

MANUFACTURERS TRUST COMPANY BUILDING INTERIOR, later Chase Bank Building, first floor interior, consisting of the entrance vestibule and lobby at the corner of Fifth Avenue and West 43rd Street, the former banking room, the 43rd Street elevator lobby, the corridor in front of the vault on Fifth Avenue, and the escalators leading from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior, consisting of the former banking room; and the fixtures and interior components of both floors, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, and vault door facing Fifth Avenue; 510 Fifth Avenue (aka 508-514 Fifth Avenue and 2 West 43rd Street), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1953-54; architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Gordon Bunshaft, partner in charge and chief designer.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1258, Lot 40.

On February 1, 2011 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Manufacturers Trust Company Building Interior (Item 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Fourteen people spoke in favor of designation, including two representatives of the owner, as well as representatives of the Coalition to Save MHT, Docomomo New York/Tristate, the Historic Districts Council, the Landmarks Conservancy, the Modern Architecture Working Group, the Municipal Art Society, and the Recent Past Preservation Network.

Summary

When the Fifth Avenue office of the Manufacturers Trust Company opened in October 1954, bank officials claimed it was “unlike any other financial institution in this country or abroad.”¹ A major example of mid-20th century modernism, 510 Fifth Avenue was designated a New York City Landmark in 1997 and is one of Manhattan’s most transparent structures, revealing two elegantly spacious banking floors that were planned to be as prominent to passing pedestrians as the glass-and-aluminum exterior. As with many projects designed by the architectural firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM), it was a collaborative effort, requiring the talent and expertise of various staff members. Gordon Bunshaft was the partner in charge of the building’s innovative design,



assisted by Patricia W. Swan and Roy O. Allen. At the time, SOM did not have an interior design division and Eleanor H. Le Maire was responsible for the interiors, which were praised for being in “accord with the directness and purity of the architecture.”² Though interior components and artworks by sculptor Harry Bertoia were recently removed, many distinctive elements remain. On Fifth Avenue, for instance, the celebrated circular stainless steel vault door designed by Henry Dreyfuss in collaboration with engineers at the Mosler Safe Company is visible, as well as most of the white marble piers and the vast luminous ceilings that were intended to minimize glare and shadow. It was one of SOM’s first and most ambitious projects to make use of this lighting technology, and though modified, may be the earliest example to survive in New York City. Because the 7,000 square-foot second floor, sometimes called a mezzanine, is recessed from the street, it appears to float, creating the impression that both levels occupy a single, monumental space. Other notable historic features include the twin escalators, which were originally freestanding, as well as the 43rd Street lobby at the west end of the building, which, like the rear wall of the second floor, displays handsome sets of elevator doors set into polished grey marble walls. By conceiving this building and its minimalist interiors as a unified architectural statement, SOM not only produced one of Fifth Avenue’s most memorable structures but it created a work that influenced the course of American bank design.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS³

When the Fifth Avenue office of the Manufacturers Trust Company opened in October 1954, the facade was praised by critics and journalists for providing “an open view of all of the banking operations from the street and from the neighboring office buildings.”⁴ At the time, it was arguably Manhattan’s single most transparent structure; revealing the elegantly spacious banking floors that were as prominent as the glass-and-aluminum exterior. Writing in *Art Digest*, architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable observed:

In a direct reversal of the traditional idea of architecture, which places its emphasis on the nature of heavy, containing masonry, the interiors become the substance of the building itself, once light and glass have effectively dematerialized the outer walls.⁵

The interior components designed by Eleanor H. Le Maire and two sculptures by Harry Bertoia⁶ have been removed but many striking elements remain, including the cantilevered second floor⁷ with its 18-foot-high ceiling and open plan, the vast luminous ceilings, white marble piers, twin escalators, and the 43rd Street lobby.

Manufacturers Trust Company

The Mechanics Bank of Williamsburgh, the parent organization of the Manufacturers Trust Company, was organized in 1853 to serve the business community in Brooklyn’s 14th Ward. In 1865, it reorganized as a national bank under the name Manufacturers National Bank of New York, with offices in lower Manhattan. Following financial reversals in 1867, the bank returned to Brooklyn. After merging with the Citizens Trust Company in 1914, the bank became known as the Manufacturers-Citizens Trust Company, and later, in 1915, the Manufacturers Trust Company. During the next decade, the Manufacturers Trust Company acquired many small banks in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The *New York Times* summarized the bank’s success in 1925:

The trust company has figured in one of the fastest expansions in the city’s history. Starting from small beginnings in Brooklyn, it has in the last decade crossed to Manhattan and now rates as among the city’s largest banks.⁸

Based at 55 Broad Street (demolished), the Manufacturers Trust Company would pioneer many novel retail services in the late 1930s and 1940s, including personal loans, construction loans, property improvement loans, special checking accounts, and industrial credit for manufacturers. With 67 branches by 1944, the bank’s annual report noted optimistically, that “the rapid growth of many of our offices, furthered by the various new services we are extending to our customers and by special services incident to the war effort, will soon call for additional expansion of quarters.”⁹

The Fifth Avenue Branch

One of the bank’s busiest branches was located in the base of 513 Fifth Avenue (aka Postal Life Building, York & Sawyer, 1915), at the southeast corner of West 43rd Street. Described as “second only to the Head Office in the amount and importance of its business,” the branch moved here in the 1920s and was soon operating at full capacity. Despite approaching “its limit” in the 1930s, it continued to accept new accounts, with approximately 17,500 depositors by 1944.¹⁰

To meet growing customer demand, steps were taken to open a much larger office. In 1941, the bank began negotiations with the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York to lease a site occupied by two structures at the southwest corner of 43rd Street: a converted four-story dwelling at 508 Fifth Avenue, and the eight-story Ziegler Building (c. 1900) at 510-514 Fifth Avenue. Both parcels were part of a larger zoning lot that extended south to 42nd Street, and development rights from these parcels were used to build a 59-story tower at 500 Fifth Avenue (1929-31, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, a designated New York City Landmark). In consequence, any building erected on this corner could not exceed 68 feet – the height of 508 Fifth Avenue. Though wartime restrictions on building supplies created delays, in October 1944 Mutual Life agreed to clear the site and construct an \$850,000 structure based on specifications proposed by the Manufacturers Trust Company. The State Banking Department approved the relocation of the branch in December 1944.

Walker & Gillette was selected as architect. This prominent firm designed a great number of bank buildings, including offices for the National City Bank of New York at 415 Broadway (1927), East River Savings Bank, at 743 Amsterdam Avenue (1926-27, a designated New York City Landmark) and 26 Cortlandt Street (1931-34). Gillette attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts and most of the firm's work was neo-classical, or in later years, a streamlined variant of the Art Deco style. In 1944, they filed plans for a monumental limestone structure with a curved corner in what was described as the "Federal Classic style," but due to continued government restrictions and difficulties with tenants the project was canceled in 1948.¹¹ Though the successor firm, Walker & Poor, prepared a substantially modified design with a multi-story glass curtain wall facing 43rd Street in 1951, construction did not proceed due to subsequent restrictions associated with the Korean War. By the time these restrictions were lifted in July 1952, Walker & Poor had been discharged. Not only had there been disagreement over billing, but a new architectural climate had begun to emerge, one in which Skidmore Owings & Merrill became a leading firm.

