

LOOK BUILDING, 488 Madison Avenue
(aka 484-492 Madison Avenue, 15-23 East 51st Street, 24 East 52nd Street), Manhattan
Built 1948-50; Emery Roth & Sons, architects

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 14

On November 17, 2009, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a hearing on the proposed designation of the Look Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Three people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of New York State Assembly Member Richard N. Gottfried, the Historic Districts Council, and Docomomo New York/Tri-State.

Summary

The 21-story Look Building dates to 1948-50, when the minimalist aesthetics of European Modernism first began to transform the character of “setback” office buildings. Located on the west side of Madison Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Streets, this handsome mid-20th century modern structure combines tiers of ribbon-like windows with tightly-rounded corners and setbacks faced with white brick to create a unique and memorable silhouette. Two second-generation, family-run, businesses were responsible for its construction: Uris Brothers, developers, and Emery Roth & Sons, architects. Though they first began to collaborate in the mid-1920s, it wasn't until the death of each firm's founder in the mid-1940s, that the sons Percy and Harold D. Uris and Julian and Richard Roth, began to focus on commercial development. This informal partnership, which lasted until the 1970s, produced a great number of large Manhattan office buildings. Richard Roth, who attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, served as lead architect. Planned to be stylish and profitable, the building closely followed the requirements of the 1916 zoning code to maximize the square footage while using industrial materials to create sleek, streamlined elevations that suggest the influence of not only the German Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn, but also the 1931 Starrett-Lehigh Building and the 1947 Universal Pictures Building in Manhattan. The new structure was named for *Look* magazine, which was part of the Cowles media empire. With a strong emphasis on photography, *Look* became one of the most widely-read magazines in the United States and it remained at this location until ceasing publication in 1971. Other prominent tenants included *Esquire* Magazine; Pocket Books; the music publisher Witmark & Sons, where singer-songwriter Bob Dylan made some of his earliest studio recordings; the industrial designer Raymond Loewy, and the building's architects. During the late 1990s, a major and sympathetic restoration of the facade was undertaken by the architects Hardy Holzman & Pfeiffer Associates. At this time, the steel windows were replaced with similar aluminum frames and a new entrance portico was created. The Look Building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2004¹ and the facade is subject to a conservation easement filed with the Trust for Architectural Easements.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Building Site

The Look Building, at 488 Madison Avenue, stands directly north of the St. Patrick's Cathedral complex (1853-88, 1901-6, a designated New York City Landmark) and the Villard Houses (1882-85, a designated New York City Landmark). Prior to the First World War, this section of midtown Manhattan was primarily residential, with a mix of free-standing mansions, brownstone row houses, and a growing number of hotels. Transit improvements, including the extension of the subway north along Lexington Avenue in 1918, as well as on Sixth Avenue in the 1930s, would attract commercial development to the area. While some elegant Fifth Avenue residences, including houses owned by George W. Vanderbilt (Hunt & Hunt, 1902-5), Morton & Nellie Plant (Robert W. Gibson, 1903-5), and Edward & Frances Holbrook (C. P.H. Gilbert, 1904-5), were converted to new uses around 1917, many structures were demolished and replaced by retail stores and office buildings. Rockefeller Center (begun 1931), which grew out of plans for a large performing arts center, was midtown's most ambitious commercial ensemble, incorporating stores, offices, and entertainment venues.²

In the vicinity of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Roman Catholic diocese of New York owned several structures, including the rectory and cardinal's residence that flank the Lady Chapel on Madison Avenue, as well as the Villard Houses. It also owned the block on the west side of Madison Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Streets, where the Look Building would later be erected. This site was originally part of the Roman Catholic Asylum and in 1893 a three-and-half-story Gothic Revival-style structure was erected to serve as a trade school for boys. When much of the asylum's property from Fifth Avenue to Park Avenue was sold in 1902, the structure became Cathedral College, a preparatory seminary to train men for careers in the priesthood. The *New York Times* called it "a midtown landmark which for two generations had offered a haven for quiet study and religious activities."³ In 1942, the school moved to "modern facilities" on West End Avenue and 87th Street and the building was temporarily used by Catholic chaplains serving in the Second World War.⁴

On East 51st Street, the Look Building stands beside a group of low-rise structures, including the former residence of contractor John Pierce (1904-5, a designated New York City Landmark). Designed by the prominent architect John Duncan, this five-story neo-Renaissance structure is clad with light-grey granite and was converted to commercial use after 1933. On East 52nd Street, the site adjoins 16 East 52nd Street (1926-27), a 15-story brownish brick building with limestone details, designed by Schwartz & Gross.

