

# AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

(later Sony Plaza, now 550 Madison Avenue)



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## LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan  
Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10  
550 Madison Avenue

(aka 550-570 Madison Avenue, 13-29 East 55th  
Street, 14-28 East 56th Street)

## LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

## SIGNIFICANCE

Designed by Johnson/Burgee in 1977-78 and completed in 1984, the 37-story AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building was the world's first Postmodern skyscraper. Clad with pinkish-gray granite and crowned by a colossal pediment, this building marked a turning point in the history of 20th-century architecture.



**Madison Avenue and East 55th Street**  
July 2018

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Matthew A. Postal, Research Department

#### **EDITED BY**

Kate Lemos McHale

#### **PHOTOGRAPHS BY**

Sarah Moses

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# AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

550 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

public spaces; five testified that the original features at the rear of the site should be preserved, and one speaker urged LPC to exclude the annex building. The Commission has received 11 pieces of correspondence in support of designation, including letters from the Society of Architectural Historians and the National Trust for Historic Preservation New York City Field Office, and one opposing designation.

## Designation List 509

LP-2600

**Built:** 1978-84

**Architects:** Johnson/Burgee, in association with Simmons Architects

**Landmark Site:** Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10

**Calendared:** November 28, 2017

**Public Hearing:** June 19, 2018

On June 19, 2018, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Thirty-one people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the owner, New York City Council Member Keith Powers, Manhattan Community Board 5, Association for a Better New York, Building and Construction Trades Council of New York, DOCOMOMO US, Historic Districts Council, Landmarks Conservancy, Municipal Art Society, New York Building Congress, Real Estate Board of New York, Society for the Architecture of the City, and 32BJ SEIU. Among the speakers, 20 testified that designation should allow flexibility to redesign the

## Summary

### AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

The AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building is an icon of the Manhattan skyline and of Postmodern architecture. Located on the west side of Madison Avenue, between East 55th and 56th Streets, the top of the office tower is crowned by a colossal broken pediment, a feature that sets the building dramatically apart from earlier glass skyscrapers in midtown. Built for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company between 1978 and 1984, the headquarters was designed by Johnson/Burgee architects, in association with Simmons Architects.

Philip Johnson was a pivotal figure in 20th-century American architecture, active as an architect, curator, and art patron. At the Museum of Modern Art he helped introduce European modernism to a wider American audience in the early 1930s, and with partner John Burgee ushered in the era of postmodernism.

Postmodern architecture originated in the mid-1960s, with the publication of Robert Venturi's "gentle manifesto" *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, which critiqued "orthodox modern architecture" and encouraged the use of ornament and historical forms. Venturi's influence was felt in such pioneering works as Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, Michael Graves' Portland Building in Oregon, and the AT&T Building – the movement's first skyscraper.

Thirty-seven stories tall, the office tower is clad with rough-finished, pinkish-gray Stony Creek granite, a material that is associated with important Beaux-Arts-style buildings in New York City.

Johnson/Burgee's handsome yet playful design references various classical sources, such as the 15th-century Pazzi Chapel in Florence and 18th-century Chippendale style clocks and cabinets. Visible from east and west, the large circular opening in the pediment aligns with the entrance arch facing Madison Avenue. Located in the center bay, the monumental entrance is flanked by groups of flat arches that originally opened to twin arcades beneath the tower, as well as a covered pedestrian space behind the building, linking East 55th and 56th Streets. These public spaces were incorporated as part of special permits from the City Planning Commission and allowed a tower of significantly greater height without setbacks, a major feature of the building's design.

AT&T's new headquarters generated frequent and widespread media attention from the moment the design was revealed in March 1978. *The New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable confessed to having "mixed feelings" about the projected design, calling it a "pedestrian pastiche pulled together by painstaking, polished details," while Paul Goldberger described it as "post-modernism's major monument." In January 1979 Johnson appeared triumphant on the cover of *Time* magazine ("U. S. Architects | Doing Their Own Thing") raising a model of the office tower in the air – the same year he became first recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

Toward the end of construction, due to legal action by the United States Department of Justice, AT&T agreed to surrender all of its subsidiaries and never fully occupied the new headquarters. In 1991 Sony USA began leasing the building. With approval of the City Planning Commission, the original unenclosed public spaces were substantially modified in 1992-94. The arcades flanking the Madison Avenue entrance were mostly converted to shops and the covered pedestrian space at the rear of the tower was enclosed at both ends. AT&T sold the

building to Sony USA in 2002 and since 2016 it has been owned by the Olayan Group. 550 Madison Avenue is one of Johnson/Burgee's most-celebrated works, appearing in many surveys devoted to the history of American architecture. While some elements have been modified, AT&T's former headquarters is known internationally as an important Postmodern design and as a turning point in the history of 20th-century architecture.

## Building Description

AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

### Historic features

The former AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph) Corporate Headquarters is a Postmodern-style skyscraper at 550 Madison Avenue, between East 55th and 56th Streets. The east part of the site is occupied by a 37-story office tower, the primary feature of the site, facing Madison Avenue. The west part contains a covered pedestrian space and a four-story annex building, which incorporated retail, loading and service space, as well as exhibition spaces. Major features of the tower include the pediment, the entrance arch on Madison Avenue flanked by groups of flat arches, and the pinkish-gray Stony Creek granite cladding.

The tower rises 647 feet without setbacks from the sidewalk to the peak of the pediment. It features a classic skyscraper configuration, consisting of a base, mid-section, and crown. The main entrance is deeply recessed within a round-arch opening that is 116 feet tall, 50 feet wide, and 20 feet deep. The interior wall of the arch recess has diamond-pattern stonework, and a glazed entrance arch and oculus with rolled moldings. The entrance arch and oculus have dark-bronze framed glazing, with mullions dividing rectangular glass panels into groups of three or six. At the bottom of the entrance arch are two recessed revolving doors and two single panel doors. Each of the side walls has a single round arch. The top of the entrance arch incorporates a grid of recessed lighting fixtures.

On either side of the entrance arch, facing the sidewalk, are three 60-by-20 foot flat-arch

openings with voussoirs. These openings originally led to open-air public arcades beneath the tower. Single low flat arches at the corners lead to semi-enclosed granite and glass passages. Above each of the low arches is a flagpole.

The mid-section of the office tower has a strong vertical articulation with multiple bays that incorporate fixed single-pane windows. The uppermost floors have curved columns and the windows are set within recessed multi-story vertical openings. The building is crowned by a broken pediment with a semi-circular opening extending through a shallow gable trimmed by decorative coping. The base, window bays and pediment are aligned, forming a unified composition.

The tower's East 55th Street (south) facade and East 56<sup>th</sup> Street (north) facade are identical. Both contain three 16-by-25 foot flat-arch openings divided by evenly-spaced piers. Above the flat arches are three oculi with canted profiles and four vertical window openings with deep stone trim. The mid-section has multiple bays that incorporate fixed single-pane windows. The roof is trimmed with decorative stone coping.

At the rear of the tower, the covered pedestrian space (see alterations) is enclosed by a curved 100-by-40 foot metal and glass vault that springs from the roof of the annex building. The annex projects out slightly from the ends of the covered pedestrian space and is clad with pinkish gray granite, laid in an ashlar pattern. The East 55<sup>th</sup> Street (south) facade of the annex building has a simple cornice with a curved profile and three garage entrances. The East 56<sup>th</sup> Street (north) facade has a simple cornice with a curved profile, a curved multi-story window bay, and a garage entrance.

The rear (west) facade of the tower is visible above the glass vault enclosing the covered pedestrian space. Directly above the vault are six pairs of vertical rectangular openings with granite enframements that contain recessed horizontal metal

louvers. From this point up, the pattern of window openings is identical to the Madison Avenue facade, as well as the pediment.

### **Site**

The granite pavement in front of the entrances to the covered pedestrian space, between the sidewalk and glass doors, is laid in decorative patterns. Similar light gray, charcoal, and red-colored paving is extant inside the semi-enclosed north and south passages that extend beneath the tower, and below the cantilevered storefronts (see alterations) on Madison Avenue.

### **Alterations**

Ground-floor retail space was installed in the base of the tower in 1992-94. The flat-arch openings on either side of the Madison Avenue entrance were enclosed with slightly-recessed storefronts that have dark bronze mullions and cantilevered display windows. The round arches on the side walls of the entrance arch were given similar bronze infill.

