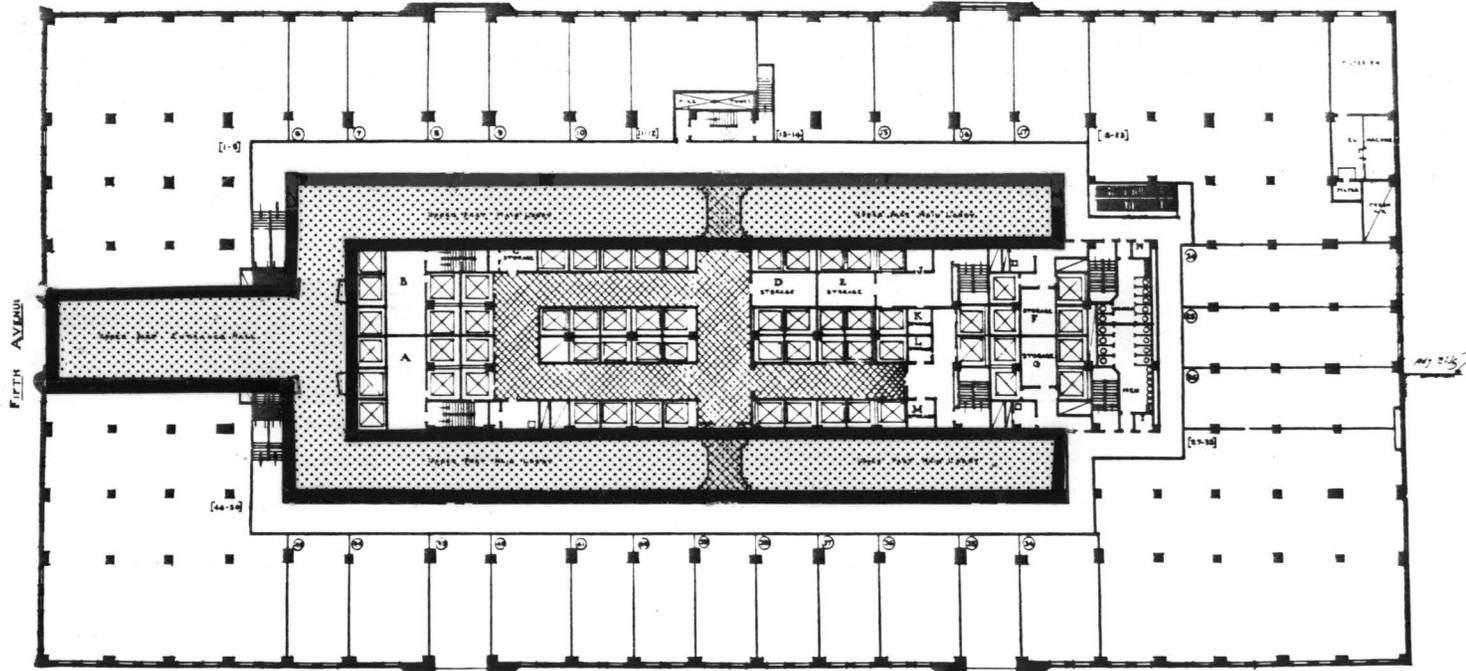


EMPIRE STATE BUILDING
INTERIOR
Ground Floor

34th STREET



33rd STREET



FIFTH AVENUE

34th STREET



EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

INTERIOR

Second Floor