

LEVER HOUSE, 390 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1950-52; architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; Gordon Bunshaft, partner in charge and chief designer.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1289, Lot 36.

On February 9, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Lever House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing was continued to April 13, 1982 (Item No. 4) and again to June 8, 1982 (Item No. 2). All hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of eight witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the three hearings. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Statements have been received from the owners opposing designation. Other statements have been received supporting designation.

DESIGNATION AND ANALYSIS

Lever House, situated on the west side of Park Avenue between East 53rd Street and East 54th Street is a 24-story glass and stainless steel clad office building composed of a vertical slab rising above a horizontal base. Its construction in 1950-52 heralded the beginning of a new wave of American skyscraper construction and a new synthesis of modernist architectural ideals. Since the time of its completion, its crystalline forms and glazed curtain walls have attracted world attention. It has assumed a major role in the literature of modern architecture and has been widely recognized as a key monument in the evolution of the International Style.

Lever House also heralded the almost complete transformation of Park Avenue that took place in the years following 1952. The mile-long stretch of Park Avenue from the Grand Central complex to East 59th Street changed in a single decade from an avenue of traditional masonry apartment houses to one of glass and steel office buildings.

Lever House was the first New York real estate venture to take advantage of a zoning provision which permitted a building to rise with no setbacks provided that the building covered only 25 percent of the lot.¹ As a result, Lever House broke the tradition of "shaped tower" skyscrapers which had prevailed since the 1910s.

Lever House introduced many innovations into skyscraper design that were to be much imitated. The most obvious was the use of glass covering almost 100 percent of the visible facades, as well as an integrally designed window-washing mechanism to keep it clean. It also introduced the concept of opening a portion of the ground floor to public use and of providing an open courtyard at its base. This last feature was later to become, in the form of the open plaza, almost a standard component of New York office building development.

Above the ground floor the building serves solely to house the offices of the Lever Brothers Company, an American manufacturer of household products whose desire for a New York headquarters of outstanding design² resulted in a major architectural statement.

Lever Brothers Company

The Lever Brothers Company traces its American origins to 1888 when William Hesketh Lever (1851-1925), a British manufacturer of "Sunlight" soap, toured the

United States with the idea of expanding his company's markets abroad.³

Lever was a businessman from Lancashire, England, who became successful selling his patented line of soaps. Eventually he purchased a factory near Lancashire which enabled him to produce as well as to sell his products. In 1887 Lever founded Port Sunlight, a model company town on the Mersey River near Liverpool composed of manufacturing plant, business headquarters, workers housing, and support facilities. It was the first venture of the Lever Company to provide "the best in terms of design, construction and amenities"⁴ to its employees.

In 1890 the new soap venture was turned into a private company, and agencies were established in America, throughout the British Empire to sell Sunlight. In 1894 the private company gave way to a public company which became Lever Brothers Ltd. By 1900 Lever Brothers Ltd. had established factories in Australia, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.⁵

The original American factory, which was located near Boston, had been purchased by Lever himself during his 1888 tour. His exposure to America left a lasting impression on the founder of Lever Brothers. He purchased his company's first advertising slogan in Philadelphia, and was also impressed with the innovative nature of American packaging. Charles Wilson in History of Unilever, writes:

Lever Brothers Company in the United States was always "sui generis," Lever himself had been fascinated by the American scene. Many of his ideas on technology and marketing -- more especially advertising -- were by-products of his observations on his American journeys.⁶

In 1929 Lever Brothers Ltd. merged with a Dutch company, Margarine Unie. The resulting multi-national corporation was Unilever Ltd. (In the United States, the Unilever enterprises comprise Lever Brothers Company.) In the 1930s the transfer of Lever Brothers Ltd. from Port Sunlight to London signaled the transformation of a Lancashire soap business into an international enterprise.

In 1949, spurred in part by the success of the new synthetic detergent "Tide," Lever Brothers Company moved the center of its operations "from Boston into the brisker air of New York."⁷ The new president of Lever, Jervis J. Babb, was familiar with modern corporate architecture as he had worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's famous glass-towered Johnson's Wax building in Racine, Wisconsin, while vice-president of that company.⁸

Lever Brothers Company commissioned Skidmore, Owings & Merrill to design a modern headquarters for their exclusive use on Park Avenue and also commissioned from them a research facility and manufacturing plant in Edgewater, New Jersey,⁹ thus following the innovative tradition of Port Sunlight some 60 years earlier. The design of both these structures was assigned to the firm's principal New York designer, Gordon Bunshaft. Bunshaft, an American disciple of Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, was the firm's principal interpreter of the International Style. The very progressive concepts of Bunshaft were particularly well suited to the corporate image that Lever Brothers wanted to project. The company that had introduced to the American public such well known brand names as Lux, Lifebouy, Tide, etc., clearly wanted to convey an image of sparkling cleanliness and modernity. The International Style, which at that time was seen to symbolize production and modern living, found an enthusiastic corporate sponsor in Lever Brothers Company.

The Site

In 1815 the site of the present Lever House was part of a farm owned by Charles McEvers, whose house stood on the western end of his property near Fifth Avenue.¹⁰ His tract stretched from the imaginary line of Fifth Avenue to that of Fourth Avenue (later Park Avenue).

The history of Fourth Avenue, however, really begins with the advent of the railroads. In 1834 the New York and Harlem railroad first carried passengers along newly laid tracks down the center of Fourth Avenue from 42nd Street to 96th Street.¹¹ By 1848 the New Haven Railroad entered Manhattan along Fourth Avenue. Due to increased noise, smoke, and danger of fire and injury, the city government directed the railroads to depress the tracks along the avenue. As railroad traffic increased, more space was needed to lay additional tracks. By 1881 Fourth Avenue was widened to 140 feet. The trains ran in an open cut below grade south of 56th Street. On either side of the depressed tracks were 27-foot wide roadways and 15-foot wide sidewalks. North of 56th Street the tracks were partially covered over with a "beam tunnel"¹² consisting of raised planted malls running down the center of the boulevard. Within these planted malls open wells provided light and ventilation to the tracks below.