Skidmore Owings & Merrill

Few firms have been as closely associated with the development and evolution of 20th-century modern architecture as SOM. Founded by Louis Skidmore, Sr. (1897-1962) and Nathaniel Owings (1903-1984) in Chicago in 1936, Skidmore opened the New York office in 1937. John O. Merrill (1896-1975), an architectural engineer, joined the firm as a limited partner in 1939. The first structures Skidmore and Owings (with John Moss) completed in New York City were part of the 1939-40 New York World's Fair: the Venezuela Pavilion, the Gas Industries exhibit, and the Continental Baking-Wonder Bread exhibit. Executed with partial walls of transparent glass, these temporary structures anticipated the minimalist aesthetic – commonly known as the International Style – at which SOM excelled.

Skidmore served on the advisory board of the bank's 57th Street branch and was close friends with Horace ("Hap") C. Flanigan (1890-1978), who became the bank's president in September 1951. According to Gordon Bunshaft (1909-1990), the SOM partner who was in charge of the design, Manufacturers Trust first approached them about their plans in 1953 at the recommendation of Lou Crandall, president of the George A. Fuller Construction Company, who was also a member of the bank's board of trustees. At Lever House (1950-52, a designated New York City Landmark), one of Bunshaft's most celebrated early office building designs, Fuller acted as general contractor. In his role as advisor, Bunshaft told the bank that "it would be

unwise to try to save a small amount of money on engineering fees when a better building might result from a fresh start.”¹²

Flanigan approached SOM with three primary goals. Because the current Fifth Avenue branch was overcrowded, he wanted a building that could serve a high volume of retail and commercial clients. It was also important that the structure have an “inviting look,”¹³ in keeping with the bank’s emphasis on customer service, as epitomized in the advertising slogan “Come See Us, You’ll Be Very Welcome.” Most interesting, perhaps, was the requirement that it be adaptable for another use. During the 1930s, Flanigan recalled being disturbed by the sight of abandoned branches in Detroit, neo-classical structures that could not attract tenants due to the prohibitive cost of remodeling. “What branch banking needed,” he claimed, “was an easily convertible type of branch building.”¹⁴ In response, SOM pioneered a new image and building type, one in which familiar materials, ornament, and symbolism traditionally associated with banking were purposely ignored.

As with most SOM projects, the Fifth Avenue office was a collaborative effort, requiring the talent and expertise of various staff members. Owings later recalled:

Skid, sensing the opportunity for a masterpiece, conceived the idea of a competition among our young and eager designers. Here was an opportunity to shake up the conventional architects’ approaches to banking. They were encouraged to come up with whatever popped into their heads, and the history and tradition of banking be damned.¹⁵

Charles Evans Hughes III (1915-85) placed first with a sketch that contained many elements that were incorporated into the final design. Though Walker & Poor proposed a glass elevation for 43rd Street, Hughes wanted a glass-walled structure in which the vault – “the central drama of the scheme” – would be visible from the street.¹⁶

Under Bunshaft and the project’s administrative partner William S(elsor) Brown (b. 1909), Hughes’ vision was refined, creating a cage-like transparent structure. Patricia W. Swan (b. 1924) headed the design team, working with Bunshaft, as well as Roy O. Allen (d. 1992) and Alan Labie, who oversaw construction and served as job captain.¹⁷ At the time, there were relatively few women in the field and she remembered being the third hired by SOM, following Natalie De Blois.¹⁸ A graduate of Columbia University (B. Arch, 1950), Swan’s father, G. Dewey Swan, was an architect and friend of Skidmore. She was promoted to associate in 1956 and associate partner in 1970. Swan later worked in SOM’s San Francisco and Denver offices, retiring in 1987.¹⁹

Eleanor H. Le Maire (1897-1970) was responsible for the handsome interiors. At the time, SOM did not have an interior design division and she was identified as a “consultant.” Born in Berkeley, Le Maire studied at the University of California and Columbia University and began her career as a stylist in the home furnishings department of Bullocks Wilshire, a recently-opened department store in Los Angeles.²⁰ Le Maire specialized in hotel interiors and retail spaces; her New York City clients included Macy’s Department Store, the New Yorker Hotel, and the New York Savings Bank. She employed a staff of fifty in the 1950s and in subsequent years would oversee the redesign of many of the bank’s branches.²¹ At 510 Fifth Avenue, Le Maire designed the furnishings and selected the color scheme, which *Interiors* magazine said was in “accord with the directness and purity of the architecture.”²²

The Exterior

Plans were submitted to the Department of Buildings in April 1953. Weiskopf & Pickworth, who frequently collaborated with SOM, served as structural engineer and George A. Fuller was contractor. The glass panels were installed during July 1954 and a press preview was held on September 22, 1954. Over two days at the beginning of October, all bank deposits and “nests of safe deposit boxes” were transported across Fifth Avenue and on October 5, 1954 the new branch office opened for business. The cost of construction was approximately \$3 million.

The Manufacturers Trust Building is a major example of mid-20th-century modernism, frequently called the International Style. Located on a prominent corner site, the Fifth Avenue facade is 100 feet long and the 43rd Street facade is 125 feet long. It is a four-story building, with a recessed penthouse and gardens on the roof. Both entrances face West 43rd Street. The main entrance, at Fifth Avenue, provided access to the bank, while the west entrance served the elevator lobby, safe deposit area, and offices on the upper floors.

Prior to the Second World War, nearly all buildings were faced with stone or brick. Manufacturers Trust challenged this tradition and has walls that are almost entirely glass. Each panel is framed by four-inch-wide polished aluminum mullions that project ten inches in front of the glazing. Providing visual “texture and depth,” this elegant grid was described by the building superintendent as “more like jewelry than building.”²³ To emphasize views into the second floor, the glass panels are significantly larger. Whereas the panels on first, third and fourth floors are square and 9 by 9 feet, on the second floor the panels measure 10 by 22 feet. Manufactured by the Franklin Glass Company of Butler, Pennsylvania, they were said to be the “largest ever made in this country.”²⁴

Under the influence of the German architect Mies van der Rohe, who immigrated to the United States in 1938, American architecture grew increasingly abstract, minimal and transparent in the late 1940s. The Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe, 1946-50), outside Chicago, Philip Johnson’s “Glass House” (1949) in New Canaan, Connecticut, and the free-standing lobby of SOM’s Lever House, have glass walls that recede and disappear, blurring the distinction between inside and out. Though glass played an important role in modern aesthetics, to diminish heat gain many curtain walls featured colored glass, such as the United Nations Secretariat (1947-52), Lever House, and the Seagram Building (Mies van der Rohe, 1955-58), thus diminishing transparency. At 510 Fifth Avenue, however, the glass is clear and appears almost invisible under specific lighting conditions. Lewis Mumford, architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, commented:

Happily for the architects of the bank, its location and its purpose greatly reduced the practical objections to an all-glass structure. Because it is surrounded by taller buildings, there is no need for screens or blinds or green heat-ray-glass.²⁵

SOM also pioneered various structural innovations, using just eight piers to support the concrete floor slabs. Particularly novel was the design of the cantilevered second floor which does not reach the exterior wall and seems to float. On the north side, facing 43rd Street, the cantilever extends more than the 20 feet beyond the four piers, and on Fifth Avenue, 11 feet. Because the piers are faced with white Vermont marble, when viewed from outside they almost dematerialize against the brightly-lit ceilings. This may indicate the influence of Mies, who recently proposed an immense clear-span structure with glass walls for the Chicago Convention Center (1952-54).