Uris Brothers

Uris Brothers, acting as Neproch Realty, Inc., negotiated the purchase of the L-shaped site from St. Joseph's Seminary & College in October 1948 for \$2.6 million. The demand for office space in midtown Manhattan was growing and this market became their primary focus. Percy Uris (1899-1971) and Harold D. Uris (1905-1982) were the sons of Harris H. Uris (born Urias, c. 1867-1945), a Russian immigrant from Latvia, who arrived in New York City in 1892. By the first decade of the 20th century, he and his brothers operated a large iron foundry at 525 West 26th Street (part of the West Chelsea Historic District) where a workforce of about 160 produced ornamental ironwork for the New York City subway system and other clients.⁵

Percy Uris attended Columbia University, graduating with a degree in business administration in 1920. He and his father became commercial developers in the early 1920s,

specializing in the construction of hotels and apartment buildings. Harold, who trained as a civil engineer at Cornell University, joined them in 1925. Together, they built numerous Manhattan structures, including the Court Square Building (Buchman & Kahn, 1925-26) at 2 Lafayette Street, 1 University Place (Emery Roth, 1929) at the corner of Waverly Place, and the Hotel St. Moritz (now the Ritz Carlton, Emery Roth, 1930-32) on Central Park South. They experienced great success but, like many of their contemporaries, struggled during the early years of the Depression and lost some of their best-known properties. In the late 1930s, they reentered the real estate field, hiring Emery Roth to design apartment buildings at 2 Sutton Place South (1937-38) and 930 Fifth Avenue (1939-40).⁶ Roth also designed 880 Fifth Avenue, their last residential project, in 1946-48.⁷

Few of Manhattan's leading builders of the 1920s remained active following the Second World War. The *New York Times* described the Urises as being, along with the Tishmans, the "only builders . . . who are descended from the leaders of the Nineteen Twenties boom."⁸ Percy and Harold Uris would accomplish this by focusing almost entirely on office building construction. The forecast for this type of real estate was particularly optimistic and using the skills they learned with their father, they would, over the next three decades, create more than 13 million square feet of new office space. *Time* magazine reported in 1954 that they:

. . . made a fortune out of conforming to the latest taste in office buildings. Their recent constructions in Manhattan have been compared both to wedding cakes and to Assyrian ziggurats, and have more layers than the former, more bulk than the latter and about as much esthetic merit as both combined. Says Percy Uris: "We're not building in a vacuum. We're building in a market."⁹

The company's productivity was a remarkable accomplishment, one that transformed the midtown skyline and streetscape. Harold Uris recalled:

We had a policy of creating the greatest amount of space for the lowest cost . . . We bought better and built faster than anyone else . . . Efficiency was the key to our success.¹⁰

In terms of architectural aesthetics, however, their ambitions were modest. They produced a portfolio of buildings that were modern but hardly radical, fresh but conventional. In 1972, Uris explained:

I happen to believe that the *interior* of a building is more important than the exterior. None of the architectural people agree with me. But you build for those who occupy it, not for those who stand across the street and look at it. We have always built good buildings. I won't say I am not a perfectionist. I can't help it if people think every building should be the Taj Mahal.¹¹

In 1960, Uris Brothers issued stock to finance future projects which resulted in such colossal structures as the New York Hilton (1964), the Uris Building at 1633 Broadway (1970), and 55 Water Street (1972), which was at the time of completion the world's largest office building.¹² Shortly after the stock offering was made they began a series of major gifts to Columbia University which financed construction of a new building for the School of Business, called Uris Hall (Moore & Hutchins, 1961-62, altered). They also made significant contributions to Cornell University, Lenox Hill Hospital, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹³ Following the death of Percy, Harold sold his stock in the Uris Buildings Corporation to the National Kinney Corporation in 1973.

Emery Roth & Sons

Both before and after the Second World War, the Uris family turned to architect Emery Roth (and the successor firm Emery Roth & Sons) with great frequency to produce buildings that were stylish and profitable.¹⁴ Emery Roth, the firm's founder, was born in Hungary in 1871 and came to the United States around 1884. His talent as a draftsman was quickly recognized and in the decade that followed he worked in Chicago with the architects Burnham & Root, and in New York City with Richard Morris Hunt and Ogden Codman, Jr. In 1895 he opened his own office and later purchased the practice that would initially be known as Stein, Cohen & Roth. Many of New York City's finest residential structures were designed by him, such as the Bellclaire Hotel (1901-3), Ritz Tower (1925-27, in association with Thomas Hastings), the Beresford (1928-29), the San Remo (1929-30), the St. George Hotel (1930) in Brooklyn Heights, and the Normandy Apartments (1938-39).¹⁵ Though his early works display rich and inventive exterior ornamentation, the character of his later buildings is more restrained, reflecting the growing popularity of the Art Deco and Moderne styles.