The overall effect of the landscaped "beam tunnels" was widely admired,¹³ although the smoke and noise must have poured out from the open wells. In 1888 Fourth Avenue officially became known as Park Avenue. A drawing of Park Avenue from the 1870s shows substantial brownstone residences lining the side streets off Park Avenue in the Fifties and Forties.¹⁴ Most of the structures facing on Park Avenue itself appear to be one- or two-story carriage houses or commercial buildings. By 1885, the block between 53rd and 54th Streets on the west side of Park Avenue was completely built up with four- and five-story buildings.¹⁵ South of 53rd Street were located manufacturing buildings such as the Steinway Piano Factory and the Schafer Brewery.

By 1905 all this had changed. In conjunction with the reconstruction of Grand Central Terminal, the street was taken up again and new excavations were begun that took the full width of Park Avenue. The buildings on either side had to be propped up on steel "needle beams" to prevent their collapse. New double stacked tracks were constructed under grade. The nature of the new cleaner electric trains made it possible to rebuild Park Avenue solidly with no open wells. A generous planted mall was built down the center of the avenue, and park benches were placed along a central walk. The new Grand Central Terminal opened in 1911, and thereafter Park Avenue changed gradually from an avenue of rowhouses, tenements, and larger commercial buildings to a thoroughfare lined with large apartment houses for the wealthy.

In 1928-29 the central mall was narrowed to accommodate more lanes of automobile traffic. In 1936 twenty rowhouses owned by Robert W. Goelet of the remaining 22 on the block between East 53rd and East 54th Streets west of Park Avenue were demolished.¹⁶ In their place were built a small commercial building with taxpayer type shops along Park Avenue and the Normandie movie theater fronting on East 53rd Street (see photograph). Both the theater and the one-story commercial building were designed in the Art Deco style. These two buildings were taken down in May 1950, as were the two remaining brownstones fronting on 54th Street. In their place were to rise the new offices of the Lever Brothers Company. Excavations for the new building began in August of 1950.¹⁷

In 1961, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock described the changes along Park Avenue that a visitor would encounter after a ten year absence:

If he knew the Park Avenue of the dozen blocks above 46th Street as it was before 1950 he will hardly recognize the scene. Of the older landmarks, St. Bartholomew's, several hotels, the Racquet Club, and two skyscrapers, the Ritz Tower and the Grand Central building - soon to be out-topped by the Pan American Building behind behind it - survive. But almost without exception the solid brick and stone blocks of the 'teens and twenties have been replaced by glazed curtain walls - in several cases literally so since the old internal structure has been retained.

If the visitor has the curiosity to ask, he will soon learn that this change began in 1951 with the construction of Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the first example of a tall curtain-walled business building.¹⁸

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (S.O.M.)

The firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was established in 1936 in Chicago by Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings. By 1950, in addition to the original headquarters, the firm had established offices in New York City, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon. Although the offices were managed individually, professional expertise was shared among them, and they possessed a common approach to building design and project management. Thus de-centralized, the firm despite its Chicago origins, has long been truly national;¹⁹ its works are generally considered as part of the whole rather than as the work of separate offices. It has been pointed out that the national character of S.O.M. is as much a twentieth-century phenomenon as the architecture. Only in an age of rapid air travel could architects and specialists supervise concurrent projects in widely diverse parts of the country. Today S.O.M. is still among the largest and most prolific of the large international architectural firms.

In 1930, 33 year-old, Indiana-born, Louis Skidmore had just returned from a "grand tour" of Europe.²⁰ A recent M.I.T. graduate he managed to find work in the hard-pressed economic climate of the early thirties by persuading the directors of the 1933-34 "Century of Progress" Exhibition in Chicago to appoint him chief designer. This opportunity introduced him not only to the latest innovations in industrial construction but also to the world of the American businessman. Some 700 companies displayed their wares at the fair and Skidmore had to deal with all of them.

Just prior to this, he had married Eloise Owings, a fellow Indianan whom he had met in Paris. Her brother, Nathaniel Owings, was a recent graduate of the Cornell Architecture school. Skidmore and his brother-in-law became friends and set up an informal working partnership. Later, Skidmore asked Owings to join him at the Chicago Exhibition as Development Supervisor.

Skidmore and Owings formalized the partnership in 1936 and opened an office. In 1937 they were offered a commission for alterations to the New York offices of the American Radiator Company. However, one of the conditions of the commission was that a partner had to be in New York to supervise the work. Making a decision that would have a long-range impact on their firm, the two partners decided to open a second office in New York City. Skidmore left Owings at the head of the Chicago office (they had two employees) and headed for New York.

By 1939 the partners decided that the firm would keep two non-centralized offices. They also decided that their firm would design only in the "contemporary style," and they began to hire specialists in varied disciplines to be able to take on larger commissions. One of these specialists was John O. Merrill, an architectural engineer who joined the firm as a limited partner in 1939. J. Walter Severinghaus was hired as a housing specialist and William S. Brown as an expert on modern prefabricated materials. In 1938, Gordon Bunshaft was hired as a designer. His imprint was eventually to shape the design image of S.O.M.

