

FULLER BUILDING, first floor interior consisting of the 57th Street entrance vestibule, the Madison Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, mailbox, directory boards, vent grilles, light fixtures and ornamental metal panels; 593-599 Madison Avenue a/k/a 41 East 57th Street, Manhattan. Built 1928-29; architects, Walker & Gillette.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1293, Lot 26.

On September 13, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Fuller Building, first floor interior consisting of the 57th Street entrance vestibule, the Madison Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, mailbox, directory boards, vent grilles, light fixtures and ornamental metal panels; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 18). The hearing was continued to November 15, 1983 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers opposed to designation. The Commission has received several letters in favor of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The richly decorated first floor interior of the Fuller Building enhances the elegant Art Deco skyscraper which it serves. The Fuller Building, constructed in 1928-29 for the George A. Fuller Company, one of America's leading building firms, is an outstanding example of the large group of skyscrapers built during the 1920s and early 1930s which transformed midtown Manhattan. To symbolize the client's position in the construction field, as well as this building's place in the building boom, the architectural firm of Walker & Gillette used the theme of construction in their design of the lobby. In a highly stylized, modernistic manner, the architects included classical elements in their lobby design. These, combined with the elegant bronze and marble materials and construction-related motifs create a handsome and appropriate entrance to this major mid-town skyscraper.

The George A. Fuller Company

The George A. Fuller Company was founded in Chicago in 1882 by George Allon Fuller (1851-1900).¹ Fuller was trained as an architect at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and started his career as a draftsman in the office of Peabody & Stearns in Boston, becoming a partner by age 25. His early work included the design and the supervision of construction of the Union League Club in New York. Fuller quickly realized he was more interested in the construction phase of building and started his own contracting firm. From 1880-1882 he was a partner in the firm of Clark & Fuller, building the Union Club and the Chicago Opera House in Chicago. Staying in that city he formed his own company in 1882, one of his first jobs being the Pontiac Building. The George A. Fuller Company built one of the first completely steel-framed skyscrapers, the Tacoma Building in 1887, also in Chicago. Fuller was instrumental in differentiating the contractor's role from that of the designer, and, breaking with common practice, provided only building services. Fuller's extensive knowledge of construction and his interest in the new technology being developed for high rise buildings gained his company a reputation as a premier skyscraper builder. He used electric hoists and new methods of steel fastening and he pioneered a team approach to tall building construction which was adapted throughout the country.

After Fuller's death in 1900, at the age of 49, his son-in-law Harry S. Black became head of the Fuller Company. With the company's operations now in New York, Black became a major force in the promotion and construction of tall office buildings in this city. Black established a real estate venture, the United States Realty and Improvement Company, to plan, finance and build in New York. The Fuller Construction Company was, for a time, a subsidiary of U.S. Realty, handling the construction work for the speculative building of its parent company.²

In the more than one hundred years since its founding, the Fuller Company has constructed thousands of buildings, in New York, throughout the country, and abroad. The company's work in New York includes the old Pennsylvania Station, the main U.S. Post Office, the Plaza Hotel, the United Nations Headquarters, Lever House and the Seagram Building. In Washington, D.C. Fuller built the National Cathedral, the United States Supreme Court Building and the Lincoln Memorial. Other buildings by the firm include an Otis Elevator factory in California, a laboratory in Pittsburgh, a Federal Reserve Bank in Chicago and a missile base in Kansas.

In 1902 Harry Black hired the nationally prominent Chicago architect Daniel Burnham to design an imposing headquarters building for the firm in New York. The Fuller Building which resulted is located at the intersection of Broadway and Fifth Avenue, at 23rd Street, on a triangular piece of land facing Madison Square.³ The building received much publicity but the popular name -- the Flatiron -- soon eclipsed that of the building's owners. In 1928, the Fuller Company decided to build new headquarters uptown, both to acquire more space and to follow the business center which was moving north.