Roth first collaborated with the Uris family in 1924, designing the Buckingham Apartments, at the northwest corner of Sixth Avenue and 57th Street. It was during this decade that Roth's sons, Julian and Richard, joined the firm. Julian Roth (1902-92) attended Columbia University and may have been a classmate of Percy Uris. Though not licensed as an architect, he "specialized in building materials, construction methods, cost estimates and the technology of curtain walls."¹⁶ Richard Roth (1904-87) graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1928 and after briefly working with Allen & Collens in Boston, entered his father's practice, which was renamed Emery Roth & Sons in 1938.¹⁷ Steven Rutenbaum, author of *Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emery Roth*, claimed this change had little impact on the firm's operations and the elder Roth remained "the man who made the decisions, who maintained client contact, and set the fees. He shared the responsibilities of overseeing design development with no one."¹⁸

In the 1940s, however, ill health caused Emery Roth to relinquish control of the office. One of his last commissions was 300 East 57th Street, an 18-story tan brick apartment house. Built for developer Samuel Rudin in 1944-48, it featured unusual recessed terraces that were probably added by Richard who became the firm's chief designer. This sleek project received a medal from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects as one of the city's best new residential structures.¹⁹ His next project was 505 Park Avenue (1948, altered), a 21-story tan brick office building. Located at the northeast corner of 57th Street, the elevations had a strong horizontal orientation, with a "continuous glass front . . . to give a maximum amount of natural light."²⁰ This was the first of many buildings Richard designed for Uris Brothers, followed by 4 West 58th Street (1948-49), incorporating the Paris Theater, and 575 Madison Avenue (1948-50), between 56th and 57th Streets. Begun in January 1948, the latter building shares many features with the Look Building, such as a two-story base, white brick elevations, and continuous windows that "run entirely around the structure above the second floor level, providing maximum flexibility in the arrangement and subdivision of offices."²¹

These family-run businesses would remain closely aligned for several decades. Julian Roth later recalled:

Percy Uris would call me and say, Julian, I've just bought a plot of land. How soon can Richard have the plans ready?"²²

Emery Roth & Sons became one of New York City's most prolific firms. As architect, or architect of record, they were involved in at least 150 structures after the Second World War.²³ In 1967, reporter Thomas Ennis said that Roth has "earned most of the praise – or blame – for the way Manhattan's business district looks today."²⁴ The firm developed a reputation for superior efficiency, employing mostly predictable formulas that maximized square footage and speed of construction. In addition, they collaborated on such high-profile projects as the Pan Am Building (1963, with Pietro Belluschi and Walter Gropius), the World Trade Center (1975, with Minoru Yamasaki), and the Citicorp Building (1978, with Hugh Stubbins & Assoc.). One writer observed: "It seems unlikely any firm in history has been responsible for so many tall buildings within such a short span of time."²⁵

Designing the Look Building

Richard Roth began to prepare his scheme in late 1948 and the final drawings were completed in July 1949. Built on speculation, the Look Building needed to be fashionable, practical, and profitable. Throughout his career, Richard pursued a pragmatic approach to design. Not only did he try to maximize the square footage in buildings but he believed this type of plan created the kind of interior space favored by prospective tenants. When he addressed the Real Estate Board of New York in 1952, Richard urged architects entering the field to develop "a working knowledge of the various codes, laws, regulations, and ruling affecting buildings."²⁶ Though he acknowledged that slender towers could be dramatic and beautiful, he believed the market for offices on the smaller, upper floors was limited.

While higher rents may be obtained from tower floors, he said there are fewer good tenants for 5,000 square feet of space than there are for 15,000 square feet to 20,000 square feet.²⁷

The 1940s proved to be a transitional period in office building design and the Look Building combines characteristics associated with Streamlined Modernism, sometimes referred to as Art Moderne, and the International Style. In terms of massing, its shape was determined by the 1916 zoning resolution, which was conceived to protect access to light and air in Manhattan's most crowded districts. To accomplish this, commercial buildings were required to set back at a certain height, which was determined by location and street width. Bulk was regulated and diminished in stages, creating wedding-cake-like silhouettes in which the uppermost floors could cover only 25 per cent of the lot. Slender towers, consequently, were discouraged on all-but-the-largest of properties.