Skidmore explains his firm's professional goals at that time as follows:

Up until the war, most U.S. architects were trained to work only on small plots, they left the problems of coping with large scale projects - industrial plants, airfields - to the engineer - we felt that the architect would have to win back the role of the creator and coordinator of big projects.²¹

World War II brought the firm its first truly large project. The federal government needed an entire new town built from the ground up in the Tennessee hills. Called Oak Ridge, this was to be a secret community of 30,000 inhabitants and the seat of the Manhattan Project. It was precisely because S.O.M. was willing and able to take on tasks not traditionally handled by architectural firms such as site surveying and town planning that they received this extraordinary commission. A new office was opened in Oak Ridge and the S.O.M. staff swelled to 450 full-time employees. The design and administrative experience gained in Oak Ridge laid the foundations for the large private projects that would come to the firm after the war.

The firm had completed several large projects by 1950 including Manhattan House in New York (in association with Mayer & Whittlesey) the Terrace-Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, and the Brooklyn Veterans Hospital. However, it was the corporate headquarters for Lever Brothers Company on Park Avenue that was to make the reputation of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. In his monograph of S.O.M.'s work, Henry-Russell Hitchcock wrote:

The main work of S.O.M. in the 1950s and earliest 1960s has followed the line initiated with Lever House at the opening of the former decade; and the continued acceptability of such work to architects and to clients, not only in America but abroad as well, is proved by the frequency of its emulation. "Lever House" has become familiar term to describe the curtain-walled slab skyscrapers which have by now risen all over the western world.²²

The International Style was named and defined by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932. The style, an outgrowth of 19th-century architectural concerns with functionalism and the post-World War I upheaval of Europe, was called by Hitchcock and Johnson "unified and inclusive, not fragmentary and contradictory." To the architects who designed its "monuments of distinction," it was a means of creating a modern, well-ordered, and enlightened world. The characteristics of the style include: a conception of architecture as volume rather than mass; regularity as the chief means of ordering design; the avoidance of applied decorations; and the articulation of structure.²³

Gordon Bunshaft, the principal designer of Lever House, was the man most responsible for taking the European-born dictums of the International Style and creating a new synthesis - part functional aesthetic, part building as advertisement - that was to become the new breed of American corporate architecture.

"The partners work as one big team - the others take care of job getting, supervision, and all those headaches, and I am in charge of design."²⁴

- G. Bunshaft, 1961

Gordon Bunshaft was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1909. He completed his undergraduate and graduate studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, receiving his Master's degree in 1935.²⁵ Thereafter, he spent 18 months touring Europe on a \$3,000 Rotch travelling fellowship where he experienced first-hand the new European architecture that was at that time capturing the imagination of architects all over America.

In 1937 upon his return, he joined the firm of Skidmore and Owings which had just opened a New York office. The young firm was committed to the contemporary style which had been given a great boost by the 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, "International Architecture," organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, and which was becoming known as the International Style.

Bunshaft started as a designer and rose to be the chief design force in the firm. He became a full partner in 1946. Following Lever House, which he designed in 1949-50, Bunshaft was involved in the design of a number of outstanding buildings, including: Manufacturer's Hanover Bank (1953-54) on Fifth Avenue; the Union Carbide Building (1960) on Park Avenue; the U.S. Air Force Academy (1959) in Colorado Springs; the Connecticut General Life Insurance Building (1955) in Bloomfield, Connecticut; the Chase Manhattan Bank Headquarters (1960) in downtown Manhattan; and No. 140 Broadway (1967).

Most influential in shaping Bunshaft's design aesthetic were the teachings and works of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Bunshaft's aim like that of Walter Gropius was to promote the International Style in its fully mature, formalized and universal form. The excellence attained by his buildings is often compared to the work of Mies van der Rohe. Bunshaft disliked regional influence on architecture, striving instead for the normative, formal, and technically oriented architecture most rigidly espoused by the Bauhaus (led by Gropius in 1918-28 and Mies in 1930-33). Pragmatic utilitarianism and the industrial aesthetic became the driving force behind Bunshaft's designs. In an interview that appeared in Architectural Review, (May 1957), Bunshaft stated:

To a much greater degree than any other country, the United States is a steel and production line economy. It follows logically that its architecture has become industrialized: the basic materials in which it works, steel, aluminum, glass, plastics, all come from the production line...It is to S.O.M.'s credit that we have taken prefabrication and made a design asset of it.²⁶

The Design of Lever House

The original program for the Lever Brothers headquarters called for a structure containing 290,000 square feet of floor area to accommodate approximately 1200 employees.²⁷ In addition to the executive and administrative offices, the building

was to contain an employees' dining room and lounge, an auditorium, the usual complement of reception areas and support facilities, and an underground garage. The Lever Brothers Company did not wish to include additional office space to rent out to other concerns, nor was it interested in sharing the new company symbol with commercial ground floor tenants.²⁸

Responding to the client's atypical program, the architects at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill produced a unique and innovative building which became a new model for the New York office skyscraper. Instead of the traditional lobby and commercial areas at the ground floor, Lever House was planned with open colonnaded space flowing directly off the sidewalks with a planted courtyard open to the sky. Only about 30 percent of the ground floor is indoor space, the bulk of which is enclosed and defined solely by panels of glass. This glassed-in reception area also serves as an art gallery. Tucked away towards the rear of the site are the elevator banks and a small auditorium. The second floor, which hovers over the entire site, originally contained the dining room. It takes the form of a horizontal slab which is wrapped around an open central courtyard. The glass facades of this slab continue the line of the street wall set up by the neighboring buildings on Park Avenue and on the side streets. The ground floor columns which support the second floor are recessed behind the plane of the facade. In this way the slab achieves a more weightless appearance, and the column foundations can remain clear of the underground retaining walls built to accommodate the railroad tracks beneath Park Avenue. An integral part of the design of the open courtyard is the paving which echoes on a different plane the rhythm of the columns. Above the second floor, the tower rises to accommodate 19 office floors and three additional floors of mechanical equipment (for a total of 24 stories).