On East 55<sup>th</sup> and 56th Streets, dark metal horizontal ventilation louvers were installed inside the oculi. The north and south ends of the covered pedestrian space was enclosed with glass. Recessed from the sides of the office tower, these dark metal and glass curtain walls incorporate circular metal louvers for ventilation, as well plate glass doors set into a recess. Both recesses align with the semi-enclosed north and south passages that connect to Madison Avenue. These passages contain storefronts, fixed windows with granite bases, and lighting fixtures that are not original to the building. The glazing in the vault over the covered pedestrian space was replaced in 2010 with a double-glazed system.

Metal signs, security cameras, and hanging banners have been installed at various locations near or at ground level.

## History and Design

AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

### Johnson/Burgee and the Postmodern Movement

Philip Johnson (1906-2005) was a pivotal figure in 20th century American architecture, active as an architect, curator, and art patron. Born in Ohio, he studied classics at Harvard University (1929-30) and architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (1940-43), under Bauhaus alumni Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer.

As founding director of the Museum of Modern Art's architecture department, Johnson co-organized "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" in 1932, the first major exhibition devoted to European modernism in the United States. His earliest buildings owe an unmistakable debt to the German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, particularly the Glass House (1946-49) in New Canaan, and the Rockefeller Guest House (1950, a New York City Landmark). He was also responsible for the interiors of the former Four Seasons Restaurant (1956-58, a New York City Interior Landmark) at the rear of the Seagram Building, which Mies designed.

Johnson's work took a noteworthy shift in direction in the late 1970s. During this period he was in his 70s and his partner was architect John Burgee (b. 1933), who replaced Richard Foster in 1967. Johnson said he and Burgee "were partners in everything," and Burgee described their partnership as a collaboration in which Johnson had "the final veto."<sup>1</sup> A graduate of the University of Notre Dame ('56), Burgee began his career in Chicago as a

construction superintendent (1955-56) with Holabird, Root & Burgee, where his father Joseph Z. Burgee had worked as an architect, and then joined Naess & Murphy, later known as C.F. Murphy Associates and Murphy/Jahn, where he worked as a project manager (1958-61) and project architect (1961-65) before becoming an associate partner.

During their first decade together, Johnson/Burgee produced mostly sleek modern designs for American corporations. Their first skyscraper was the IDS Center (1973) in Minneapolis, a four-building complex incorporating a winter garden, followed by Pennzoil Place (1976) in Houston, a pair of 36-story office towers connected by a glazed atrium.

The AT&T Building is one of the firm's most important works. First presented to the public in 1978, it was the world's first Postmodern skyscraper. The term "post-modern architecture" entered popular use in the mid-1970s, particularly in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977, multiple editions) by Charles Jencks. Inspired by the Philadelphia architect-critic Robert Venturi, who authored *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1966 and *Learning from Las Vegas* (with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour) in 1972, American architects like Charles Moore and Michael Graves began to question "orthodox modern" aesthetics, finding sources in Renaissance, Baroque, and vernacular traditions.

Johnson, who *Time* magazine described as the "nearest man Post-Modernism has to a senior partner,"<sup>2</sup> developed similar views, which were frequently expressed in public lectures and interviews. In 1978, he proclaimed:

We architects stand at a watershed, at a place where maybe we haven't stood for 50 years – at a shift in sensibility so revolutionary that it is hard for us to grasp, because we are

right in the middle of it. It is the watershed between what we have all been brought up to regard as the modern, and something new, uncharted, uncertain and absolutely delightful.<sup>3</sup>

He later softened his position, saying: “postmodernism was very much in the air . . . and I went along with it out of sheer fatigue with the International Style.”<sup>4</sup>

Johnson sensed the significance of the AT&T commission. Prior to construction, he mused:

When the AT&T building is completed, I’ll be 75-years-old. The building brings together much of my thought and feeling. In that sense, it will be, for me, *capolavoro* – the culmination of my life’s work.<sup>5</sup>

Johnson received several prestigious awards during planning and construction: the City of New York’s Bronze Medallion (1978), American Institute of Architects Gold Medal (1978), and the first Pritzker Architecture Prize (1979). As the office tower neared completion in 1982, the firm was renamed John Burgee Architects, with Johnson as consultant.<sup>6</sup> Burgee said it was “a time when Johnson expressed a desire to reduce the pressure and volume of work we had undertaken in previous years and to end the heavy travel schedule.”<sup>7</sup>

Over the next decade, the firm prospered and Johnson continued to collaborate with Burgee, producing such Postmodern works as PPG Place (1984) in Pittsburgh, Republic Bank Center (1984) in Houston, Two Federal Reserve Plaza (1985) at 33 Maiden Lane, the “Lipstick” Building (1986) at 885 Third Avenue, Manhattan, and the William S. Paley Building/Museum of Television and Radio (1991) on West 52nd Street.

John Burgee Architects filed for bankruptcy protection in 1992.<sup>8</sup> Johnson had already left the firm and was sometimes associated with Alan Ritchie (b. 1938). Trained as an architect in England, Ritchie joined Johnson/Burgee in 1969 and managed the AT&T project. He left the firm and opened his own office in 1987. In New York City, Johnson/Ritchie designed the Chrysler Center Trylons (2001) at 666 Third Avenue.

Towards the end of his life, Johnson worked for New York City real estate developer Donald Trump, collaborating on the design of the International Hotel & Tower in Columbus Circle (1997) and four apartment buildings (1998-2001) on Riverside Boulevard, part of the Riverside South development in Manhattan. All were credited to Johnson with Ritchie & Fiore and Costas Kondylis.

### The AT&T Corporation

For much of the 20th century, the American Telephone & Telegraph Company was the largest corporation in the world.<sup>9</sup> Alexander Graham Bell, who patented the telephone in 1876, established the Bell Telephone Company in Boston in 1877. AT&T, a Bell subsidiary, was organized in 1885 to build and operate the first long distance telephone network, a process that required the cooperation of numerous local exchanges. Bell Telephone and AT&T merged in 1899, making New York City the “centre of the vast Bell telephone system.”<sup>10</sup>

AT&T was often criticized for operating in violation of Federal anti-trust rules. Faced with an investigation by the Interstate Commerce Commission, the company gave up ownership of the Western Union Telegraph Company in 1913. Nonetheless, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century AT&T controlled nearly all domestic and commercial phone service and rentals in the United States.

In 1974 the United States Department of Justice filed an antitrust suit against AT&T. A settlement was reached in January 1982 that required

AT&T to surrender all of its 22 local telephone subsidiaries, which were merged into seven independent companies known as “Baby Bells.”<sup>11</sup> The settlement took effect in January 1984, with the new headquarters almost complete.

As a patron of architecture, AT&T has had a notable history. From 1916 to 1984, it was headquartered at 195 Broadway (1912-16, 1920-22, William Welles Bosworth, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark). Filling an entire block, between Dey and Fulton Streets, this monumental neo-classical structure created an “impression of quality, durability, and permanence expressive of the telephone company’s commitment to public service.”<sup>12</sup> AT&T and its subsidiaries built the following New York City Landmarks: the Barclay-Vesey Building (1924), erected for New York Telephone and the AT&T Long Lines Building (1930), as well as the Long Island Headquarters of New York Telephone (1930) in Brooklyn. AT&T later commissioned works from architects Eero Saarinen and Max Abramowitz, as well as John Carl Warnecke & Associates, who designed the Long Lines Building at 33 Thomas Street. Completed in 1974, several years before Johnson/Burgee commenced work, this window-less structure has similar pinkish gray granite cladding.<sup>13</sup>

John D. deButts became AT&T’s board chairman and chief executive officer in 1972. Under his leadership, the Executive Policy Committee determined that a new headquarters was needed and steps were taken to acquire a midtown site.<sup>14</sup> An internal memo advised: “the selection of the Headquarters location is primarily a matter of executive judgment related to corporate image rather than an economic decision.”<sup>15</sup> While plans to relocate most of the staff in the “General Departments” to New Jersey were announced in 1970 and 1971, the company denied that it was “abandoning New York and running to the suburbs.”<sup>16</sup>

The city was in a deep fiscal crisis during the mid-1970s and AT&T executives believed a new headquarters:

. . . would receive a very favorable reaction from all quarters here in New York City and even in Albany and Washington. It would be a tremendous morale booster. We must not forget that New York City probably is the Bell System’s largest customer outside the Federal Government.”<sup>17</sup>

The same year construction plans were formally announced AT&T generated a record volume of business earnings, dividends, and capital expenditures.<sup>18</sup> With more than 900,000 employees and three million shareholders, it remained one of the most prosperous corporations in the nation.<sup>19</sup>