Interior Plan

In early photographs, both banking floors were open and uncluttered. Passing through the glazed vestibule, customers experienced an uninterrupted view of the first floor, with 11-foot tall ceilings, free-standing writing desks, and an L-shaped counter along the south and west walls where tellers performed such routine transactions as check cashing. To enhance the sense of spaciousness, the ebony wood counters had sleek white marble tops and no security grilles. There was little else to break up the view and the walls behind the counters were clearly visible. The south wall (adjacent to the vault) was polished black granite and the west wall (adjacent to the 43rd Street lobby) was painted “sky blue.”²⁶

Immediately inside the entrance closest to Fifth Avenue are the escalators to the second floor, sometimes described as the main banking floor or mezzanine. Because this level is recessed from the east and north walls, it creates the impression that both floors occupy a single volume of space. With approximately 7,000 square feet of space, the second floor recalls, without imitating, the grandly-scaled halls of earlier banks. The *Architectural Record* described it as having an “almost classic serenity . . . dignified yet lively; ordered but not forbidding.”²⁷ Devoted to commercial accounts, the second floor had a similar asymmetrical configuration to the first floor, but with groups of senior officers desks arranged at center. Behind the counter, near the west end of the south wall, was originally a large clock with metal numerals. This wall was painted white and incorporated much of the building’s mechanical system, including electricity, air conditioning ducts, and water pipes. In contrast, the west wall was faced with polished gray German marble that was possibly chosen to create a strong background for the 70-foot-long screen by sculptor Harry Bertioia. Weighing about five tons, it featured more than 800 enameled steel plates supported by a framework of steel rods and braces. Ada Louise Huxtable commented that the screen added a note of “Byzantine splendor in an otherwise austere elegant interior . . . the perfect accent for the polished surroundings.”²⁸ Removed by the prior tenant (and owner of the artwork) in 2010, this glittery abstract artwork was not only colorful but it disguised a row of desks, as well as service doors and elevators, from public view. The banking floors were also originally enlivened by rectangular flower boxes, placed in rows along the perimeter of the second floor, and near Fifth Avenue, on the first floor.

The Escalators

The former banking floors are linked by escalators. Located on the east side of the building, they were convenient for customers entering from 43rd Street and were positioned to maximize visibility from Fifth Avenue. Rising on a diagonal in open space, without any apparent means of support, passing pedestrians could easily observe the constant the flow of customers, while inside, riders could enjoy changing views of the interiors.²⁹

Escalators were first used by American retailers at the start of the 20th century, especially in department stores. In the 1930s, a small number were installed in office buildings, including the Cities Service Building (Clinton & Russell, 1930-32) at 70 Pine Street and the International Building at 630 Fifth Avenue (Associated Architects, 1933-34, a designated New York City Landmark Interior) in Rockefeller Center. One of the first modern skyscrapers in the United States was the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society headquarters (Howe & Lescaze, 1932). This trail-blazing structure featured an impressive double-height banking hall on the second floor, reached by an unusually long escalator. It was, most likely, the first installed by an American bank. Following the Second World War, architects paid greater attention to the aesthetics of circulation, using spiral stairs, curving ramps, and with increasing frequency, escalators, to move

people through buildings. Walker & Poor's earlier design for the Fifth Avenue branch, for example, featured a mezzanine that was reached by escalator.³⁰

Le Maire designed the anodized aluminum interior side panels of the escalators, which were finished in a "straw gold color." This color was probably chosen to harmonize with the 33-foot-high gold-tinted curtains,³¹ the gilt Bertolia screen, or possibly Bertolia's untitled wire "cloud" construction that was originally suspended above the escalators. Each escalator panel contained numerous small holes, allowing light from "cold cathode continuous tubes" to shine onto the moving treads. She "pioneered" this idea for the Otis Company in 1946 and it was later used in a Dayton, Ohio, department store.³² The bank's newsletter described the effect: "The escalators gives a friendly glow to the room and strengthens the feeling of unity between the first and second floors."³³ In addition, a grid of nine evenly-spaced recessed lighting fixtures was installed above the east end of the teller's counters on the first floor, close to where the escalators meet the ceiling.³⁴

Lighting

Vast "luminous ceilings" hover above both floors, as well as the third and fourth floor offices (not part of this designation). Corrugated "paper thin vinyl sheeting," hung from T-shaped metal channels, gave the ceilings an uncluttered directional character. With none of the lighting fixtures visible, it could easily be seen from both streets and reads as a floating, illuminated grid. On the second floor, the thicker metal channels direct the eye toward the west end of the room where the Bertolia screen was located, today revealing a gray marble wall. The original luminous ceiling has been altered so that a grid of three panels is now located where there was originally a single panel.

Luminous ceilings were relatively new in the early 1950s. Developed by the electrical engineer Parry Moon and Domina Eberle Spencer for use in offices, this technique produced "an even glow of illumination, without glare or shadow."³⁵ They collaborated with the Marlux Corporation, of Somerville, Massachusetts, who manufactured the panels. *Interiors* magazine reported:

Light from the tubes reflects again and again between the plastic panels and the brightly painted structure ceiling until nearly all the light passes through the plastic. This makes the light seem to come from an unbroken plane of light rather than rows of tubes.³⁶

It was the first of many SOM interiors to incorporate this type of ceiling and is a defining feature of these interiors.

Even from the outside, the interiors constitute the major sensation of the building, because they are under luminous ceilings, providing light so brilliant that the interior space is entirely and perfectly revealed ...³⁷

Because the banking floors emitted an even glow, reflections were significantly reduced on the exterior and the glass seemed to vanish during daylight hours. *Architectural Forum* interpreted this as a shrewd retailing:

It is an old merchandizing trick, if you have a store window and you want the contents seen from the outside, you have to put more foot candles inside the glass than there are foot candles of natural light outside the glass . . . It makes a glass wall into something it has not been before, an invisible control instead of a mysterious barrier.³⁸

Luminous ceilings also enhanced each floor's minimalist character. Not only did the panels diffuse and disguise the lighting source but they hid such necessary elements as public address systems, air diffusers, and acoustical materials. Though Huxtable criticized the "pale yellow" color in her 1954 review, saying it would never seem pleasant or flattering, this system did produce a powerful and consistent glow that helped publicize the new branch.³⁹ With electric rates relatively low, management was initially instructed to keep the building "fully lighted" throughout the day and until one o'clock in the morning.⁴⁰ Mumford was especially impressed, writing: "Viewed from outside, this building is essentially a glass lantern, and, like a lantern, is even more striking by dark than daylight."⁴¹

Vault Door

For people strolling Fifth Avenue, the most prominent feature was the circular door to the main vault – open and plainly visible from the street. Traditionally, vaults were placed below ground or at the rear of the banking floor. Instead, this vault was placed in full view, just ten feet from the sidewalk. During banking hours, people could see the door's locking mechanism and circular frame, as well as the gate to the vault and its interior. Though safes had occasionally appeared on banking floors to comfort "wary depositors," it did not become a widely-accepted practice until the opening of this branch.⁴²

Various reasons were given to explain the location. According to the architects, aesthetics played an important role:

It's like sailors and boats. While we were designing the building, the bankers kept taking us down into bank cellars and showing us vault doors; then they would stand around looking at them, and say to each other reverently, 'Isn't it beautiful!' After a while we began to agree.⁴³

Flanigan thought the placement would benefit the bank's clients. He told the *New York Times*, that "with our vault at street level, safe deposit customers can use their boxes . . . with maximum convenience."⁴⁴ Some writers contended that security was the main motivation and by giving the vault greater visibility, robberies could be deterred. Though this suggestion was dismissed by the bank, a year earlier the notorious bank robber Willie Sutton had been convicted of robbing a Manufacturers Trust Company branch in Sunnyside, Queens.⁴⁵

Lacking conventional sculptural symbols associated with banking – owls, squirrels, lions, and beehives – the gleaming door also served to confirm the building's purpose. Mumford observed:

By raising the most dramatic physical element in the bank from the cellar to the ground floor, the architects have made the most of a natural advertisement . . . This use of the bank's vault as an expressive and visible feature was truly an inspiration.⁴⁶

Huxtable expressed a similar view in *Art Digest*, calling it "spectacular merchandising this, and good visual drama."⁴⁷

The noted industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss (1904-1971) collaborated on the door's design, which *Industrial Design* magazine included in its annual review of 1954. The unidentified author remarked how the door was "to the bank what a beautiful broach is to a dress."⁴⁸ Conceived as a showpiece, the 30-ton, 7-foot diameter, 16-inch thick door was made of "flange quality carbon steel, stainless steel, and chrome laminated steel," as well as architectural bronze.⁴⁹ Especially prominent was the bolt wheel and the I-shaped hinge, which was "so delicately balanced it can be swung with one finger."⁵⁰ Throughout the 1950s, Dreyfuss worked for the Mosler Safe Company, producing designs for vault doors, vaults, night depositories, and drive-in windows. According to publicity, he helped "develop the "newest look" that's come to banking in 50 years."⁵¹

The exterior of the vault was faced with Canadian black granite. This polished stone provided an elegant backdrop for the shiny door, as well as for the luminous ceiling and white marble columns in the first floor banking hall.⁵² As one of the branch's best-known and most-publicized features, the Dreyfuss door was lit throughout the night, providing Mosler with a "twenty-four hour advertisement." Furthermore, the company took such great pride in this commission that each week an employee was sent to polish it.⁵³ In a 1997 *New York Times* editorial, the door was called out as "an icon of security, immensely technical, deeply forbidding, almost ironic in its seriousness."⁵⁴

Popular and Critical Reception

The glass branch was an immediate success. *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Fortune* were among various publications to cover the opening events, which attracted 15,000 visitors to admire the "clear walls, luminous ceiling, open counters, white marble columns, and sprawling main banking area."⁵⁵ Tours were offered to the public and by 1957 nearly 100,000 people had visited. *The New York Times* reported in 1955:

Fashion advertisers have posed models on the escalators and in front of the huge vault door. Some 1,100 pictures of the building have been published. Photographs and information have been supplied to 146 publications . . . When the building was opened Manufacturer's personnel office received requests for transfer from other branches. Moreover, when the building was kept open on holidays, bank employees came with their families to see it.⁵⁶

Buildings, *Lighting*, *Office Management*, and *Management Methods* also covered aspects of the bank's design for specialized audiences and *Architectural Forum*, *Architectural Record*, and *Progressive Architecture* were united in praise. One writer, however, criticized the "ostentatious under consumption of space" in *Harper's Magazine*, calling it the most "uneconomical piece of architecture since the pyramids."⁵⁷

For the bank, the most satisfying response is likely to have come from depositors – nine months after opening *The New York Times* reported that the number of savings accounts had nearly tripled and special checking accounts and commercial accounts had more than doubled. With such strong evidence "that modern banking premises are a strong attraction for new accounts,"⁵⁸ Manufacturers Trust stepped up its program of modernizing and redecorating branch offices. Rival banks would open similar glass-walled facilities during the decade that followed, such as the one in the concourse of One Chase Manhattan Plaza (SOM, 1964) and in the headquarters of the Emigrant Savings Bank at 5 East 42nd Street (Emery Roth & Sons, 1969).

The Manufacturers Trust Company Building was awarded the Architectural League's Gold Medal for Architecture and the Municipal Art Society's Plaque of Commendation in 1955,⁵⁹ and the Fifth Avenue Association's Award for Excellence in 1956.

Recent History

In 1961, Manufacturers Trust merged with The Hanover Bank, creating the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company. Three decades later, in 1991, it merged with Chemical Bank. By this time, only the first floor of the Fifth Avenue branch remained open, and the second floor had been converted to offices. Automated teller machines were installed blocking the view of the escalators from Fifth Avenue and the luminous ceilings were altered. Though the east-west channels were retained, the original plastic panels were replaced with square panels divided by thin mullions. The second floor reopened as a bank branch around 1994 and the first floor was divided into two spaces, with a portion serving as the bank entrance and ATM lobby, and the balance as retail space. Chemical Bank became part of Chase Manhattan Bank in 1996.

The building exterior was designated a New York City Landmark in October 1997 and public hearings on the interior were held in 1990. Chase Manhattan sold the building to Tahl Propp Equities in 2000 but retained ownership of the artworks. At that time, Chase continued to operate a branch on the second floor and agreed to keep the Bertioia screen in place "as long as Tahl Prop owns the building."⁶⁰ An affiliate of Vornado Realty Trust acquired the building in 2009. When J. P. Morgan Chase closed its branch and vacated the building in 2010, it removed the Bertioia screen and hanging sculpture, as well as the teller's counters.⁶¹ As of January 2011, the second floor is vacant and the west part of the first floor, facing 43rd Street, is occupied by fashion designer Elie Tahari.

Description

The former Fifth Avenue branch office of the Manufacturers Trust Company consists of three main areas: the first floor, second floor, and 43rd Street lobby. The first and second floors are enclosed by walls of clear glass, framed by polished aluminum mullions and horizontal rails. The first floor is divided into three main sections: entrance to the second floor (east), 43rd Street retail space (center), and the 43rd Street elevator lobby (west).

Historic

First floor, east entrance vestibule: three outer doors, three inner doors, east wall with radiator openings in base, north wall with Municipal Art Society plaque; *first floor:* luminous ceiling with wide mullions running from east to west, escalators opposite vestibule, white terrazzo floor divided into rectangles by thin metal channels, aluminum radiator covers with elongated oval pattern along perimeter, piers with white marble facing and black footings, circular stainless steel bank vault door, hinge, and polished granite facing on vault exterior, facing Fifth Avenue. *Second floor:* cantilevered floor slab with horizontal aluminum ventilation grille facing street, luminous ceiling with wide aluminum channels aligned with piers, running east-west, glazed parapet around escalators, escalator landing, piers with white marble facing and black footings, west wall, grey marble, vault door (south), two reddish-orange elevator doors with stainless steel portals and indicator lights (west); *43rd Street lobby entrance vestibule:* glass doors with stainless steel walls, radiators, and ceiling; white terrazzo floor divided into rectangles with thin metal channels, luminous ceiling; *elevator lobby:* luminous ceiling, grey marble on east and west walls, door opening (east wall) to first floor retail space, stainless steel elevator doors with indicator

lights; *foyer to safe deposit area*: luminous ceiling, grey marble facing on east and west walls, stainless steel doors, signage above doors (south wall).