The tower, only 53 feet wide, is a vertical slab set perpendicular to the avenue. The elevator and service core for the tower is located at the rear of the slab at the western edge (see photo) and forms a solid masonry wall. The other three facades as well as the "returns" on the rear wall of the property are entirely glazed and give the building a crystalline and volumetric quality. Since the outline of the tower covers only 25 percent of the total lot area, it was not required to have setbacks.

The structural system of the building is a standard steel frame which supports reinforced concrete floors. This type of structural system is not new, and traditionally was enclosed by a stone and brick non-bearing wall that incorporated architectural motifs and visual devices to articulate window and door surrounds, and to express vertical and horizontal divisions. Typically, such a building looked solid and classical with a base, middle, and top. Often, very tall buildings would incorporate several lower floors faced in rusticated masonry to convey the feeling that the building rested on solid foundations although the masonry on the lower floors carried no more load than the masonry on the penthouse. The modernists felt that this traditional masonry vocabulary was no longer acceptable for a steel-framed building, and the newer style attempted to exploit the intrinsic qualities of the steel cage and of pre-fabricated materials.

Lever House is a prime example of this aesthetic. The exterior walls of Lever House were designed as a grid of stainless steel mullions, anchored to the structural skeleton at every floor level. These mullions hold in place large and small panels of fixed glass. The large panels (the windows) are green-tinted, heat absorbing transparent glass, and the small panels are tinted wired-glass spandrels sheathing the floor slabs behind. The technical aspects of the building's curtain wall were untested and therefore of an experimental nature. Over the years panels have cracked and broken and have been replaced by glass of two slightly different shades. The smaller, blue-green panels run in double bands beneath the transparent panels. These panels provide a horizontal counterpoint to the thin gleaming vertical mullions. Behind the spandrels the mechanical systems provided the building with heating and air conditioning.

Since all of Lever House's glass is fixed, the mechanical systems must provide all ventilation and cooling. This is accomplished through a system of forced air ducts connected to grilles on the interior sills of each glass panel and also running above the dropped ceilings on every level. The hermetic sealing of the building was considered quite a plus at the time.²⁹ The fixed glass walls were not only economical to build, but they were also supposed to reduce air conditioning and heating costs, and keep the interior grime- and dust-free. However, since fixed windows can only be cleaned from the outside, the architects designed a special window cleaning gondola that could be lowered from the roof and which moved on a miniature railroad track behind the parapet. Nothing caught the attention of New Yorkers at first quite as much as this mechanism. Every contemporary account of the building gave a detailed description of the machine. Lewis Mumford, writing in the New Yorker, comments:

For a company whose main products are soap and detergents, that little handicap of the sealed windows is a heaven-sent opportunity, for what could better dramatize its business than a squad of cleaners operating in their chariot, like the deus ex machina of Greek tragedy, and capturing the eye of the passerby as they performed their daily duties? This perfect bit of symbolism alone almost justifies the all glass facade.³⁰

Since the curtain wall is carried in front of the structural columns it completely masks the structure of the building, except at night when the interior is lit. Then, the columns appear as rhythmic verticals at every fifth mullion, and each level becomes a hovering horizontal ribbon of light. Like all glass-clad buildings, Lever House completely changes in appearance at night. The window walls lose their reflectivity and become totally transparent while the spandrels become totally opaque (see photo). At night, the International Style dictum that buildings should contain volume rather than create mass is most vividly apparent in Lever House.

Critical Evaluation

Since its unveiling, the design of the Lever Brothers headquarters on Park Avenue has received worldwide notice. The design, in the form of a model, was first seen in an exhibit of S.O.M.'s work put on by the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1950. The New York Times architectural critic Aline B. Louchheim reviewed the exhibit in an article titled "Architecture Of and For Our Day" (October 24, 1950);

The most inventive, handsome and remarkable of the firm's buildings is that for Lever Brothers.

"We were fortunate in having clients who were aware of advertising and prestige, they wanted more than an office building, they wanted a civic monument!"

The architects met the challenge with skill and daring and the foundations are now being dug for the building...³¹

Upon its completion, Lever House was widely discussed by the contemporary press. It was not the tallest building in the city nor the most expensive but it was an evocative and optimistic expression of its time; one that captured the hearts of architects and laymen alike by embodying their dreams of a glistening future.

However, not everyone was won over by this glistening expression. Frank Lloyd Wright was perhaps foremost among the building's detractors. In a lecture delivered to the American Institute of Architects in 1952, shortly after that organization had conferred its first honor award on Lever House, Wright described the building as "a box on sticks."³² He considered the International Style a form of classicism that set the art of building back several hundred years. He further condemned the architectural profession of the time for "merely taking things on the surface and passing them around on the surface without getting down to the bottom and inner meaning of the spirit of architecture."³³ Wright's own brilliantly individualistic approach to design was at complete odds with the formalistic dictums of the International Style. A comparison of Lever House and the Guggenheim Museum (designed in 1946, built in 1956-59) demonstrates the philosophical distance between Wright and Bunshaft in the 1950s.

Most of the initial press coverage was extremely positive and concentrated on the building's modernistic nature which was accurately perceived as trend-setting.