While Roth's setback massing was fairly conventional, stepping back at every other floor above the 12th story, the treatment of the elevations was somewhat new. Faced with industrial materials, the facade has a strong horizontal emphasis. The building's developer, Percy Uris, defended this trend toward simplicity, saying:

The new facade, with its horizontal lines and absence of ornamentation is generally admired, but there are some who consider the modern exterior too severe. Actually, if a building has good lines, its simplicity will add to its beauty.²⁸

The Look Building has bands of ribbon-like windows that alternate with white brick spandrels. Roth was most likely influenced by two local projects: the Starrett-Lehigh Building (1930-31, a designated New York City Landmark) and the Universal Pictures Building (1945-47).²⁹ Both structures feature continuous bands of fenestration that reflect contemporary interest in

functional aesthetics and possibly the work of the German Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn, who immigrated to the United States in 1941. Many of his works had a distinctive streamlined appearance, such as the Rudolf Petersdorf Department Store (1926-28) in Breslau, which was illustrated in the *New York Times* in March 1931 under the headline “German Architecture Goes Modern.”³⁰

Of probable greater importance was the Universal Pictures Building, 445 Park Avenue, completed in 1947. Designed by Kahn & Jacobs, the project architect was Elsa Gidoni, who trained in Berlin and was later described as “highly attuned to the International Style work of Erich Mendelsohn.”³¹ Built on a comparable block-long site, this 21-story office building has similar bulk and massing, ribbon-like windows, terraces, and air conditioning. It was a great success and entirely rented prior to completion. Developer Paul Tishman asserted these amenities would increase “working efficiency” and “make it possible for tenants to obtain maximum use of space on each floor . . . there just won’t be any unusable areas.”³²

For the Look Building, Roth fine tuned many of these ideas. While the number of floors and massing is similar, the curved corners allow the windows and spandrels to flow without interruption. According to Percy Uris, this type of fenestration had various benefits. Not only did it provide better lighting and a sense of openness, but he believed it was part of:

. . . a real step forward in office planning. Where the space is used as a large open general office, the effect is light and cheerful. These windows also make for easy subdivision into smaller rooms with more flexibility than formerly possible when masonry and columns more or less determined individual office spaces.³³

Roth claimed that this approach would satisfy “status conscious tenants . . . because it permitted an even distribution of window space for executive offices, a matter of considerable importance to corporate tenants.”³⁴

The stacked, multiple curves give the elevations an organic, almost biomorphic quality. Marv Rothenstein, who worked for Uris Brothers, later wrote:

Everything about them was special, starting with the curved structural steel, followed by curved concrete forms, curved bricks, curved window frames, and curved glass.³⁵

The corners have a three-and-a-half foot radius and are faced with radial brick. In New York City, buildings with rounded corners are found in Lower Manhattan, where irregularly-shaped parcels provided architects with opportunities to emphasize specific vistas, facades, and entrances. Though concave and convex facades gained greater popularity in the late 1930s and were present in various pavilions at the New York World’s Fair, such features were rarely used in office buildings. It was, however, used to great advantage at the Starrett-Lehigh Building, as well as in Roth’s much simpler design for 505 Park Avenue.³⁶ These streamlined buildings, however, have much wider curves and were erected with less costly “straight segments.”³⁷

Above the 12th story, the Look Building’s setbacks function as private terraces. These unbroken, wrap-around spaces were part of the original design, and appear in the blueprints at Avery Library, Columbia University, with glass doors and metal railings. In contrast to Rockefeller Center, which had common landscaped gardens on the rooftops, these shallow outdoor spaces seem closer in spirit to residential terraces and, like the upper floors of the Cities Service Building (Clinton & Russell, Holton & George, 1930-32), 70 Pine Street in lower Manhattan, and the Universal Pictures Building, were reached from inside offices. Such

amenities were also part of a broader trend after the Second World War to blur the boundaries between interior and exterior space.

To give the Look Building a stylish, modern appearance, Roth faced it with white brick. This material was introduced in the first decade of the 20th century but did not become popular until construction of Manhattan House (a designated New York City Landmark). Built by the architects Skidmore Owings & Merrill on East 66th Street in 1947-51, this 21-story structure is considered Manhattan's earliest white brick apartment house, influencing the design of numerous imitators and possibly Richard Roth. Though some explained the popularity of this brick in practical terms, saying it was self-washing and would reflect light into the surrounding area, white was also strongly associated with the European avant-garde, particularly the early minimalist works of Le Corbusier and Alvar Aalto.