Alterations

Luminous ceilings, both floors, divided into three smooth panels (before 1989, originally single corrugated panels), 43rd Street lobby (c. 1993, originally single corrugated panels), track lighting in retail space, angled glass-and-aluminum ceiling along 43rd Street and most of Fifth Avenue perimeter between first and second floors (c. 1993). *First floor, east entrance vestibule*: divided in two sections; vestibule door handles, west wall with horizontal window; *first floor, east*: glass-and-aluminum wall and doors in front of escalators, partition wall (south) between escalators and exterior of vault (c. 1993), wall (west) between escalators and retail space, aluminum exterior facing on escalators, security cameras, mirrors, signage, cork board with metal trim attached to north pier, terrazzo tiles in front of ATMs. *43rd Street retail space*: east, south and west walls. *Second floor*: damage to original white terrazzo floor where teller's counters, carpeting, and Bertioia screen have been removed, damage to marble wall in northwest corner, glass parapet along exterior (c. 1992), black metal doors between vault and elevators; glass and aluminum enclosure in front of elevators (west), aluminum ventilation grille at top of south wall (before 1989); *43rd Street lobby*: marble panel above doors replaced with back-lit photographs (c. 1993), glass panels with white patterning; sculpture, cantilevered shelf, wood paneling (north wall, west bay).

The interiors are well-documented in contemporary periodicals (copies in LPC files) and were photographed by LPC in 1989, 1993, 2008, and 2011. For information on alterations since the calendaring of the building in 1985, consult LPC files. Historic images and plans are available in *Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill* by Carol Herselle Krinsky and *SOM since 1936* by Nicholas Adams, as well as online at <http://www.esto.com>

Researched and written by
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NOTES

¹ “Fortune is Moved Across Fifth Avenue,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1954, 6.

² “The Manufacturers Trust Company: the interiors are the show in a new glass bank,” *Interiors* (January 1955), 133.

³ The “(Former) Manufacturers Trust Company Building (now Chase Bank)” was designated an individual landmark on October 21, 1997, see Designation Report, prepared by Gale Harris (LP-1968), (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1997). This report also makes generous use of books by Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill* (Cambridge: MIT, 1988), 49; and Nicholas Adams, *SOM since 1936* (Electra Architecture, 2007).

⁴ “New Design Used For Bank Edifice,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1953, R1.

⁵ Ada Louise Huxtable, *Four Walking Tours of Modern Architecture in New York City* (Museum of Modern Art and Municipal Art Society of New York, 1961), 32-33.

⁶ Harry Bertoia (1915-18) was an American sculptor and furniture designer. For the Fifth Avenue branch office, he designed a hanging wire sculpture that was hung above the escalators and a sixty-foot-long gilt metal screen for the west end of the second floor.

⁷ An angled aluminum and glass partition (c. 1993) currently separates the first and second floors.

⁸ “Gotham National Figures in Merger,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1925, 25. These banks included the West Side Bank (1918), Ridgewood National Bank (1921), North Side Bank of Brooklyn (1922), Industrial Savings Bank (1922), Columbia Bank (1923), Yorkville Bank (1925), Gotham National Bank (1925), Fifth National Bank (1925), and Commonwealth Bank of New York (1927).

⁹ Manufacturers Trust Company Report, 1945, cited in Designation Report, 3.

¹⁰ Designation Report, 3; Robert M. Fogelson, “A Report on the Historical Significance of 510 Fifth Avenue,” submitted by Brown & Wood as part of a “Closing Argument of Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company and Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York in Opposition to Designation As a New York City Landmark, November 2, 1990, 23-24, copy in LPC files.

¹¹ For an image of the proposal, see “Properties in New Control as the 1944 Realty Market Ends,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1944, R1.

¹² Krinsky, 49.

¹³ “Money Changing in a House of Glass,” *Life Magazine* (October 25, 1954), 12.

¹⁴ Jack Alexander, “The Bank Has No Secrets,” *Saturday Evening Post* (November 30, 1957), 105.

¹⁵ Nathaniel Alexander Owings, *The Spaces In Between: An Architect’s Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 103; Krinsky, 50; Adams, 307, fn 10.

¹⁶ Owings, 103.

¹⁷ Alan Labie later worked as project manager on many projects in the metropolitan area, including the Chase Manhattan Plaza and Marine Midland Bank buildings in lower Manhattan. For a list of SOM projects, see Krinsky, 335-37.

¹⁸ By 1960, the *New York Times* reported that SOM employed four women: De Blois, Swan, Jane Eliza Becker, and Norma M. Fairweather. See “Women Gain Role in Architecture,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1960, R1.

¹⁹ Patricia W. Swan, phone conversation with author, December 2010; Krinsky, 335; Adams, 323.

²⁰ “Flair for Interior Decoration Opens Way to Brilliant Career,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1940, 56; “Eleanor Le Maire, A Decorator, Dies,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1970, 47.

²¹ David P. Handlin, “Exhibit H: 510 Fifth Avenue: 1954/1990,” submitted by Brown & Wood as part of a “Closing Argument,” 2, 6, fn 8.

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- ²² “The Manufacturers Trust Company: the interiors are the show in a new glass bank,” *Interiors* (January 1955), 133.
- ²³ “Manufacturers Trust Company Builds Conversation Piece on Fifth Avenue,” *Architectural Record* (November 1954), 154.
- ²⁴ “A Single Pane of Glass,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1954, 34.
- ²⁵ Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: Crystal Lantern,” *The New Yorker* (November 13, 1954), 203. *The Saturday Evening Post* reported the building received only one hour of direct sun each day.
- ²⁶ Mumford, 200.
- ²⁷ *Architectural Record*, 152.
- ²⁸ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Bankers’ Showcase,” *Arts Digest* (December 1, 1954), 13. Bertoia produced a similar metal screen for the General Motors Technical Center, a year earlier, in 1953.
- ²⁹ An unidentified author wrote: “If the bank’s essential qualities are classic dignity and rich, exact elegance, it is at the same time surprisingly approachable. For one thing, the scale is not awesome (except, perhaps, for the great diagonal thrust of the escalators.” *Interiors*, 58.
- ³⁰ Handlin, “510 Fifth Avenue: An Architectural Analysis” submitted by Brown & Wood as part of a “Closing Argument,” November 2, 1990, 25.
- ³¹ The curtains were removed before 1989.
- ³² The current panels are silver colored and probably date to the early 1990s. Adams, 77, 307, fn 22.
- ³³ *The Emteeco*, not paginated, copy in SOM files.
- ³⁴ Photo reproduced in *Interiors*, 52.
- ³⁵ Wright employed a similar idea in the 1939 SC Johnson Administration Building which combines electric lighting with skylights above a suspended translucent pyrex ceiling.
- ³⁶ *Interiors*, 57.
- ³⁷ *Interiors*, 52.
- ³⁸ “Modern Architecture Breaks Through the Glass Barrier,” *Architectural Forum* (December 1954), 104.
- ³⁹ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Bankers’ Showcase,” *Arts Digest* (December 1, 1954), 13.
- ⁴⁰ J(ack) Alexander, 105.
- ⁴¹ Lewis Mumford, 198.
- ⁴² Carol J. Dyson and Anthony Rubano, “Banking on the Future: Modernism and the Local Bank,” 2-47, pdf viewed online, 2010.
- ⁴³ “Big Banking and modern architecture finally connect,” *Architectural Forum* (September 1953), 136. This article includes Ezra Stoller photographs of the 3/8” scale model built by Theodore Conrad.
- ⁴⁴ “Showcase Bank Holds a Preview,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1954, 51.
- ⁴⁵ J(ack) Alexander, 105.
- ⁴⁶ Mumford, 200.
- ⁴⁷ Huxtable, “Bankers’ Showcase,” 12.
- ⁴⁸ “Annual Review,” *Industrial Design* (December 1954), 45.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*; also see “Behind the Steel Door,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1999, CY2.
- ⁵⁰ “Manufacturers Trust Company Builds Conversation Piece on Fifth Avenue,” 151.