New York, city of superlatives extended an official welcome today to its newest wonder, a house of glass. This 24 story \$6,000,000 building of tomorrow...(is) designed for most efficient employee operation. The glass and stainless steel structure is literally a monument to the company's public relations.³⁴

(New York Journal American, April 29, 1952)

Although its well known that New Yorkers will stare at anything, it's seldom that they get goggle-eyed with amazement. But they did just that today when Lever House, the gleaming glass and stainless steel skyscraper had its unveiling. The building... was described lyrically by Mayor Impellitteri as: "The building of tomorrow which promises to set the pattern for the city of tomorrow."³⁵

(New York World Telegram, April 29, 1952)

Architecture critic Aline B. Louchheim, who had reviewed the design of the building prior to its construction, wrote in the April 27, 1952 edition of The New York Times:

Lever House is beautiful as well as functional; it uses the visual possibilities of disciplined, formal architecture for emotional appeal. Vitruvius's famous requirements for good architecture - commodity, firmness, and delight - are magnificently fulfilled.³⁶

Among others commenting on the innovative nature of Lever House was British art historian Nikolaus Pevsner in an interview appearing in The New York Times:

Mr. Pevsner made a brief visit to the United States to attend the recent conference on design at Aspen, Colorado. He was especially enthusiastic about New York's Lever House.

"The fact that such an extraordinary building was commissioned from a firm rather than an individual genius" he said, "is different from the Continent. Moreover, it really develops the Rockefeller Center idea of giving a skyscraper sufficient space around it. I see this as the beginning of something."³⁷

(The New York Times, June 14, 1952)

The innovative use of an open ground floor level with a public courtyard was one of the most popular features of the building upon its completion. The review of Lever House in the June 1952 Architectural Record noted:

The openness of the ground floor (where much of the area is garden and pedestrian walks with only the essentials enclosed in glass) is also somewhat monumental, if not in expression certainly in its fundamental regard for the citizens of New York. In this aspect, the entire structure is thoughtful, pleasant, and a decided advance over the average speculative building.³⁸

As the years passed it became clear that Lever House has introduced a new chapter in the history of American urbanism and architecture. Ada Louise Huxtable addressed these forces of change in an article in The New York Times on December 15, 1957:

As the old buildings disappear radical new ones rise immediately in their place, and the pattern of progress becomes clear: business palaces replace private palaces; soap aristocracy replaces social aristocracy; sleek towers of steel-framed blue, green, or gray-tinted glass give the avenue a glamorous and glittering new look.

...The staples of our civilization - soap, whiskey and chemicals - have identified themselves with advanced architectural design and their monuments march up the avenue in a proud parade.³⁹

Reyner Banham, writing in 1962, characterizes Lever House:

It gave architectural expression to an age just as the age was being born, and while the age lasted, or its standards persisted, Lever House was an uncontrollable success, imitated and sometimes understood all over the Americanized world, and one of the sights of New York.⁴⁰

On the occasion of Lever House's twenty-fifth anniversary, Paul Goldberger reviewed the contributions of the building from a perspective afforded by a quarter of a century. The article, "Lever House has a Birthday," appeared in The New York Times on April 28, 1977:

Lever House is still by any measure, one of New York's pre-eminent landmarks. It has been surpassed in quality on Park Avenue by only one other building - Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson's Seagram Building - and there are few commercial towers anywhere in the city that match it either in historical influence or in its visual quality.

Its influence has not been altogether benign, however. Lever's scooping out of a block of space on Park Avenue damaged the celebrated "street wall" of the avenue, setting a precedent for other buildings around town. And its sealed glass windows, the architect's pride back in 1952, are more of an anachronism than an asset in these energy-conscious days.

But these are quibbles. The building represents a commitment both to New York and the idea of architecture that is rare; its birthday is something that should be celebrated not only by Lever Brothers, but by the entire city.⁴¹

One of the truly extraordinary aspects of Lever House is the place it has attained in the literature of architecture. Indeed, it is rare to find a history of contemporary architecture after 1952 that does not include a reference to and an illustration of the building. An evening view of Lever House even graces the cover of The Encyclopedia of Modern Architecture (Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1964). The building is almost universally viewed by historians as a milestone in American architectural development. It marked the turning point, for better or worse, of the Modern Movement from the European avant-garde to corporate America. Charles Jencks writes in his book Modern Movements in Architecture (1973):

In the 1950s the International Style reached a sort of penultimate development and acceptance with the final working out of the curtain wall. In essence, the curtain wall is a non-supportive skin made up of window mullions and infill panels which is cantilevered from a frame structure. It starts its final development with the Lever Building on Park Avenue in New York City.⁴²

R. Furneaux Jordan states in his book A Concise History of Western Architecture (1971):

Second only to Mies van der Rohe one must place the large American firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; with big offices in many cities this firm is a phenomenon that would have astounded all earlier centuries. In 1952 one of the partners of the firm, Gordon Bunshaft, gave to New York in the Lever Building its then most distinguished high-rise building; it has clarity of design and it incorporates a small but charming court which set a precedent that may lift New York to a new level among world capitals.⁴³

Less optimistic about the trends that the Lever House set, Leland M. Roth writes in his book A Concise History of American Architecture (1980):

Following the war, corporate clients sought to fix their public images through building and in the process gave architects like Mies, Johnson, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill opportunities to realize...the technically pure architecture they had been advancing for twenty years. In the hands of Mies and his colleagues, this became an exercise in abstract beauty. ... /But/ architecture became a package in which the ambiguities and complexities of modern institutions were ruthlessly wrapped in sleek, monotonous continuities. It became reductive and exclusive, eliminating untidy functions to conform to a vision of society as the architects thought it ought to be, rather than according to the way it was...