Construction

Plans for construction of a \$6 million structure at 488 Madison Avenue were filed with the Department of Buildings in November 1948. Several months later, during February 1949, D. E. H. Demolition began tearing down the former home of Cathedral College and excavation of the site began.³⁸ The Harris Structural Steel Company began to deliver the steel components in June 1949 and by the end of August 1949 the framework was "topped" out. *The New York Times* reported that this was "considered a postwar record for steel erection." According to Marv Rothstein, as many as seven four-men riveting teams were involved in the process.³⁹ The concrete floors were finished in early September 1949, and shortly after, the white brick elevations. About four floors were enclosed each week. As this task progressed, the steel casement windows were installed. Once this job was completed, the interior plastering began. Tenants began to occupy the air-conditioned structure in early 1950.⁴⁰

Tenants

With Cross & Brown as the building's rental agent, all of the office floors were leased by November 1949 – several months before construction was complete – and all of the retail space by May 1, 1950. This section of midtown Manhattan was a lively hub of media activity, especially around Rockefeller Center. Several magazines were early tenants, including *Look*, *Esquire*, and *Seventeen*. *Look* was launched by Gardner "Mike" Cowles, Jr., in Des Moines, Iowa, in January 1937. He consolidated the editorial offices at 522 Fifth Avenue, where it remained for a decade. Modeled on European picture magazines, it became a significant rival to *Life* magazine, which was based in Rockefeller Center, and by 1948 the magazine had a paid circulation of three million. *Look* would become the largest tenant, with offices on the 10th, 11th and 12th floors.

Uris Brothers agreed to name the building for *Look* in early 1950. *Esquire*, which claimed it was "embarrassed by the "new look," took legal action to stop this, arguing that the change would "convey the false impression" that *Esquire* was "published or sponsored by the publishers of *Look*." No action, however, was taken by the courts and until 1980 large capital letters spelled out "Look Building" on the mechanical tower's south side.⁴¹ The 1950s would be heyday of *Look*'s popularity, reaching an estimated 21 per cent of all U.S. adults in 1961. It was the third most popular magazine in the nation and in 1963 it would sign a new lease, almost doubling its office space to more than 200,000 square feet.⁴² The New York Times Company purchased the Cowles Media Company in 1971, which included *Family Circle* and various regional newspapers.

Pocket Books, Inc., a division of Simon & Shuster, which published popular best sellers, was also an original tenant, as was the Music Publishers Holding Company, with such subsidiaries as Harms, Inc., Remick Music, New World Music, Advances Music, and Witmark & Sons. In Witmark's fifth floor studio, a young Bob Dylan produced a series of important early demo recordings during 1962 and 1963.⁴³

Emery Roth & Sons joined the prestigious roster of tenants in April 1950. The *New York Times* reported that it was only the firm's "fourth move" in fifty years and they occupied part of the 18th floor until the late 1950s.⁴⁴ Three floors above, on the 21st floor, was Raymond Loewy, one of the 20th century's most significant industrial designers, who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in October 1949 and would design the interiors of Lever House (a designated New York City Landmark), completed nearby at 390 Park Avenue in 1952.⁴⁵ Later tenants have included the Institutional Investor and Abbeville Press.

Subsequent History

In April 1953, the property was sold to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Several months later, in August 1953, the building was leased back to Uris Brothers. Since the 1970s, it has been owned by the 488 Madison Avenue Associates (Feil Organization) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The two-story retail base was remodeled with tinted black glass and new shop entrances in the 1980s. Horowitz Immerman Architects were responsible for these alterations. The rest of the exterior was renovated with great sensitivity by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates in 1995-98. Architect Malcolm Holzman (b. 1940) was the partner in charge of the project. He said that his main objective was to "keep the building as it is and not make it into something it will never be."⁴⁶ At the time, the original steel windows were replaced by similar aluminum frames and the glazed brick was cleaned. Additionally, about 20 per cent of the brick was replaced, as well as the original slate windowsills.

Interest in mid-20th century modern architecture was growing in the 1990s and the building's careful restoration was described in a *New York Times* article, as well as in a small exhibition, *New Life for a Modern Monument: A Salute to 488 Madison Avenue*, organized by the Municipal Art Society in autumn 1998. The brochure's text praised the owners and architects, commenting "The Look Building's restoration shows how successfully the best post-war buildings can be updated, rewarding investors and delighting passerby."⁴⁷ In 2004, the Look Building was added to the National Register of Historic Places and the facade is subject to a conservation easement filed with the Trust of Architectural Easements.

Description

The Look Building stands on the west side of Madison Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Streets. It occupies an L-shaped lot, measuring 200 feet on Madison Avenue, 140 feet on 51st Street, and 75 feet on 52nd Street. Above the second story, the facade is mainly white brick. Continuous non-historic aluminum windows (late 1990s), three horizontal panes tall, extend continuously around the facade, starting at the west ends of the north and south facades. The center panes are operable and open out from the bottom. Above the 12-story base, every second floor sets back, climaxing with a mostly windowless tower, which incorporates horizontal louvers on the east front.