These were, however, uneasy times for AT&T and it was difficult to know what lay ahead. DeButts retired in February 1979. Under his successor, Charles L. Brown, there was diminished enthusiasm for the project and talk of halting construction. AT&T determined that it was too late to change course, fearing that such a reversal would be “ruinous for the company’s image.”<sup>20</sup>

### Selecting the Site and Architects

Several midtown locations were considered before selecting Madison Avenue as the site for the new headquarters. The first parcel, an assemblage of seven properties, was acquired in late 1974, followed by two small abutting properties in 1975. Located to the west, the latter lots were used to square the site and “gain zoning code rights to construct an additional 75,000 square feet of building space.”<sup>21</sup>

Fifteen structures occupied the 36,800-square-foot site, many of which were built in the late 19th century as four- or five-story residential

structures. According to *New York* magazine, up until the 1970s the scale of the block remained “unusually human” for midtown. Most of the buildings had been converted to retail use by the mid-20th century, adding storefronts to the lower facades. The building at 558 Madison Avenue (1927, demolished) had a gable that suggested a broken pediment. When Johnson was asked in 1998 if this element had inspired the tower’s design, he dismissed the idea, saying “there is nothing very interesting about a broken pediment.”<sup>22</sup> The first demolition permits were approved in early 1976. Despite such actions, the project was delayed and an interim use, such as a park or a taxpayer, was briefly considered.

Johnson and Burgee both remembered expressing little initial interest in the AT&T commission. A questionnaire was sent by the selection committee to 25 “highly qualified” firms, but they ignored or overlooked it. Stanley W. Smith, who headed AT&T Resource Management (earlier known as 195 Broadway Corporation), visited eight firms and chose three finalists: Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates; Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum; and Johnson/Burgée.<sup>23</sup>

Following presentations to the Executive Policy Committee on June 16, 1977, newspapers reported that Johnson/Burgée had been selected. Johnson told *The New York Times* that he envisioned a “landmark headquarters, hopefully for this generation what the Seagram Building was for a generation ago.”<sup>24</sup>

Harry Simmons, Jr. (1943-94) was chosen to be associate architect. In 1972, the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, prohibiting discrimination in the workplace. In response, AT&T required Johnson/Burgée to select a minority firm as its associate. Twenty-eight firms were considered for the position and seven were interviewed.<sup>25</sup> A graduate of Howard University (‘66) and Pratt Institute (M. Arch, ‘69), Simmons

established his firm in circa 1969. This small African-American practice was unanimously selected to perform 20 percent of the architectural functions, including work on the public spaces and interiors.<sup>26</sup> According to Burgee, Simmons attended all meetings and produced many construction drawings.<sup>27</sup> In New York City, works by Simmons Architects include an apartment complex for the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (c. 1975) in Brooklyn, Medgar Evers College (1988) in Brooklyn, the St. Albans Baptist Church (1990) in Queens, and the Allen African American Methodist Episcopal Cathedral (1997) in Queens.

### A “Vote” for New York City

1978 would prove to be an auspicious year for New York City. After two decades of major corporations leaving for the suburbs, AT&T, as well as IBM and Phillip Morris, made commitments to stay and erect new headquarters. AT&T’s building was planned for senior officers and staff, as well as groups involved in issues related to administration, finance, planning, public relations and legal matters. In preliminary estimates, it would hold 700 employees, with the potential for as many as 1,500.<sup>28</sup>

Numerous newspaper articles were devoted to the project, including a January 1978 editorial in *The New York Times* which described it, along with the IBM Building at 590 Madison Avenue (Edward Larrabee Barnes, 1983), as “a declaration of corporate commitment” and “two towering votes” for the city.<sup>29</sup>

Plans were officially announced at City Hall on March 30, 1978. The press conference made first-page news in *The New York Times*, with a rendering of the office tower prominently displayed in the top left corner. Edward I. Koch, the new mayor, attended, as did deButts, Johnson and Burgee. Koch said the project was “of great importance to New York City’s economic growth and stability, as well as to our prestige as the undisputed communications

capital of the world.”<sup>30</sup> The newspaper’s architecture critic Paul Goldberger reviewed the design the same day, in the first of many articles he would publish on the project and its design. Though construction had yet to begin, Goldberger proclaimed it “post-modernism’s major monument.”<sup>31</sup>

## Construction

In December 1978, construction commenced. A 50-foot-deep pit was dug through solid rock for the reinforced concrete foundations.<sup>32</sup> Frank Briscoe Company was construction manager, in association with William Crow Construction (est. 1840) and HRH Construction (formerly Starrett Construction). About 450-500 workers were employed, representing 70 trades.<sup>33</sup> *Inc.* magazine reported that there were “three dozen powerful prime contractors and 150 subcontractors and suppliers, most of which were small companies.”<sup>34</sup>

Bethlehem Steel of Pennsylvania supplied the structural steel, which began to rise in March 1980. By the end of the year, the entrance arch facing Madison Avenue was “beginning to take shape.”<sup>35</sup> Workers began to attach the granite panels in September 1981 and a “topping out” ceremony took place on November 18, 1981.

The structural engineer was Leslie E. Robertson, who worked on the World Trade Center (1966-73), as well as the 1978 repair of Citicorp Center (1973-78, a New York City Landmark). He claimed: “No steel-frame building in the history of construction [had] ever supported so much granite.” To lessen the potential of a “progressive failure,” the strength of the mounting apparatus needed to be substantially increased.<sup>36</sup>

With 75 percent of the construction complete, the “Spirit of Communication,” a 24-foot-tall statue by Evelyn Beatrice Longman, was removed from the roof of 195 Broadway to the new headquarters’ entrance lobby on Madison Avenue. More than a year and a half behind schedule, the

building was reportedly \$40 million over budget.<sup>37</sup>

Staff began to occupy the upper part of the tower on July 29, 1983.<sup>38</sup> Two months later, on September 27, 1983, the lobby statue was “unveiled” and the building was “unofficially” opened with Mayor Koch in attendance.<sup>39</sup> At this time, AT&T claimed: “on initial occupancy we will have 1,379 people.”<sup>40</sup> Only three floors, however, were filled by the end of the year and it cannot be determined whether such occupancy forecasts were ever met.

After more than five years of planning and construction, *The New York Times* reported that on January 1, 1984 – the same day that the “consent decree” between AT&T and the Department of Justice went into effect – the building would be “fully occupied.”<sup>41</sup> With the breakup making newspaper headlines, there was little cause for celebration and the actual end of construction went mostly unpublicized and unnoticed.

In February 1984, the building was described as “still unfinished . . . and won’t be completely done until May.”<sup>42</sup> The total cost of construction was more than \$200 million, equaling about \$200 per square foot, or about twice the average for office space in major American cities.<sup>43</sup>

## Design and Inspiration

Johnson/Burgee conceived the AT&T Corporate Headquarters as a “statement” building – a solid stone structure with a recognizable top and base. To accomplish this, they studied the Manhattan skyline and what gave buildings a strong identity. Burgee recalled that the most memorable examples – the Woolworth, New York Life, Chrysler and Empire State buildings – all had a “presence on the ground and a presence in the sky.”<sup>44</sup>

From the outset, Johnson/Burgee compared the building to masterpieces of the American Renaissance and Art Deco eras, using old-fashioned terms like “loggia” and “arcade” to evoke earlier times. Though the decision to employ conspicuous

references from earlier buildings surprised contemporary observers, it also complemented AT&T's corporate culture, which valued reliability and caution. Johnson told *Bell Telephone* magazine:

We looked at the great architecture in New York and we felt that the AT&T design should recall the buildings that gave New York City its architectural greatness . . . It is the greatest company in America. Ma Bell and The Flag. It's like America, So we felt the AT&T Building should be conservative, yet not reactionary. Conservative in a positive, forward-looking way. It represented greater values than a glass box.<sup>45</sup>

To develop their scheme the architects met with AT&T executives, many of whom were critical of glass-clad buildings. DeButts said he wanted "something that both AT&T and the City would be proud of," not an "aluminum and glass museum." J. S. Cave, Vice President of the Steering Committee, "did not like the World Trade Center Towers" and felt the "headquarters should be distinctive and not "the little building next to IBM." Francis E. Wetzel, Vice President of Personnel, "expressed a personal dislike for "glass boxes" and warned them "against being too conservative and stodgy. The building should not appear to have been designed by an engineer, but should be imaginative." And Charles L. Brown, who was chief executive officer when the building was completed, "expressed a preference for stone buildings, but wondered if they were appropriate in today's age . . . It should be outstanding and easily differentiated from other buildings, but not "freakish."<sup>46</sup>