⁵¹ Dreyfuss Collection, Mosler files, Cooper Hewitt Museum. Dreyfuss was frequently employed by banks, designing a model branch for the Bank of America in 1947 and a graphics program for the First National Bank of Oregon in the early 1960s. He also designed the gridded facade and original interiors of the Bankers Trust Building (1963), at 280 Park Avenue.

⁵² The vault's north wall is currently part of the retail space and is not visible.

⁵³ "Glass Bank Lures Tourists, Deposits," *New York Times*, February 13, 1955, 149.

⁵⁴ "Three New Architectural Landmarks," *New York Times*, November 13, 1997, A26.

⁵⁵ "15,000 Ooh and Ah at Opening of Dazzling, 'New fangled' Bank," *New York Times*, October 5, 1954, 29.

⁵⁶ "Glass Bank Lures Tourists, Deposits."

⁵⁷ Cited by J(ack) Alexander, 106. See John Fischer, "For deposit, to the account of," *Harper's Magazine* (December 1954), 73.

⁵⁸ Cited in the Designation Report, 7.

⁵⁹ This plaque is displayed inside the main bank vestibule on the north wall.

⁶⁰ "Done: Building is Sold and the Artwork Is Staying," *New York Times*, January 3, 2001, B6.

⁶¹ Ada Louise Huxtable, "A Landmark Jewel Box Loses Its Biggest Gem," *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2010, viewed online.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

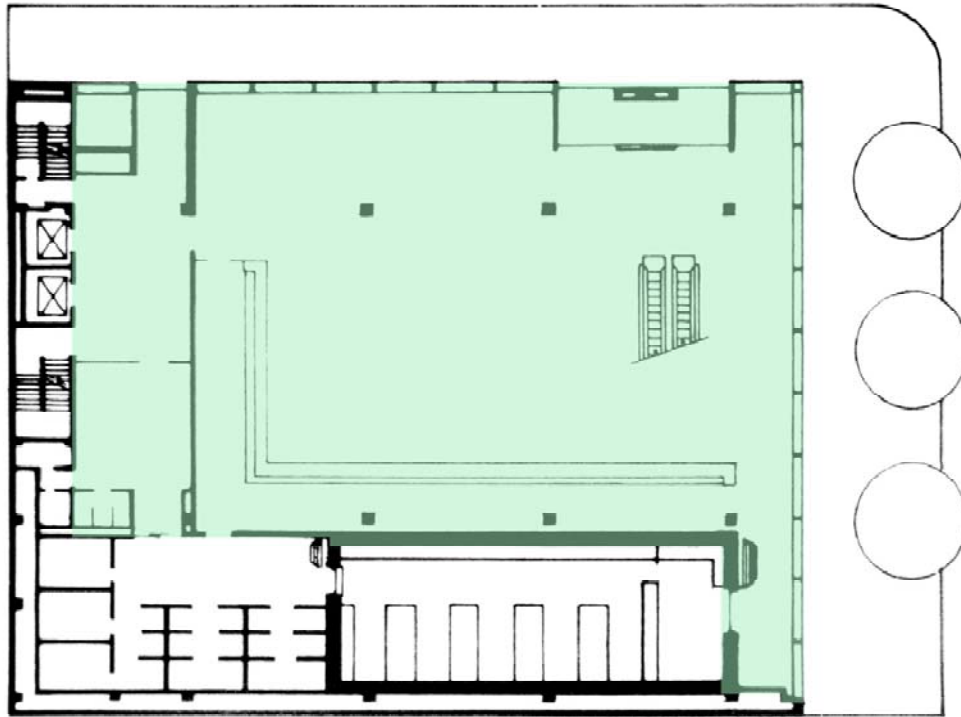
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Manufacturers Trust Company Building Interior has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the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

The Commission further finds that when the Fifth Avenue office of the Manufacturers Trust Company opened in October 1954, bank officials rightly claimed it was “unlike any other financial institution in this country or abroad;” that this interior is a major example of mid-20th century modernism; that 510 Fifth Avenue was designated a New York City Landmark in 1997 and is arguably Manhattan’s most transparent structure, revealing two elegantly spacious banking floors that were carefully planned to be as prominent to passing pedestrians as the glass-and-aluminum exterior; that many projects designed by the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill were collaborative exercises, requiring the talent and expertise of various staff members; that partner Gordon Bunshaft was in charge of the project and was assisted by Patricia W. Swan, Roy O. Allen, and interior designer consultant Eleanor H. Le Maire; that these handsome uncluttered spaces were praised for being in “accord with the directness and purity of the architecture;” that although some interior components and artworks by sculptor Harry Bertoia were recently removed from the premises, many distinctive elements remain, including the celebrated circular stainless steel vault door designed by Henry Dreyfuss in collaboration with engineers at the Mosler Safe Company, as well as the white marble piers and luminous ceilings that were intended to minimize glare and shadow; that this may be the earliest example of this lighting technology to survive in New York City and was among SOM’s first and most ambitious interiors to use it; that the 7,000 square-foot second floor, sometimes called a mezzanine, is recessed from the street perimeter of the building and appears to float, creating the impression that the first and second floors occupy a single volume of space; that other notable historic features including the twin escalators and 43rd Street lobby, featuring a handsome set of elevator doors set into polished grey marble walls; that this building and its minimalist banking floors were designed as a unified architectural statement, and that not only did SOM produce one of Fifth Avenue’s most dramatic structures but that this building and its public interiors changed the course of American bank design.

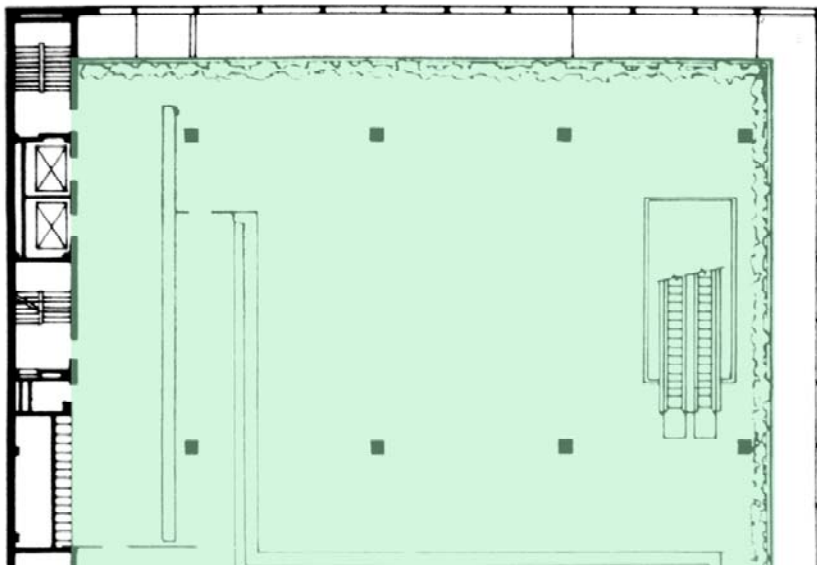
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Manufacturers Trust Company Building, later Chase Bank Building, first floor interior, consisting of the entrance vestibule and lobby at the corner of Fifth Avenue and West 43rd Street, the former banking room, the 43rd Street elevator lobby, the corridor in front of the vault on Fifth Avenue, and the escalators leading from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior, consisting of the former banking room; and the fixtures and interior components of both floors, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, and vault door facing Fifth Avenue; 510 Fifth Avenue, aka 508-514 Fifth Avenue and 2 West 43rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map 1258, Lot 40, as its Landmark site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Pablo Vengochera, Vice Chair
Frederick Bland, Diana Chapin, Michael Devonshire, Joan Gerner,
Michael Goldblum, Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners

First floor



Second floor



Manufacturers Trust Company Building Interior
510 Fifth Avenue (aka 508-14 Fifth Avenue and 2 West 43rd Street)
Fifth Avenue on left (east), 43rd Street above (north)
Courtesy: Vornado Realty Trust, 2011



Fifth Avenue facade
 Manufacturers Trust Company Building Interior
 510 Fifth Avenue (aka 508-14 Fifth Avenue and 2 West 43rd Street)
Photo: Ezra Stoller, 1954 © Esto (upper)
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011(lower)



Second floor, view west
Photo: Ezra Stoller, 1954 © Esto (upper)
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011 (lower)



First floor, east entrance
Photo: Ezra Stoller, 1954 © Esto (upper)
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011(lower)



First floor, adjoining Fifth Avenue
South and North sides
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



First floor retail space
 43rd Street entrance, northeast corner (upper)
 View east (lower)

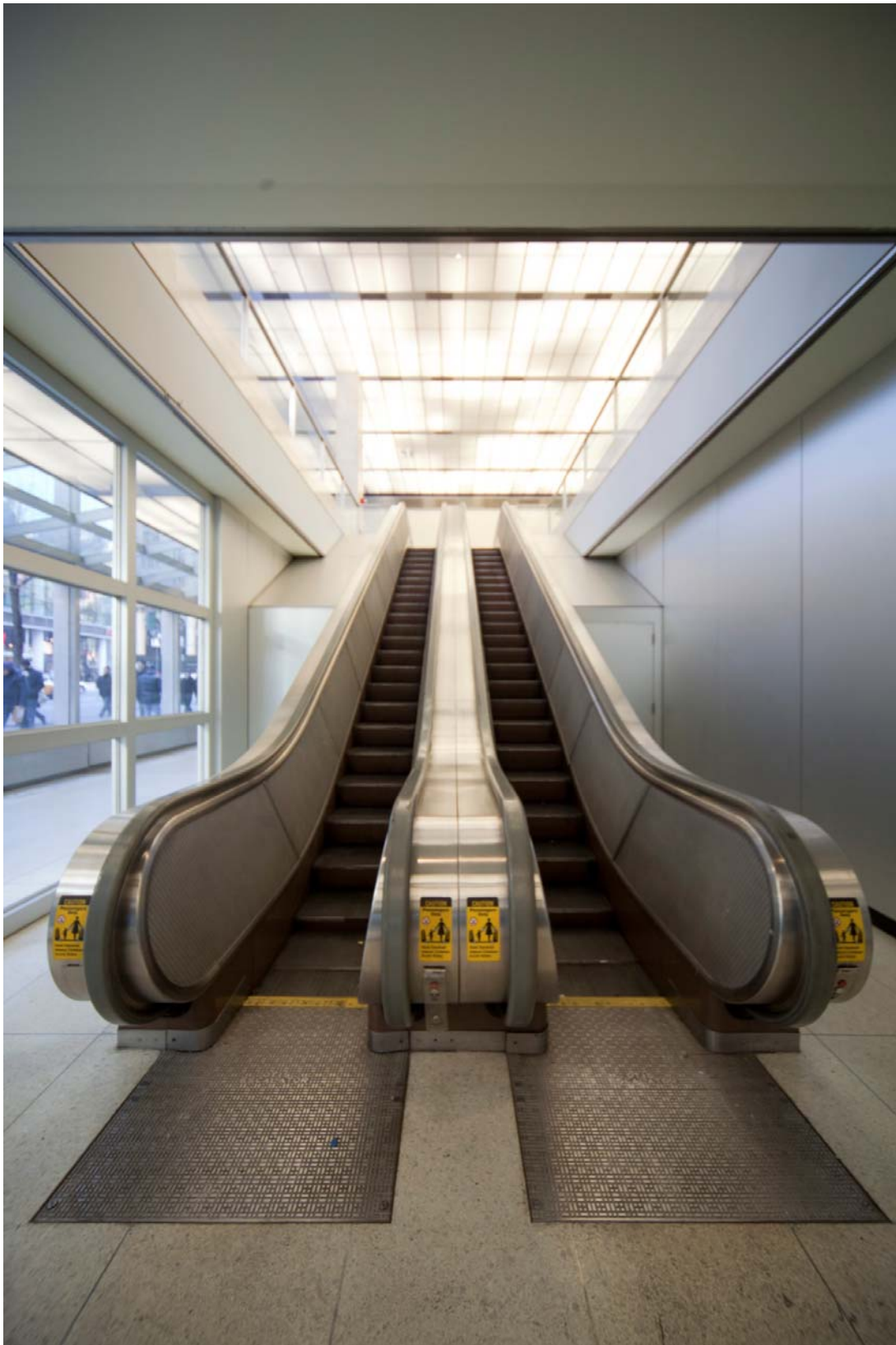
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



43rd Street lobby
 View south (upper); View north (lower)
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