The two-story retail **base** is non-historic and dates to the late 1980s. It is divided from the third story on all facades by what appears to be charcoal-colored cast-stone panels, crowned by a

curved aluminum molding. The two stories of glass panels are transparent or tinted black and the water table may be granite. The **main entrance** is at the center of the sloping Madison Avenue facade. There is a recessed passage that leads to a single revolving glass entrance door, flanked by conventional glass doors. The entrance passage is paved with contrasting light and dark gray granite. The exterior panels that face the street are polished black granite and the walls that flank the passage are light brown-and-black marble. There is a ribbed aluminum ceiling with recessed lighting fixtures, as well as square service panel near center. Above the entrance passage is a wide non-historic aluminum marquee with curved corners and free-standing numerals (488) that identify the address. To the left (south) are three storefronts with recessed entrances. The one closest to the entrance has a horizontal aluminum sign with white lettering. At the corner of 51st Street is a revolving door with dark tinted glass. Directly to the right of this door is a conventional recessed store entrance. To the right (north) of the main entrance is a single storefront with clear glass windows. This storefront incorporates several horizontal aluminum signs with white lettering: on Madison Avenue, at the corner of 52nd Street, and on 52nd Street.

The **Fifty-First street** facade has four non-historic storefronts, at 19, 21 and 23 East 51st Street. The last address has two entrances. Most of the first-story businesses are identified above the storefronts with metal letters against black glass panels. Though most of the glass on the second story is tinted black, the windows nearest Madison Avenue are transparent. At the west end of the facade, a vertical banner is strung between two horizontal brass poles. A significant number of glass panels toward the west end of the second story have been replaced with horizontal metal louvers. Near the top of the 11th story, at center, a white horizontal box projects out from the facade. In addition, there are four vertical boxes attached at the corner above the third story. There is a fan-like security gate at the west edge of the 7th story.

Fifty-Second Street has a single storefront that extends around the corner from Madison Avenue. To the west of the last window is a single vertical panel of horizontal louvers. At the corner, above the aluminum sign, are two small black boxes with visible wires. The service entrance, with two metal doors that open outward, is located at the west end of the first story. At the middle of the 4th story, two of the upper windows have been replaced with horizontal louvers. Fan-like security gates have been installed at the west end of two of the uppermost floors.

Researched and written by
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NOTES

¹ “Look Building” National Register Nomination, prepared by Anthony Robins, 2004. Robins generously shared his research materials with the author of this designation report.

² The structures mentioned in this paragraph are all designated New York City Landmarks.

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- ³ “Razing Landmark to Provide A Site For Tall Offices,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1949, R1.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ “Harris H. Uris, 73, Realty Operator,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1945, 19.
- ⁶ The Urises were said to have used their “personal savings” to build 930 Fifth Avenue. See Tom Shactman, *Skyscraper Dreams: The Great Real Estate Dynasties of New York* (Boston, 1991), 167.
- ⁷ “Harold Uris Recollects With Pride,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1981, R1.
- ⁸ “Skyscraper Builders of Yesteryear Give Way to the New,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1958, R1.
- ⁹ “Art: Retreat of the Cleft Heads,” *Time* (October 24, 1954), viewed online at www.time.com
- ¹⁰ “Harold Uris, Skyscraper Developer and Philanthropist, Is Dead at 76,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1982, B11.
- ¹¹ “Builder,” *The New Yorker* (December 2, 1972), 49-50.
- ¹² “Uris Joins Trend to Financing through Public Stock Offering,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1960, R1.
- ¹³ “Columbia Gets Gift of Million,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1960, 15; also see “Harold Uris, Skyscraper Developer” and “Percy Uris, Builder, Dies at 72,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1971, 85.
- ¹⁴ Steven Ruttenbaum, *Mansions in the Clouds: The Skyscraper Palazzi of Emery Roth* (New York: Balsam Press, 1986).
- ¹⁵ These buildings are designated landmarks or are located in historic districts.
- ¹⁶ “Julian Roth, 91, Dies,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1992, D19.
- ¹⁷ “Historical and Biographical Note,” Emery Roth & Sons Finding Aid, viewed at Columbia.edu; also see “Richard Roth, Sr., Is Dead, Architect Led Family’s Firm,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1987, B15.
- ¹⁸ Ruttenbaum, 165.
- ¹⁹ “Architects Win Awards,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1948, 51.
- ²⁰ “Park Avenue Corner Will Be the Site For Tall Offices,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1948, R1.
- ²¹ “25-Story Offices Will Have Garage in Basement,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1949, R1.
- ²² Quoted by Shactman, 197.
- ²³ “One Hundred Buildings,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 1970, 37-38; “Julian Roth, 91, Dies,” “Richard Roth Sr., 82, Is Dead.” In 1963, for instance, they were described as having 55 buildings completed, 20 under construction, and nine in the planning stage. See “Emery Roth and Sons Marks 60th Anniversary,” *Architectural Record* 113 (May 1963), 26.
- ²⁴ “Tower Evolution Traced by Designer,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1967, 449.
- ²⁵ “Emery Roth and Sons Marks 60th Anniversary,” *Architectural Record* 113 (May 1963), 26. The author of this piece was not identified. Richard Roth Jr., who joined the office in circa 1958, became a partner in the firm in 1963. See “New Partner is Named by Emery Roth & Sons,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1963, 56.
- ²⁶ “Building Trends Outlined By Roth,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1952, 49.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ “Hails “Efficiency of Modern Offices,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1949, R9.
- ²⁹ “Starrett-Lehigh Building Designation Report,” (LP-1295) (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1986), prepared by Jay Shockley.
- ³⁰ “German Architecture Goes Modern,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1931, E4.
- ³¹ Jewel Stern and John A. Stuart, *Ely Jacques Kahn, Architect* (New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 204.