Johnson/Burgee probably studied 195 Broadway, where AT&T had its headquarters from

1916 to 1983. 195 Broadway is a mostly granite-clad building with classical-style features that, until the ground floor lobby was altered in 2016, had almost no retail space – only rows of outsized marble columns that created a somber environment that felt more like a shrine or civic structure than a commercial building. The arcades in the base of the new headquarters on Madison Avenue were intended to be similarly monumental. Divided by tall granite piers, the only stores were kiosks adjacent to the covered pedestrian space. In meetings with the architects, deButts expressed opposition to ground level retail space because "shops could interfere with the AT&T identity on the street."<sup>47</sup>

Classical motifs are featured in many of Johnson's early designs. The interior of his New Canaan guest house (1953) has vaults inspired by 19th-century British architect John Soane, and many of his 1960s buildings include rows of columns and arches. In 1964, more than a decade before the AT&T commission, he told Ada Louise Huxtable:

I call myself a traditionalist, although I have fought against tradition all of my life . . . I like to be buttoned onto tradition. The thing is to improve it, twist it and mold it; to make something new of it. The riches of history can be plucked at any point.<sup>48</sup>

No single work or period of architecture seems to have influenced the office tower's design. Johnson told writer Hilary Lewis he was "looking at early Romanesque" and "McKim," meaning works by the architects McKim, Mead & White.<sup>49</sup> The tall round entrance arch has proportions that suggest 11th-century French Romanesque churches, while the original configuration of the base, combining the arch with arcades, recalls various Italian Renaissance buildings, which inspired the original entrance to

Pierpont Morgan's library (1902-07) on East 36th Street, and the Guastavino tile arcade beneath the Municipal Building (1907-14). Both of these New York City Landmarks were designed by McKim, Mead & White.

Johnson/Burgee also looked at 1920s buildings. For instance, the entrance resembles the Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Building (Miller & Pflueger, 1924-25) in San Francisco, where Johnson/Burgee had several concurrent commissions. This building features a similar, albeit Gothic, lobby window flanked by arched side passages. Johnson also expressed admiration for Raymond Hood, architect of the Chicago Tribune Building (with John Howells, 1924) and many Art Deco-style skyscrapers in New York City.<sup>50</sup> Hood's influence is felt in the fenestration, which accentuates the building's height and verticality.

But architecture critics discerned further influences. Goldberger, who published the first review, introduced the term "Chippendale skyscraper." He later credited it to Arthur Drexler, architecture curator at the Museum of Modern Art, who used it in an "informal conversation" because the pediment resembled "nothing so much as the top of a grandfather's clock or a Chippendale highboy."<sup>51</sup>

Goldberger also noted a resemblance to the Basilica of Sant'Andrea (begun 1472) in Mantua, Italy, while subsequent writers compared the base to the Pazzi Chapel (1443) in Florence. Turning the corner onto East 55th and 56th Streets, three circular openings punctuate the lower facade. The telescoping voids recall the oculi that ring the dome and upper facade of Florence Cathedral (1436), while the covered pedestrian space at the rear of the building was, from the start, described as a "galleria," evoking late 19th-century commercial arcades in Italy.<sup>52</sup>

The 37-story office tower has a 200-by-100-foot footprint that occupies about half the site. Just

shy of 650 feet, it rises from the sidewalk without setbacks, a significant aspect of the design. Because it was placed on the east half of the site, with the covered pedestrian space and annex to the west, each facade is freestanding, making the rhythmic interplay of granite and glass especially important above the base. The symmetrical tripartite division of the facades places a strong emphasis on the shaft-like office floors. Johnson/Burgee considered various arrangements, including designs with single and multiple arches, continuous and punched windows, and a combination of both.

As constructed, the east and west facades are identical above the base, with the wide center section flanked by narrower bays and solid corners. The center section has eight windows. It is the same width as the entrance arch and the opening in the pediment, allowing the Madison Avenue facade to read as a continuous composition. To either side of the center bay are three groups of four windows, flanked by a wide single window that marks the corners of the facade. Divided by thick ashlar piers and thin mullions, all but the uppermost floors have granite spandrels. Though the architects originally wanted mullions with curved profiles, for budgetary reasons square mullions were substituted.

At the top, the nine-bay configuration is maintained but the fenestration differs. While the center bay has thin piers, the outer bays have granite columns and more glass – similar to many mid-20th century office buildings. This may have been done to set the executive floors apart from the rest of the building, or to highlight the types of glazed curtain walls that Johnson/Burgee were abandoning. Architect-critic Michael Sorkin perceived the sharp contrast between granite and glass as deliberate. He wrote that the tower resembled a "tarted up" version of the Seagram Building, calling the stonework:

. . . a graceless attempt to disguise what is really just the same old

building by cloaking it in this week's drag and by trying to hide behind the reputations of the blameless dead . . . Johnson, though, has totally substituted décor for design, yielding in AT&T no more than a decorated slab, little different than the despised modern buildings it purports to confound. AT&T is the Seagram Building with ears."<sup>53</sup>

On East 55th and 56th Streets the facades are identical. Ninety feet wide, the six vertical bays are divided by continuous granite piers. Near the top, triple-height bays frame rectangular glass grids. In contrast to the east and west facades, there are no granite columns and the windows appear flush with the granite curtain wall.

### Stonework

Granite is a key element in the building's design. In a city where most skyscrapers have smooth light-colored masonry or shiny glass skins, it was a significant (and expensive) choice. Not only was the pinkish-gray color unusual but according to journalist Craig Unger it was the "first decision made toward evoking an earlier time."<sup>54</sup>

AT&T stipulated that only American materials could be used.<sup>55</sup> Of ten quarries considered, the finalists were from Texas and Connecticut, which delivered sample slabs to the site for comparison. Ultimately, Stony Creek granite was selected, a stone from Branford, Connecticut, that was finished at a plant near Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>56</sup> Many well-known structures in New York City are faced with this material, including the base of the Statue of Liberty, parts of Grand Central Terminal and buildings at Columbia University. Castellucci & Sons Inc., owners of the quarry, "invested \$1 million in new equipment – more than the previous year's sales . . . cutting 60,000 pieces of granite, some

weighing as much as 7,000 pounds."<sup>57</sup>

Johnson claimed "no other stones were considered" and Ritchie said it had "more character, more life, richness to it" than granite found elsewhere. Burgee, however, told *The New York Times* that the color was "chosen to contrast with the gray-green facade of the IBM Building."<sup>58</sup> Johnson had used stone skins in various high-profile commissions, such as the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art (1961) in Texas, the Boston Public Library Addition (1972, with Architects Design Group), and the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library at New York University (1972, with Richard Foster).

Thermal performance was also taken into account. At the time, Johnson said: "the heat loss from [glass] curtain walls is too great and the price of aluminum has probably more than doubled in the last few years."<sup>59</sup> Whereas most buildings erected after the Second World War had floor-to-ceiling windows, glass covers only a third of the tower's exterior. This was important during the late 1970s oil crisis when buildings like Citicorp Center were planned to reduce energy use. In fact, because the AT&T Building had less glass than many recent buildings and an innovative heat recovery system, Johnson boasted it would be "the most energy efficient structure in New York City."<sup>60</sup> Such concerns, however, did not remain front and center and subsequent articles rarely mentioned it.

The granite was given a rough textured flame finish. In the lower part of the facade, it comes down to the ground and is treated to appear load bearing – especially compared to the granite panels on the IBM Building. Seemingly built of solid blocks rather than a sleek veneer, it covers most of the exterior, highlighting the thickness of the deep-cut arches, oculi, piers, and windows.<sup>61</sup>

Judith Grinberg and Howard W. Swenson helped develop the architectural details. Grinberg, who earlier worked with Skidmore Owings & Merrill, used Johnson's preliminary sketches to

“interpret his design intent.” In addition to working on the interiors, she produced the seven-foot-tall presentation drawing now in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.<sup>62</sup>

Swenson was an architect-draftsman who worked with Bertram Goodhue, Harrison & Abramowitz and I.M. Pei. Susan Doubliet wrote in *Progressive Architecture*:

The success of the carved granite at the entrance level is no accident . . . [Swenson] help[ed] them achieve a satisfying sequence of shapes and moldings. In some cases, styrofoam models were prepared, and reworked, and redone.”<sup>63</sup>

Such architectural details were considerably more prominent before the 1992-94 alterations that enclose some of the stone arches, arcades and passages.