The first of these corporate images in New York was Lever House... the product of an office that quickly became a leading force in American architecture.⁴⁴

In American Buildings and Their Architects (vol. 3), William H. Jordy writes that Lever House "established a new standard for office buildings after the war," and described the plaza as "the first such civic-minded gesture of consequence by private enterprise in New York since Rockefeller Center."⁴⁵

Finally, in The City Observed: Manhattan, Paul Goldberger characterizes Lever House: "This ranks with McGraw-Hill, The Daily News, and Seagram in terms of influence - it is a building that really did help make an era."⁴⁶

Conclusion

In 1982, Lever House still serves as the New York offices of Lever Brothers Company. The window washing gondola still climbs up and down the glass facades. Certain changes have taken place to the building since 1952, the most obvious being the addition of a geometric mural on the side wall of the adjoining building which faces the Lever House courtyard, and the replacement of approximately 30 percent of the glass spandrel panels throughout the tower. The award-winning mural painted by Robert Wiegand and titled "Leverage," was commissioned by Lever Brothers Company in 1970. Its purpose was to enhance the view from the third floor roof garden.⁴⁷ The new replacement glass spandrels done in two types of glass which are somewhat darker in shade and more opaque than the original do not detract from the building's glistening, crisp and modernistic character. Among interior changes, the second floor restaurant and employees' lounge have been turned into a computer center and the first floor auditorium into a conference room.

The important public spaces have remained unchanged. Both the ground floor gallery and the unenclosed courtyard look and function as had been originally intended by the architect. The gallery hosts exhibitions, contains two small glass showcases for the company's products and functions as the building's entrance. The courtyard with its plantings provides sunlit greenery among the hard edges of Park Avenue. The courtyard pavement with its light and dark terrazzo remains intact, although the sidewalk pavement has been patched with concrete in several places.

Lever House retains a special place in American architecture as the most famous corporate expression of the modern International Style in postwar America. Its innovative design and mechanical features set important precedents for the design of American office buildings. Of particular interest are the building's crystalline and volumetric qualities emphasized by the glass curtain walls as they turn corners, visually float above the base, create outdoor space, and wrap around interior volume. Lever House spawned a host of imitators but has been rarely equalled. It remains outstanding for its spatial clarity, scale, and beauty of form.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Leland M. Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980) p. 278.
2. Aline B. Louchheim, "Architecture Of And For Our Day," New York Times, October 24, 1950.
3. Charles Wilson, The History of Unilever, Vol. I. (New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1954), p. 229.
4. See Mervyn E. Macartney, "Mr. Lever and Port Sunlight," Architectural Review: Town Planning and Housing Supplement, 28 (July 1910), 43-46.
5. Wilson, Vol. 3 (1968), p. 35.
6. Wilson, Vol. 1, p. 228.
7. Ibid., p. 230.
8. Aline B. Louchheim, "Newest Building in the Newest Style," New York Times, April 27, 1952.
9. "Lever Brothers New Research Center in Edgewater, N.J." Architectural Record, 113 (April 1953), 179-183.
10. Map of Farms in New York, 1815 (New York: E. Robinson, 1887), plate 10.
11. William D. Middleton, Grand Central (San Marino, Ca.: Golden West Books, 1977), p. 32.
12. Ibid., p. 33.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Atlas of the City of New York, (New York: E. Robinson, 1885), plate 18.
16. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Demolition Permit for Lots 31 through 42½, Block 1289, (1936).
17. New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Demolition Permit for Lots 36, 43 and 44, Block 1289, (1950). In a complicated real estate transaction, the Estate of Robert W. Goelet retained title to the land, leasing the property to Lever Brothers. After the building was constructed, Lever Brothers sold the building to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company which then leased it back to Lever Brothers. Lever Brothers surrendered its lease to the land which was in turn leased to Metropolitan Life. See New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds 4645, pages 369 and 378, Liber Deeds 4804, pages 100-112.
18. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Ernst Danz, Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1963) pp. 7-8.

19. Ibid., p. 8.
20. See "The Architects From Skid's Row," Fortune, 57 (January 1958), 137-140, 210-215.
21. Ibid.
22. Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, p. 8.
23. See Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, The International Style (reprint, New York: N.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 1966), especially "Introduction: The Idea of Style," pp. 17-21.
24. "Genetrix: Personal Contributions to American Architecture," Architectural Review, 121 (May 1957), 358.
25. See Fortune, 57 (January 1958), 137-140, 210-215.
26. Architectural Review, 121 (May 1957), 358.
27. "Lever House Complete," Architectural Forum, 96 (June 1952), 101-111.
28. Louchheim, New York Times, April 27, 1952.
29. "Lever House, New York: Glass and Steel Walls," Architectural Record, 111 (June 1952) 130-135.
30. See Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: House of Glass," New Yorker, August 9, 1952, pp. 48-50.
31. Louchheim, New York Times, October 24, 1950.
32. "Frank Lloyd Wright ridicules architectural schools as waste," New York Times, June 26, 1952.
33. Ibid.
34. "Lever Building Opens Today," New York Journal-American, April 29, 1952, p. 32.
35. "New Lever Glass House Dazzles New Yorkers," New York World-Telegram and Sun, April 29, 1952.
36. Louchheim, New York Times, April 27, 1952.
37. "U.S. Architecture praised by Briton," New York Times, June 26, 1952.
38. See Architectural Record, 111 (June 1952), 130-135.
39. See Ada Louise Huxtable, "Park Avenue School of Architecture," New York Times Magazine, December 15, 1957, pp. 30-31, 54-56.
40. Reyner Banham, Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture (1962; reprint 1st U.S. edition, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p. 114.

41. Paul Goldberger, "Lever House has a Birthday," New York Times, April 28, 1977.
42. Charles Jencks, Modern Movements in Architecture (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 41.
43. R. Furneaux Jordan, A Concise History of Western Architecture (London: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc. 1971), p. 332.
44. Leland M. Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 277-278.
45. William H. Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects, Vol. 4 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 255.
46. Paul Goldberger, The City Observed: Manhattan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) p. 156.
47. Lever Brothers received the Business and Arts Award for this mural as the first such painting in midtown Manhattan and the first in New York City commissioned by a major corporation.