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- ³² *New York Times*, April 6, 1947, R1.
- ³³ “Hails ‘Efficiency’ of Modern Offices.”
- ³⁴ “Tower Evolution Traced by Designer, *New York Times*, December 3, 1967, 449.
- ³⁵ Letter to Robert A. M. Stern from Marv Rothenstein, December 6, 1996, copy in LPC file.
- ³⁶ Emery Roth & Sons employed a curved facade in one of the firm’s last works, 17 State Street, built in 1987-88.
- ³⁷ Letter to Robert A. M. Stern from Marv Rothenstein, December 6, 1996, copy in LPC file.
- ³⁸ “Razing Landmark To Provide A Site For Tall Offices,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1949, R1. The engineer was James Ruderman.
- ³⁹ “Steel Set Quickly On Office Building,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1949, R1. This article claimed that each crew had seven men.
- ⁴⁰ Advertisement for 575 Madison Avenue and 488 Madison Avenue, *New York Times*, May 2, 1950, 30.
- ⁴¹ “Esquire Bars ‘New Look,’ *New York Times*, June 7, 1950, 31; David W. Dunlap, “Twas a Looker in Its Day And Still Draws the Eye,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1998, B7.
- ⁴² Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 57, quoted by Robins, 8; “Look Publishers Expand Quarters,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1963, 64. In 1973, Look’s publisher, Cowles Communications, reportedly had 350,000 square feet of office space in the building. See “Look Building Changes Hands,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1973, 490.
- ⁴³ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (1997), 95, last viewed at Googlebooks.
- ⁴⁴ “Real Estate Notes,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1950, 52.
- ⁴⁵ “Offices Leased On Madison Ave.,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1949, 52.
- ⁴⁶ David W. Dunlap, “Twas a Looker in Its Day And Still Draws the Eye,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1998, B7.
- ⁴⁷ Research Department Files, Landmarks Preservation Commission.

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 Look 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 the Look Building dates to 1948-50, when the minimalist aesthetics of European Modernism began to transform the appearance of “setback” office buildings; that it is located on the west side of Madison Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Streets; that this handsome mid-20th century modern structure combines tiers of ribbon-like windows with tightly-rounded corners and setbacks clad with white brick to create a unique and memorable silhouette; that two second-generation, family-run businesses were responsible for the building’s construction: Uris Brothers, developers, and Emery Roth & Sons, architects; that it wasn’t until the death of each firm’s founder in the mid-1940s that the sons, Percy and Harold D. Uris and Julian and Richard Roth, began to emphasize commercial development; that this informal partnership, lasting until the 1970s, produced a great number of office buildings in Manhattan; that the Look Building was planned to be stylish and profitable, reflecting the influence of the German Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn, the 1931 Starrett-Lehigh and the 1947 Universal Pictures Buildings in Manhattan, as well as requirements introduced by the 1916 New York City zoning ordinance; that upon completion it was named the Look Building for the principal tenant; that *Look* was a popular magazine that was part of the Cowles media empire; that it placed a strong emphasis on photography and continued to publish until 1971; that prominent tenants also included the building’s architect, *Esquire* magazine, Pocket Books, the industrial designer Raymond Loewy, and Witmark & Sons, where Bob Dylan produced some of his earliest studio recordings; and that the facade was sympathetically restored by the architects Hardy Holzman & Pfeiffer in the late 1990s.

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 a Landmark the Look Building at 488 Madison Avenue (aka 484-492 Madison Avenue, 15-23 East 51st Street, 24 East 52nd Street), Manhattan, as a Landmark, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 14 as its Landmark Site.