### **The Pediment**

The most recognizable feature is the colossal pediment that tops the office tower. Visible from the east and west, the 34-foot diameter, semi-circular opening extends the full depth of the tower. Called a split or broken pediment, Burgee said they added the opening to “make it distinctive,” while an AT&T spokesman described it as a “gently pitched triangle split at its peak by a concave hollow (best described, in sum, as an “orbicular”), [which] would convey to observers the individual character of this corporate structure.”<sup>64</sup>

Johnson understood the importance that rooftop features have on the Manhattan skyline. As a young man he experienced the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings rising from the ground in the early 1930s, as well as the nearby Citicorp Center (1973-78), which received substantial attention for its unusual sloping top. Johnson/Burgee had also recently completed Pennzoil Place (1976) in

Houston, Texas, a pair of glass office buildings with angled roofs. Johnson told deButts that “If we don’t do something very striking on the top, you won’t know your building is up there.”<sup>65</sup>

Johnson/Burgee chose an architectural element with clear outlines that could be easily recognized. The dimensions of the roof are relatively small, too shallow for a dome or pyramid, but it was perfect for a pitched pediment.<sup>66</sup> Johnson explained the sloping shape in visual terms, saying:

We felt that a pediment, by raising the middle higher, was the only way to unify the verticality and symmetry of the facade. Perhaps one could put a tower there, but we were classicizing, and this was clearly the most classical solution.”<sup>67</sup>

The scheme was presented to AT&T’s Executive Policy Committee and Board of Directors in late 1977. Most of the executives supported Johnson/Burgee’s design. Vice President Edward M. Block recalled:

When we first saw the design, we really liked it. But we just hadn’t focused on the pediment. Initially, it didn’t strike us as being odd, and it wasn’t a big issue until others made it one. Then we had to reconsider it. I don’t think we would ever have imposed our will on Philip. But we had to look at the alternatives.”<sup>68</sup>

Possibilities considered included pediments with slender vertical notches and different-shaped holes, as well as a stepped gable with a curved peak.<sup>69</sup>

Split and broken pediments originated in late Classical and Hellenistic times. Revived in Italy during the Mannerist and Baroque eras, they

frequently appear on Georgian and American Colonial-era doorways, particularly in New England. Such pediments have sloping or curved sides and openings that sometimes display urns, pineapples, and cartouches. Though Johnson said he was inspired by the so-called Treasury (or Khazneh) at Petra, Jordan,<sup>70</sup> he and Burgee may have also caught glimpses of earlier AT&T structures that incorporated this motif. For instance, there are delicate brass reliefs with scrolled decorations that resemble a broken pediment above many entrances to the company's former headquarters at 195 Broadway and its pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1939-40) had a concave corner entry with flat arches, piers, and curved walls that formed a similar outline in aerial views.

The pediment is trimmed with decorative copings. Fashioned from large granite blocks that contrast with the more delicate ashlar panels below, these projecting features not only catch the eye but cast a slim shadow, giving the pediment and disc-like opening greater prominence. Though earlier buildings incorporate this motif, it was probably the first instance that a pediment of any kind was placed on top of a skyscraper.

### **Madison Avenue Entrance and Public Spaces**

The entrance to the office tower is in the center of the Madison Avenue facade. Aligned with the curved opening in the roof pediment and having similar width, this deep attenuated round arch functions as a kind of forecourt. Approximately 116 feet tall, 50 feet wide and 20 feet deep, the granite side walls contain round arches that originally opened to arcades.

An early AT&T press release said the highly-visible entrance arch was designed to “give the building dominance and express a sense of dignity.”<sup>71</sup> Inside the arch, on the west wall, are two grandly-scaled openings. The round arch opening

faces the lobby, while the circular opening above it adjoins the “sky lobby” – the building’s original reception hall, which provided access to the office floors. Trimmed with rolled and stepped moldings, the windows within the openings have dark bronze mullions that recall the Seagram Building, which Johnson worked on and various AT&T executives praised. The surrounding wall has granite tiles arranged in a diamond pattern. The 70-foot tall lobby entrance originally framed views of the “Spirit of Communication” statue, which stood here until 1992. The circular “sky lobby” window complements the oculi on East 55th and 56th Streets, as well as the opening in the pediment.

The ground level was planned as “an open, street-level plaza.”<sup>72</sup> Johnson said:

We lifted the entire building six stories off the ground, leaving space below for pedestrians. The city liked that, and we got a more monumental building.<sup>73</sup>

The twin arcades, covered pedestrian space, and annex museum<sup>74</sup> were developed to support as-of-right bonuses and discretionary waivers from the City Planning Commission. Approved by the City Planning Commission in October 1978 and by the Board of Estimate in November 1978, these bonuses and waivers had a significant impact on the office tower's configuration and massing, allowing it to rise without setbacks, and without retail space on Madison Avenue.<sup>75</sup> Though the City Planning Commission had reservations about interrupting the flow of retail activity on Madison Avenue, the covered pedestrian space incorporated kiosks which, along with a proposed science museum in the annex, were intended to draw people into the arcades and toward the rear of the site. These public spaces generated an additional 104,000 square feet of floor area. In a building where most floors measure about

20,000 square feet, the tower is approximately five stories taller than structures on comparable sites.<sup>76</sup>

Because of these bonuses the City Planning Commission continues to exercise jurisdiction over the design and use of the various public spaces.

To increase pedestrian “flow” through the arcades, the lower walls of the office tower contain openings on all sides, which encouraged “convenient diagonal shortcuts to the side streets” and visual connections throughout the ground level.<sup>77</sup> On Madison Avenue the flat arches are 60 feet tall and approximately 20 feet wide, while the flat arches on the side streets are 16 feet tall and approximately 25 feet wide. The arcades, which are now enclosed retail space, were furnished with metal chairs and tables and had floor-to-ceiling granite walls and piers – architectural features that have been compared to hypostyle halls in ancient Egypt and Greece.

The block-long covered pedestrian space extends between the office tower and annex. Forty-foot wide, it has a white metal and glass vault that springs to a height of 100 feet. Burgee recalled that he wanted the vault to be “separate” from the office tower, not an “extension of the shaft or a projection of the building, [nor] a bustle tacked onto the back end.”<sup>78</sup> Originally open at both ends, it provided a clear visual connection to the IBM Building’s landscaped atrium, a covered pedestrian space that has entrances on Madison Avenue, East 56th and 57th Streets.

Floor area bonuses for public arcades were first adopted by the City Planning Commission in 1969, followed by an amendment for covered pedestrian spaces in 1970. A subsequent report described the latter category as “an efficient pedestrian circulation system and an attractive sheltered public space.”<sup>79</sup> Popular with urban planners and developers, such mid-block bonus spaces required special permits and were intended to ease crowding on adjacent sidewalks and shelter pedestrians from inclement weather.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Johnson/Burgee frequently used a glazed canopy or vault to bring light into public or common spaces. Johnson had proposed an “arching canopy” for New York University, covering Washington Place in 1964. Though this plan did not go forward, a number of Johnson/Burgee’s subsequent commissions would incorporate metal-and-glass roof enclosures, such as in Pennzoil Place (1976), the Crystal Cathedral (1980), the San Francisco Branch of Neiman Marcus, the United Bank of Colorado (1983) in Denver, and PPG Place (1984) in Pittsburgh.

Decorative paving was used throughout the arcades and covered pedestrian space. Possibly inspired by the English architect Edwin Lutyens, the color of the granite is light gray, charcoal, and red. Inside the arcades were diamonds and small octagons, while the covered pedestrian space has a continuous chevron pattern. Though most of this stonework is now inside the building or has been removed, small sections remain visible in the north and south passages, as well as beneath the display windows on Madison Avenue and outside the entrances to the covered pedestrian space.

When AT&T purchased the two west lots in 1975, it agreed to restrict the height of what would be built adjacent to the Corning Glass Building. The annex contains parking and service entrances at the north and south ends, as well as ground floor retail space. The top three levels originally contained the Bell System Communicade,”<sup>80</sup> which an AT&T executive described as “an exhibition of communications science and technology for the information age . . . a multi-media presentation on the nationwide communications network.”<sup>81</sup> Though AT&T wanted to abandon the plan in 1984 and use the annex as a commercial showroom, the city refused the request and Infoquest Center, a free museum operated by the company debuted in May 1986.<sup>82</sup>

## Reception

Few structures in New York City have attracted as much media attention as the AT&T Building. Conceived at a time when modernism was waning, it signaled a new direction in American architecture. Furthermore, following a period in which there had been relatively little new construction in Manhattan, it predicted a bright future for midtown.