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 Lever House 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, among its important qualities, Lever House was among the first, as well as the most famous, corporate expressions of the modern International Style in postwar America; that designed by the firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, it established the reputation of the firm and its chief designer, Gordon Bunshaft; that the design with its vertical and horizontal volumes faced with shimmering blue-green glass held in place by stainless steel mullions and its open courtyard emphasizes the crystalline and geometric qualities of the structure, thus exemplifying basic tenets of the International Style; that Lever House was built on Park Avenue at a time when the section north of Grand Central Terminal was still residential and set the trend for a burst of commercial development; that Lever House, built to serve as the New York headquarters of Lever Brothers Company, the noted manufacturer of soap, detergent and other household products, created a striking and successful image for the company, providing encouragement for many other American corporations to redress their own architectural images; that Lever House with its emphasis on volume and surface rather than mass as in older masonry buildings set important precedents for the design of American office buildings, many of which were carried out by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; that it is widely recognized as a key monument in the evolution of the International Style and has assumed an important role in the literature of modern architecture; and that Lever House remains outstanding for its spatial clarity, scale, and beauty of form.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Lever House, 390 Park Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1289, Lot 36, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmarks Site.

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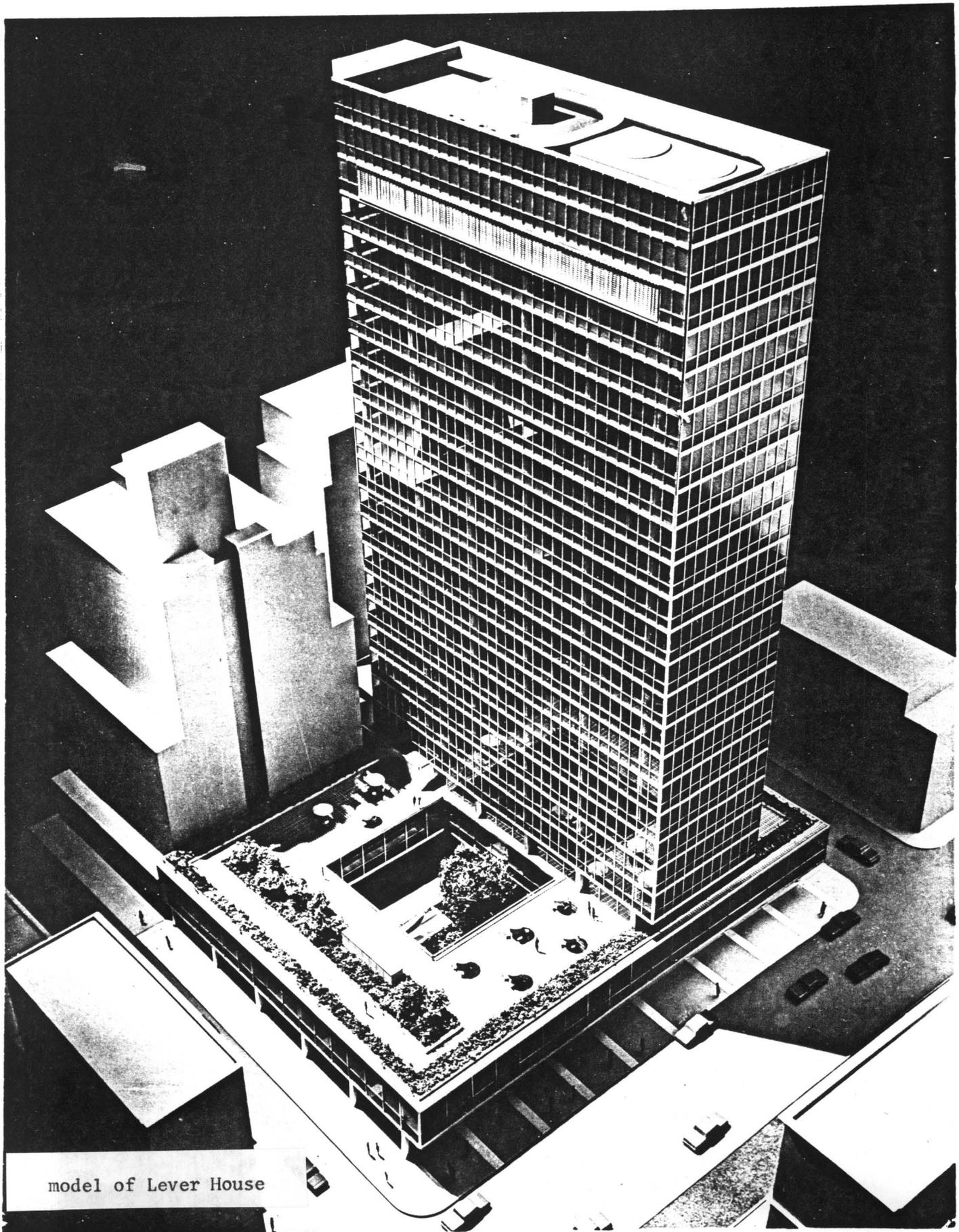
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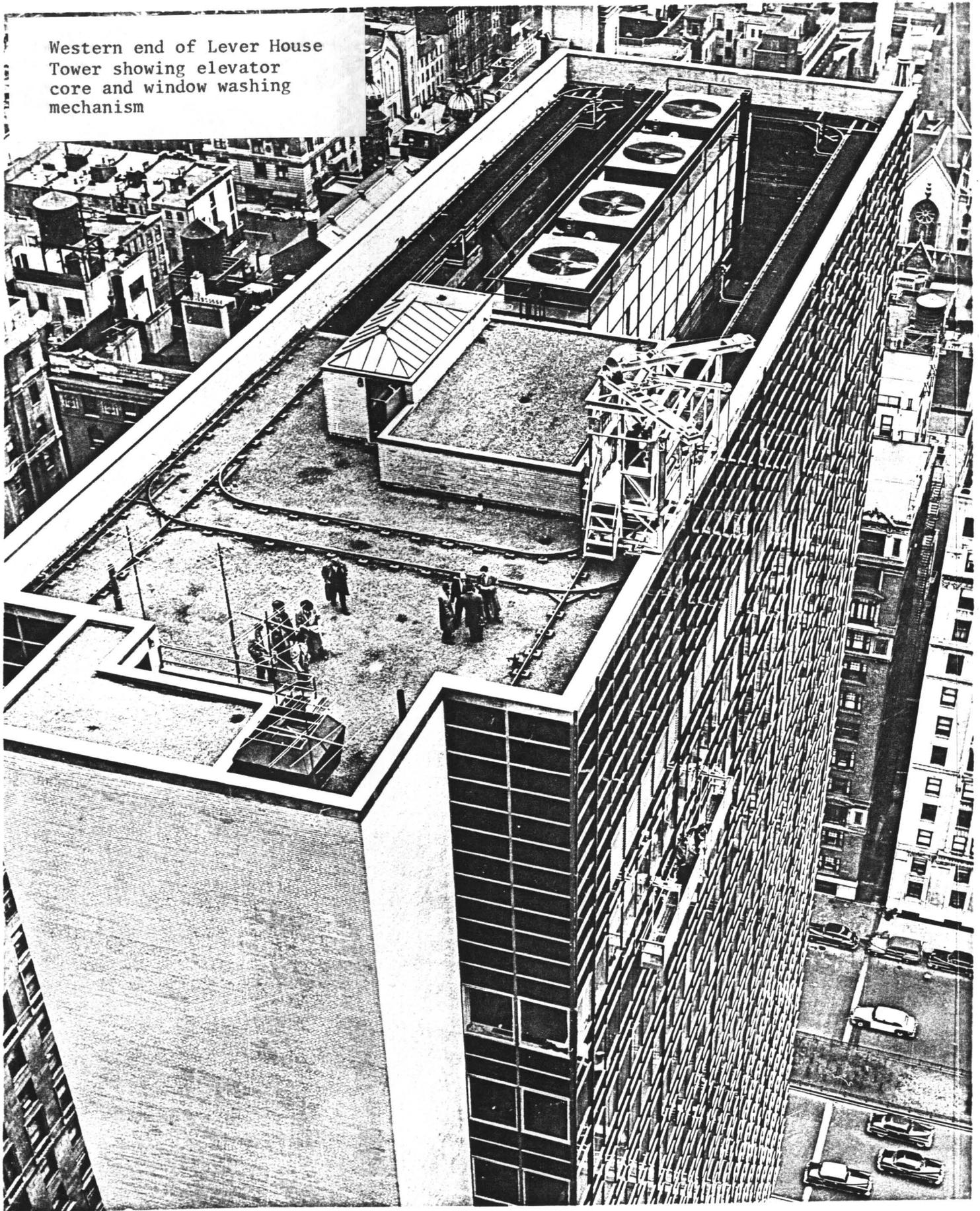