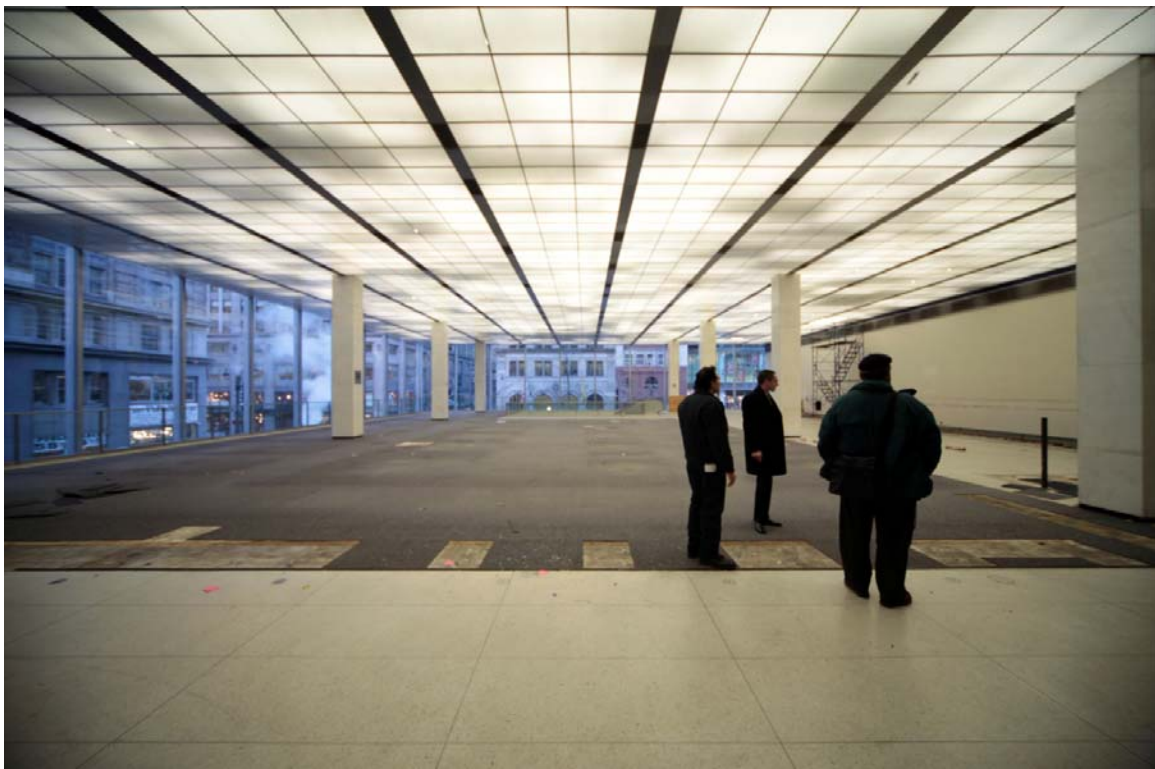
West wall of 43rd Street lobby (upper)
 Foyer to safe deposit area, south and west walls (lower)
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



First floor, escalators, view south
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



Second floor
View of escalators (upper); View to southwest (lower)
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011

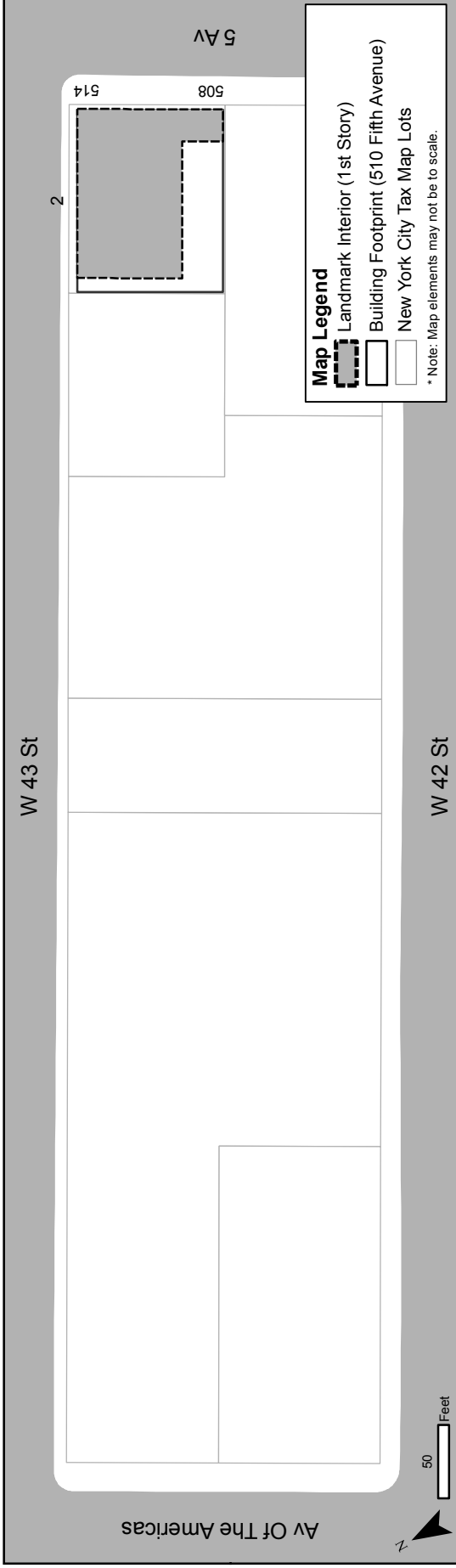


Second floor
View east toward Fifth Avenue (upper); view northeast (lower)
Photo: Christopher D. Braze, 2011

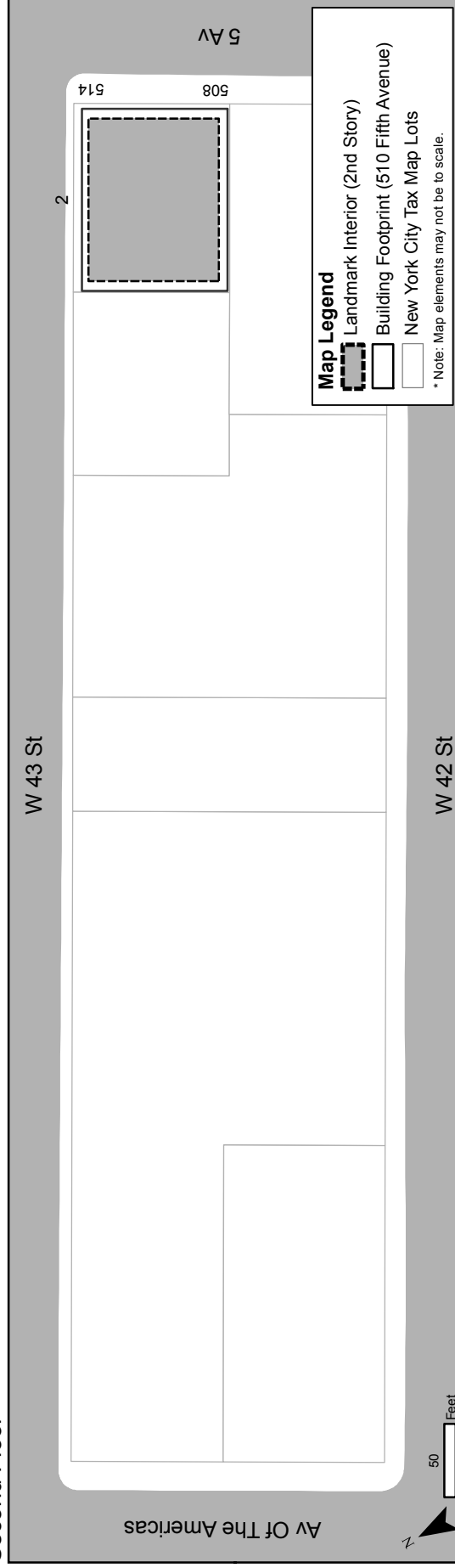


Second floor
View north to 43rd Street (upper); West wall (lower)
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011

First Floor



Second Floor



MANUFACTURERS TRUST COMPANY BUILDING INTERIOR, LATER CHASE BANK BUILDING (LP-2467), 510 Fifth Avenue (aka 508-514 Fifth Avenue; 2 West 43rd Street), Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1258, Lot 40, first floor interior, consisting of the entrance vestibule and lobby at the corner of Fifth Avenue and West 43rd Street, the former banking room, the 43rd Street elevator lobby, the corridor in front of the vault on Fifth Avenue, and the escalators leading from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior, consisting of the former banking room; and the fixtures and interior components of both floors, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, and vault door facing Fifth Avenue.

Designated: February 15, 2011