Numerous articles addressed the project and its progress. The largest number was published in *The New York Times*, written by critics Paul Goldberger and Ada Louise Huxtable, as well as other reporters. Many articles owed a debt to Goldberger's initial review which described Johnson/Burgee's design as "the most provocative and daring – if disconcerting – skyscraper to be proposed for New York since the Chrysler Building." Not only was he first writer to publish the term "Chippendale skyscraper," but he expressed concern that it might be seen as a "joke" or part of an "historical game."<sup>83</sup> Huxtable, who mostly agreed with Goldberger, described the pediment as "an identifying symbol for the company and the architect."<sup>84</sup> These faintly skeptical reviews prompted a response from Johnson, who published an excerpt from his May 1978 speech to the American Institute of Architects in *Newsday*, followed by a similar op-ed piece in *The New York Times*.<sup>85</sup> He wrote that the still-to-be-built headquarters had "become a sort of symbol of our times, which surprises us very much."<sup>86</sup>

Outside New York City, the pediment garnered the most attention. Critic Paul Gapp wrote in *The Chicago Tribune* that Johnson had "caused a national uproar" and "made instant history," while the Atlanta architect-developer John Portman said it was "totally inappropriate and can't possibly succeed."<sup>87</sup> *The Baltimore Sun*, however, considered it a positive step, observing: "If this thing catches on, we may look for peaks, spires, and all that to grace the downtown of Baltimore of the future."<sup>88</sup> *The*

*Washington Post* critic Wolf von Eckardt saw it in broad yet positive terms, writing that Johnson "may well unite contemporary architecture again and lead it out of both the glass box and the concrete sculpture to a new ecumenic gentility."<sup>89</sup>

*Time* magazine published a photo of Johnson raising a model of the tower on its cover in January 1979, accompanied by an essay titled "Doing Their Own Thing | U.S. architects: goodbye to glass boxes and all that." In the conclusion, critic Robert Hughes speculated about the AT&T building's long-term significance, calling it "peculiar rather than radical," an "enormous pastiche" and an example of "high-camp, post-Pop irony." Ultimately, he believed what was most important was the "degree of validity" that a leading corporation like AT&T offered to the Postmodernism style and the "permission it [would] grant other architects."<sup>90</sup>

As the building neared completion, a second wave of articles appeared. A two-part feature story in *New York* magazine, titled "Tower of Power" and "The Extraordinary Saga Of the AT&T Building" was published in November 1982. These in-depth articles document the project's gestation, as well as the impact of the corporation's legal problems.

In September 1983, Goldberger wrote that the finished results were "something of an anticlimax."<sup>91</sup> Though he was disappointed by some elements, he acknowledged its "importance to this moment in architectural history." Goldberger was especially impressed by the facade's physical qualities, particularly the "rich, sensuous, strong" stonework at ground level. He felt that the building was:

. . . a pleasure to walk past, to walk under, to walk through, to touch and to look at. It is unusually well made; there is craftsmanship here of a sort that is commonly thought to have died out years ago. Even where its details are awkward or its design

unsure, it fills one with a sense of architectural possibility.<sup>92</sup>

Ellen Posner, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* questioned many of the early reviews. Citing various architects, she claimed that “some of the original negative votes have been recast as positive” and that the quality of materials and level of craftsmanship could not be fully appreciated prior to construction.<sup>93</sup>

Within the postmodern movement, the significance of Johnson/Burgee’s design has rarely been questioned. Burgee recalled that he received many letters from practicing architects, some thanking him “for changing their career and making the previous rules no longer apply.”<sup>94</sup>

The revival of recognizable architectural motifs was still relatively novel in the early 1980s, and writers remarked how the pediment and entrance arch gave the tower a somewhat “cartoonish” air. Historian William Curtis regretted Johnson/Burgee’s use of “historical quotations,” remarking that these features were “no doubt symptomatic of a pressure to treat architecture as a marketing device.”<sup>95</sup>

Johnson was an influential tastemaker for more than fifty years. As writer and curator he helped launch 20<sup>th</sup>-century modern architecture and the International Style and with Burgee ushered in the postmodern era. Critic-historian Reyner Banham wrote in August 1984:

All New York knows the building has a ‘Chippendale Top,’ and has accepted it as a classic New York skyscraper already . . . Johnson, has, so to speak, killed off his most famous offspring . . . By giving AT&T a cresting that New York did not already know, Johnson gave notice that tops of skyscrapers will not be subject to historical rules but are open to reinterpretation.<sup>96</sup>

A milestone in the history of 20th-century architecture, arguably no survey of the era can be published without addressing the AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building.

### **Sony Years**

Because of the anti-trust decision, AT&T never fully occupied the office tower and began to relocate in 1987. Company revenues had been “disappointing” since the divestiture and most of the headquarters staff was moved to Basking Ridge, New Jersey.<sup>97</sup> Though officials said it would “maintain a presence” in the building, it is not clear how many staff members actually remained and for how long. In May 1991, AT&T agreed to lease the building (with a purchase option) to Sony USA, manufacturer of consumer electronics and entertainment. Since AT&T had received a 10-year property tax abatement, valued at \$42 million, from the Industrial and Commercial Incentive Board, it was required to return \$14.5 million to New York City.<sup>98</sup>

Sony hired Gwathmey Siegel & Associates to redesign the base, creating two stores for Sony products where the arcades had originally been located, and enclosing the covered pedestrian space behind the tower. Because of the zoning bonuses, the City Planning Commission was required to review and sign-off on the redesign. The changes were approved in 1992, with modifications in 1994. These public spaces remain under jurisdiction of the City Planning Commission.

Goldberger wrote that “once built, these spaces turned out to be noisy, windy and dark” and that the redesign was “unquestionably an improvement.” Even Johnson, who served as a consultant, conceded that the arcades had been “kind of cold and dark.”<sup>99</sup> Johnson recalled: “I was only asked about closing in the plaza. That’s what they were interested in because they knew that would have an impact on the public.”<sup>100</sup> Still, Sony’s redesign was controversial. Associate architect Harry

Simmons Jr. criticized the changes, saying: “To bring back the commercial to the street edge destroys what is a valued and useful place,” and planner/community board member Joseph B. Rose felt that converting the base to retail use would “set a dangerous precedent.”<sup>101</sup>

More than half the area in the arcades was converted to retail use by installing gridded bronze windows in the tall flat arches that face Madison Avenue and in the round side arches that flank the main entrance. Arranged as a vertical grid, the dark bronze mullions were based on the original infill in the west wall of the entrance arch. These new windows were deliberately recessed from the facade, leaving the sides of the granite piers visible.

At the north and south ends of the Madison Avenue facade, the low flat arches were left open, leaving a pair of east-west passages that contain the original granite piers and paving, as well as new display windows.

Renamed Sony Plaza, the covered pedestrian space at the rear of the tower was enclosed at both ends, creating an air-conditioned atrium. The Sony Wonder Technology Lab, located in the annex, debuted in May 1994.<sup>102</sup> The new shops and museum were designed by Edwin Schlossberg Inc. Though some observers praised the alterations, others, including Manhattan Borough President Ruth W. Messinger, thought the reconfigured spaces were “overly commercial,” with far too many references to Sony and its products.<sup>103</sup>

Sony consolidated about 1,400 employees in the office tower.<sup>104</sup> Purchased by Sony in 2002, *The New York Post* described it as an “icon” and “one of the city’s finest structures.”<sup>105</sup> Placed on the “auction block” in 2012, it was acquired by Joseph Chetrit and David Bistricher. Sony remained a tenant until 2016, when the building was sold to the Olayan Group.

## Conclusion

The AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building is an icon of the Manhattan skyline. Designed by Johnson/Burgee, in association with Simmons Architects, construction began in late 1978 and was completed in early 1984. The 37-story office tower was the world’s first Postmodern skyscraper. Distinguished by handsome yet playful classical elements, it was commissioned during the financial crisis of the 1970s when it was described as both a “vote” for New York and “one of the city’s most controversial buildings.” Though alterations to the ground level have substantially changed the character of the various public spaces, the handsomely-executed pinkish-gray granite facades look much as they originally did, from the round and flat arches at the base to the peak of the tower’s colossal pediment.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Scrapping the Sky: The Eternal Architect,” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1992; “550 Madison Avenue: A Conversation,” *Bell Telephone Magazine* (Autumn 1978), 4. Edward Oxford, the magazine’s managing editor, interviewed Johnson, Burgee, and Simmons.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hughes, “Doing Their Own Thing,” *Time* (January 8, 1978), 53.