Commissioners:

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechera, Vice Chair

Joan Gerner, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Stephen F. Byrns, Diana Chapin



Look Building

488 Madison Avenue, view from southeast
(aka 484-492 Madison Avenue, 15-23 East 51st Street, 24 East 52nd Street)
Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 14

Photo by Christopher D. Braze, 2010



Look Building
South and west facades, view east from 51st Street
Photo by Christopher D. Brazee, 2010



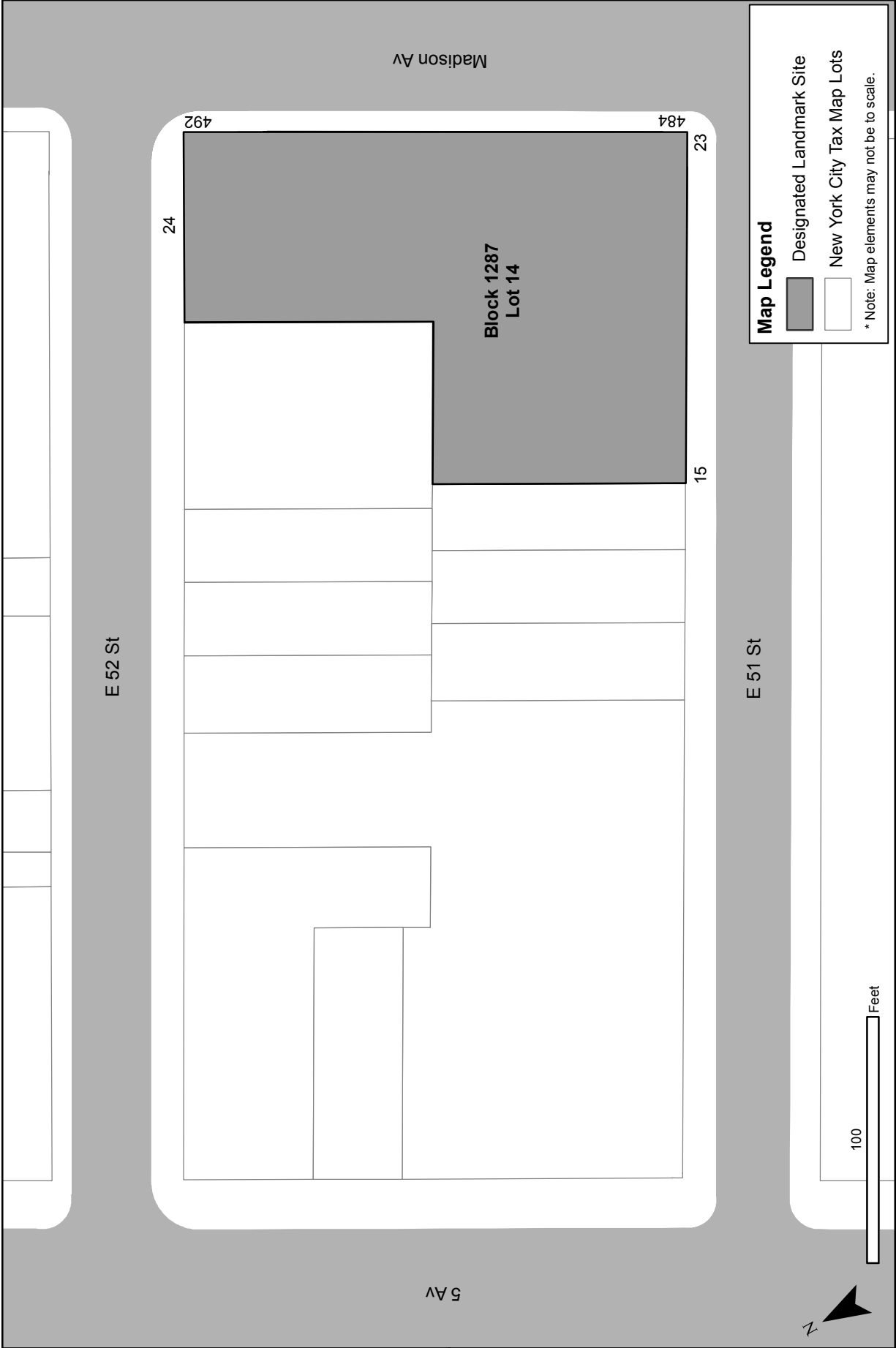
Look Building
View to southwest, from Madison Avenue and 52nd Street
Photo by Christopher D. Brazee, 2010



Look Building
East 51st Street, lower floors
East 52nd Street, lower floors
Photos by Christopher D. Brazee, 2010



Look Building
Madison Avenue facade
Main Entrance
Photos by Christopher D. Brazee, 2010



Map Legend

- Designated Landmark Site
- New York City Tax Map Lots

* Note: Map elements may not be to scale.

LOOK BUILDING (LP-2376), 488 Madison Avenue (aka 484-492 Madison Avenue; 15-23 East 51 Street; 24 East 52 Street).
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 14.

Designated: July 27, 2010