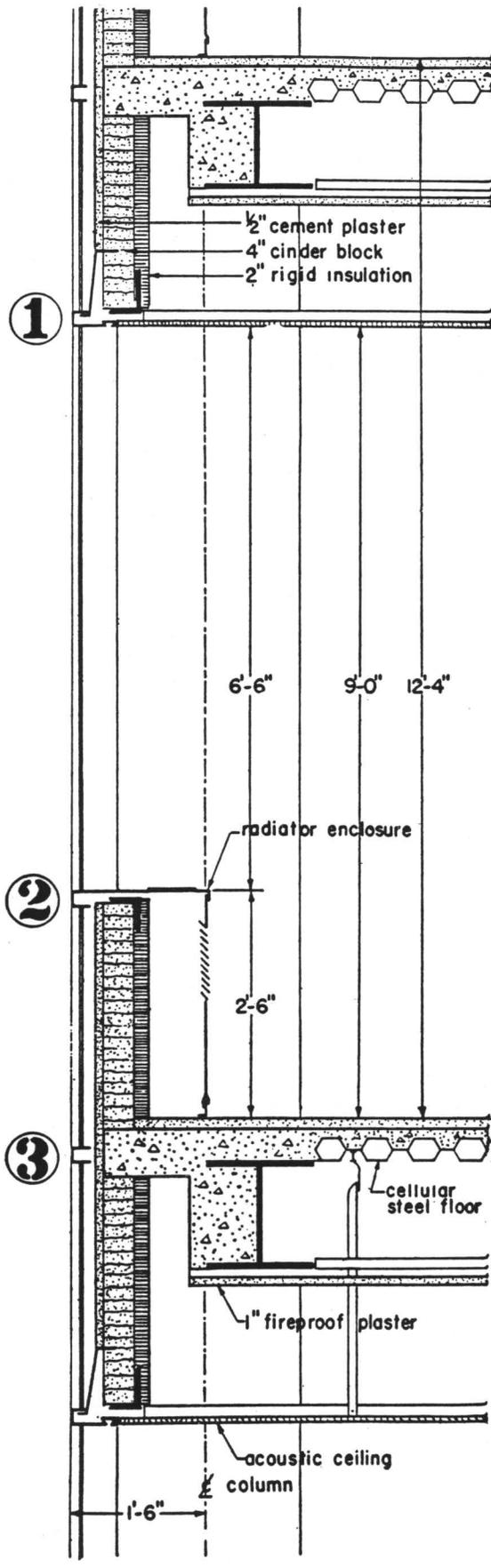
Lever House



model of Lever House

Western end of Lever House
Tower showing elevator
core and window washing
mechanism





Section through curtain wall