<sup>3</sup> This quote was excerpted from a speech that Johnson presented to the American Institute of Architects. A slightly different version appeared in *The New York Times* on December 28, 1978. See “After This, Things May Never Look The Same,” *Newsday*, November 12, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Hilary Lewis and John O’Connor, *Philip Johnson: The Architect In His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994) 104.

<sup>5</sup> “550 Madison Avenue: A Conversation,” 4.

<sup>6</sup> “A Graceful Move Upstairs,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> “Philip Johnson: Not So Silent Partner,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> “Design Flaw: Noted Architects’ Firm Falls Apart in Fight Over Control, Clients – Aging Philip Johnson Ousted By a Younger Partner, Who Lands in Chapter 11 – Beginning Over Again at 86,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 1992. This article appeared on page one.

<sup>9</sup> “American Telephone & Telegraph Company Building Designation Report,” prepared by Gail Harris, (Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP-2198, 2006), 2.

<sup>10</sup> “The Bell Telephone Deal,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1899.

<sup>11</sup> “U.S. Settles Phone Suit, Drops I.B.M. Case, AT&T To Split Up, Transforming Industry,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> “American Telephone & Telegraph Company Building Designation Report,” 1.

<sup>13</sup> See illustration of 33 Thomas Street in “Granite Challenges Glass on Facades,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> This committee included the chairman, president, vice chairman, executive vice presidents, general counsel and assistant to the chairman. See “Inside Bell’s Executive Suite,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 1979. The New York Telephone Company had recently built a 650-foot

headquarters at 1095 Sixth Avenue (1972-74), opposite Bryant Park. Designed by Kahn & Jacobs, the original facade was white marble and glass.

<sup>15</sup> 195 Broadway Corporation, letter to deButts, March 13, 1972, AT&T Archives and History Center, Warren, New Jersey. Signature illegible.

<sup>16</sup> “AT&T Confirms Real Estate Deals On Both Coasts,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1970; “AT&T is Planning Rise in Jobs Here,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> S.W. Smith to J. D. deButts, August 5, 1975, memorandum, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>18</sup> *Annual Report for 1978* (American Telephone & Telegraph, 1979), 5.

<sup>19</sup> “550 Madison Avenue: Story of a Skyscraper,” “special insert, *Bell Telephone Magazine* (Autumn 1978), 3. In 1981, AT&T was described as the world’s largest corporation in terms of assets but not in terms of gross revenue, which it ranked fifth. See “AT&T Earnings Rose By 22% in 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 1981.

<sup>20</sup> Carleton Knight III, “Significant Clients: Ma Bell Builds Big,” *Architecture: The AIA Journal* (July 1983), 64.

<sup>21</sup> 195 Broadway Corporation to W. L. Lindholm, April 7, 1975, acquisition proposal, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>22</sup> “Streetscapes/William Van Alen,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> The selection committee initially favored Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Kevin Roche, followed by I. M. Pei. Johnson/Burgee placed 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>, in a tie with Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum. See “Architectural Selection Review,” n.d., (c. 1976), AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>24</sup> “Notes on People,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1977.

<sup>25</sup> Earlier in the decade, AT&T was repeatedly charged with violations of federal and state laws against workplace discrimination. In fact, due to such charges in 1970 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission petitioned the Federal Communications Commission to “reject a massive long distance telephone rate increase.” See <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/milestones/1970.html>.

<sup>26</sup> T. E. Bolger, letter to Brown, September 1, 1977, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>27</sup> John Burgee, phone conversation with author, February 8, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> “550 Madison Avenue: Story of a Skyscraper,” 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Plans were filed with the Department of Buildings in January 1978 (NB 22-78). “Two Towering Votes for New York City,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1978. *The Wall Street Journal* similarly called it a “vote of Confidence.” See “American Telephone Officially Airs Plans For Its New Building,” March 31, 1978, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Carroll, “AT&T to Build New Headquarters Tower at Madison and 55<sup>th</sup> Street,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 1978.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Goldberger, “A Major Monument of Post-Modernism,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> “The Skyscraper Business: Getting Off The Ground,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 1979. This article discusses the site and contains a photograph of the excavations.

<sup>33</sup> Craig Unger, “The Extraordinary Saga Of the AT&T Building, Part 2,” *New York*, November 22, 1982, 51, 54. The first part, published November 15, 1982, featured the headline “Tower of Power.”

<sup>34</sup> Gerald Lanson, “The AT&T Building in Manhattan,” *Inc.* (May 1986), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Goldberger, “New Madison Avenue Buildings, A New New York,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 1980.

<sup>36</sup> Unger, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Unger, 54.

<sup>38</sup> *AT&T News*, June 14, 1983, 1, AT&T Archive and History Center.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Goldberger, “AT&T Bldg, A Harbinger of a New Era,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> “Questions and Answers,” September 27, 1983, memorandum, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>41</sup> Goldberger, “AT&T Bldg, A Harbinger of A New Era.”

<sup>42</sup> “AT&T Hones Home,” *New York* (February 27, 1984), 30, viewed at googlebooks.com

<sup>43</sup> Lanson, 25.

<sup>44</sup> John Burgee, phone conversation with author, April 30, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> “550 Madison Avenue: A Conversation,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> These meetings took place between July 13 and July 22,

1977. Summaries of the discussions were viewed at AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>47</sup> DeButts, Minutes, July 15, 1977, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>48</sup> “He Adds Elegance To Modern Architecture,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1964.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis & O’Connor, 104.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 153.

<sup>51</sup> Though the 1978 review mentions “one architect,” in a January 2018 email to the author, Goldberger said it was Drexler who first used the term but did not want it attributed to him. Burgee also confirmed this in *Architecture* (July 1983), 64.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes, August 31, 1977 meeting at the office of Johnson/Burgee, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Sorkin, “Philip Johnson: The Master Builder As a Self-Made Man,” originally published in the *Village Voice* (October 20, 1978), reprinted in *Exquisite Corps*, 12, viewed at googlebooks.

<sup>54</sup> Unger, 51.

<sup>55</sup> Burgee, conversation with author.

<sup>56</sup> “Quarry Is In the Pink,” *The Hartford Courant*, July 31, 1986, C4.

<sup>57</sup> Lanson, 25.

<sup>58</sup> “A \$75 Million, 41-Story Prism for IBM,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 1978.

<sup>59</sup> “Quarries Cutting More Granite for Skyline,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1979.

<sup>60</sup> Carroll.

<sup>61</sup> According to Burgee, the architects used thicker stone so that the columns would read as solid and the corners were notched to show the depth. Phone conversations with author.

<sup>62</sup> Glenn Adamson, “Tower of Power,” (2010), viewed at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/sketch-product/tower-power>.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Doubliet, “Not Enough Said,” *Progressive Architecture* (February 1984), 70.

<sup>64</sup> Burgee conversations with author; AT&T Press release, not dated.

<sup>65</sup> Lewis and O’Connor, 110.

<sup>66</sup> Burgee, conversations with author.

<sup>67</sup> Unger, “Extraordinary Saga,” 52.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> Five examples were published in *New York* magazine in November 1982.

<sup>70</sup> Hilary Lewis, *The Architecture of Philip Johnson* (2002), 11.

<sup>71</sup> AT&T press release, not dated, probably 1978, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Unger, 52. In New York City, Roche Dinkeloo proposed to build a plaza beneath the Federal Reserve Building in 1969. Subsequent office buildings with similar outdoor spaces include 560 Lexington Avenue (Eggers Partnership, 1981) and 33 Maiden Lane (Johnson/Burgee, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> Early discussions of the building rarely use these terms. The spaces beneath the building were frequently called loggias and the covered pedestrian space was called either an arcade or galleria.

<sup>75</sup> The permits were modified in November 1984.

<sup>76</sup> The west part of the site was rezoned in 1984, reducing the approved floor area. For further information, see background memo supplied by Planning Commission in 2018.

<sup>77</sup> AT&T press release, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Burgee, phone conversation, April 30, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Jerold S. Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York Experience* (Wiley, 2000), 13.

<sup>80</sup> Many corporations incorporated museums into their headquarters in the 1960s. In 1969, AT&T considered building a “World Communications Center” adjacent to 195 Broadway, opposite the rising World Trade Center. A memo claimed that such an exhibit “would strengthen the relationship with the general public.” Memo, January 22, 1977, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>81</sup> “Remarks by Stanley W. Smith, Topping Out Ceremony,” November 18, 1981, AT&T Archives and History Center.

<sup>82</sup> “AT&T Planning Change in Pact With City For Museum At Tower,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1984; “AT&T In A Reversal, To Open Exhibition Space,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 1984; “AT&T Gets Its Tax Break For A Museum,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1984.

<sup>83</sup> Goldberger, “A Major Monument of Post-Modernism.”

<sup>84</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, “Johnson’s Latest – Clever Tricks or True Art?,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1978.

<sup>85</sup> Philip Johnson, “After This, Buildings May Never Look the Same,” *Newsday*, November 12, 1978; Philip Johnson, “Re-Building,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1978.

<sup>86</sup> Philip Johnson, “After This, Buildings May Never Look the Same.”

<sup>87</sup> “Chippendale” Architecture – near-kitsch or top drawer,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1978; “Architects Here Abhor Johnson AT&T Design,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1978.

<sup>88</sup> “Return of the Top,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1978.

<sup>89</sup> Wolf Von Eckardt, “Proposal for ‘Chippendale Skyscraper’ Upsets Modern Movement Architects,” *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1978.

<sup>90</sup> Hughes, “Doing Their Own Thing,” 6, viewed at Time.com.

<sup>91</sup> Goldberger, “AT&T Bldg: A Harbinger Of A New Era.”

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Ellen Posner, “Learning to Love Ma Bell’s New Building,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1983.

<sup>94</sup> Burgee phone conversations.

<sup>95</sup> William J. R. Curtis. *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition), 597.

<sup>96</sup> Reyner Banham, “Philip Johnson’s AT&T: The Post Post-Deco skyscraper,” *Architectural Review*, August 1984, viewed online.

<sup>97</sup> “AT&T Is Vacating Much of Its Tower,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 1987.

<sup>98</sup> “Sony Is Reportedly Near Deal to Lease AT&T Skyscraper,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1991; “The Office Market – The Gloom Persists On Offices,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> “Architecture View: Some Welcome Fiddling With Landmarks,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1992; “Remaking Spaces for Public Use,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 1992. Gwathmey Siegel’s first corporate commission was for AT&T, a 1977 office building in Parsippany, New Jersey. During the early 1990s, the firm was also completing an 8-story addition to the Guggenheim Museum (1984-92). “Plan Reduces Public Areas For a Tower,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1992; “Scraping the Sky: The Eternal Architect.”

<sup>100</sup> Lewis and O'Connor, 106.

<sup>101</sup> David W. Dunlap, "Remaking Spaces for Public Use," *The New York Times*, September 27, 1992.

<sup>102</sup> The Sony Technology Lab replaced the eight-level AT&T Info Quest Center, which following delays, opened in June 1986. In addition to galleries, this free museum contained a third-floor assembly space, seating 70 people.

<sup>103</sup> David W. Dunlap, "So Inviting, So ... Sony; Can a Public Plaza Be Too Corporate?," *The New York Times*, May 24, 1994.

<sup>104</sup> Claudia H. Deutsch, "Commercial Property: Sony's New Headquarters; Carving Chippendale Into the Sony Image," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1993.

<sup>105</sup> "AT&T Building Is Sold To Sony," *The New York Post*, April 10, 2002.

# Findings and Designation

## AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building (later Sony Plaza, now 550 Madison Avenue) has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and culture characteristics of New York City, as set forth in this designation report.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building (later Sony Plaza, now 550 Madison Avenue), 550 Madison Avenue (aka aka 550-570 Madison Avenue, 13-29 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street, 14-28 East 56<sup>th</sup> Street) and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10, as its Landmark Site.



**AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building**

West facade, from 55<sup>th</sup> Street

Sarah Moses, July 2018



**AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building**  
East facade, from 55<sup>th</sup> Street  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



East 55<sup>th</sup> Street, view east  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



East 55<sup>th</sup> Street passage, view west  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



**Madison Avenue and 55<sup>th</sup> Street**  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



**Madison Avenue**  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



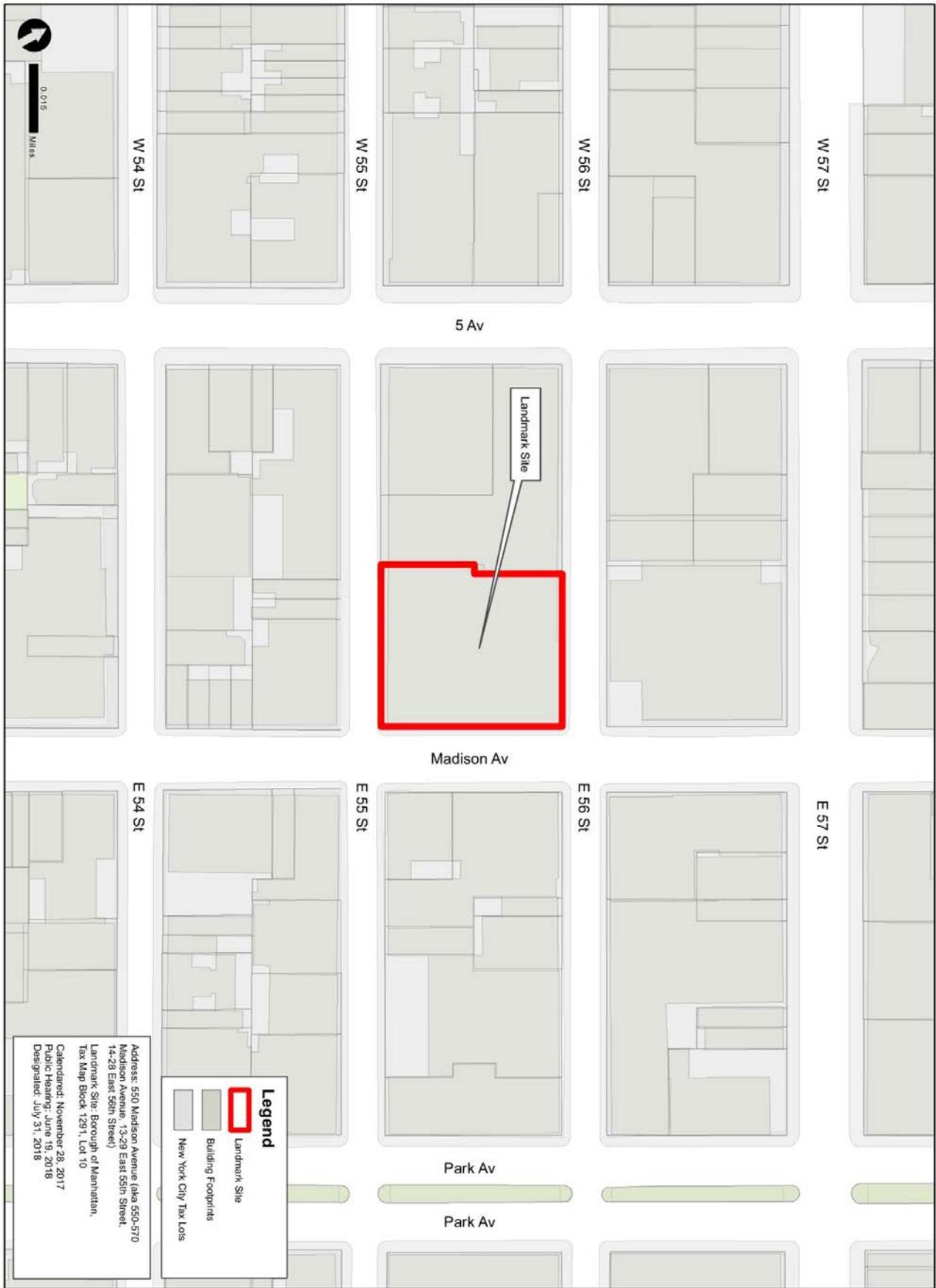
**Main entrance, Madison Avenue**  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



**East 56<sup>th</sup> Street**  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



**East 56<sup>th</sup> Street (north) facade**  
Sarah Moses, July 2018



Address: 550 Madison Avenue (aka 550-570 Madison Avenue, 13-29 East 55th Street, 14-28 East 56th Street)  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10  
 Calendarred: November 28, 2017  
 Public Hearing: June 19, 2018  
 Designated: July 31, 2018

**Legend**

- Landmark Site
- Building Footprints
- New York City Tax Lots