Walker & Gillette

The Fuller Company commissioned the architectural firm of Walker & Gillette to design its new building. A. Stewart Walker (1876-1952) attended Harvard Architectural School, graduating in 1898.⁴ Leon Gillette's (1878?-1945) first architectural experience was in the

Minneapolis office of Bertrand & Keith in 1895-97. He then attended the University of Pennsylvania, receiving a Certificate of Architecture in 1899. During the next two years in New York Gillette worked in the offices of Howells & Stokes, Schickel & Ditmars, and Babb, Cook & Willard. From 1901 to 1903 he attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Returning to New York, he worked for the firm of Warren & Wetmore before forming the partnership with Walker in 1906.⁵

The buildings designed by Walker & Gillette show a great variety in types as well as styles and their commissions can be found throughout the United States and abroad⁶. Before World War I most of their work was residential, including a huge estate in Pittsfield, Massachusetts in a classical design, a Mission Revival style house in Tuxedo Park and a Tudor Revival style house on Long Island. Their New York City work included a neo-Georgian house at 52 E. 69th Street, a neo-Federal house at 690 Park Avenue and a Tudor Revival house at 134 E. 70th Street⁷. Their small neo-Georgian style apartment house at 144 E. 40th Street won the Gold Medal from the Architectural League of New York in 1910.

Aside from housing, Walker & Gillette designed the Colonial Revival style Greenwich Country Club and the Tudor Revival style stores in Tuxedo Park, as well as the Church of St. Georges-by-the-River in Seabright, New Jersey. Individually or collectively they are also credited with the designs for Grasslands Hospital in East View, New York; the public buildings and homes in Venice, Florida; and the Playland Amusement Park in Rye, New York. Walker & Gillette designed many bank buildings, including a series for the First National City Bank. One of these is on Canal Street in New York, with others in Havana, Paris, Buenos Aires, Panama and Puerto Rico. Other banks in New York include the Union Trust Company and the Art Deco style Emigrant Savings Bank on Cortlandt Street.

New York in the 1920s

The financial boom and expanding population of New York in the 1920s created a need for more space, for housing as well as for business, and the ensuing new construction transformed Manhattan. Between 1925 and 1933 one hundred thirty eight new office buildings were constructed in Manhattan, an average of 15.3 a year⁸. The transportation hub of Grand Central Station fostered new growth and development and numerous buildings such as Tudor City (1929), the Chanin Building (1927-29), the Chrysler Building (1929) and the Daily News (1929-30) rose in that area of the city. This section of midtown Manhattan had an increase of 37.3% of rentable space during these eight years.

Business and population centers were moving north from lower Manhattan into other areas of the city as well. The blocks around the Plaza Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street saw an increase of 17.5% in new business space during these same years. The upsurge of commercial activity in this section and all through the East 50s was encouraged by the extension of the Eighth Avenue Subway lines across 53rd Street to Queens. In 1928, when the G.A.F. Realty Company (the real estate arm of the George A. Fuller Company) bought the lot on the northeast corner of Madison Avenue and 57th Street, the area was largely residential and the site was occupied by the stately, stone-faced Central Presbyterian Church⁹. Within a short time however,

this neighborhood had become the most fashionable shopping district in New York¹⁰.

The Art Deco Style

Many of the new buildings going up in midtown Manhattan in the 1920s were designed in the Art Deco style which seemed to echo the excitement and modernity of the "Jazz Age"¹¹. This style was derived from many sources, the most well-known being the 1925 Paris exhibition from which the style takes its name -- the "Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes." This show featured decorative and industrial arts primarily from Europe (with the notable exception of Germany). The decorative forms, the rich materials and fine craftsmanship of the exhibitions, as well as the simplicity of line and the geometric forms of the architecture seen at the show, were picked up and applied to building designs in the United States.

Another major influence on the development of this style was Eliel Saarinen's second-place-winning submission to the 1922 Chicago Tribune Competition. Its simplicity of design, original ornament and lack of cornices had a tremendous influence on buildings which were to follow.

The New York Building Code of 1916, which placed limits on building heights close to the lot line and required set backs at various levels to allow light and air to reach down to the street, also affected the form of new buildings. After interpretive drawings relating to these laws were published in a 1922-23 journal article by the influential renderer Hugh Ferriss, architects began to express greater concern for the volume and shape of their buildings¹².

Most of the architects who were working in this new Art Deco style were, like Walker & Gillette, traditionally trained, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. The list included William Van Alen, Raymond Hood, Ely Jaques Kahn, and T. Markoe Robertson of Sloan & Robertson. The influence of the Beaux Arts training in the quick blocking out of buildings can be discerned in the massing of these complex buildings. This classical tradition, with its insistence that a building's public spaces be regarded as amenities for everyone, is responsible for the large number of grand, fully ornamented lobbies in New York's Art Deco towers¹³.

The Fuller Building Lobby

The Fuller Building, like numerous other skyscrapers constructed in midtown Manhattan during this period, including the Chrysler, Daily News, McGraw-Hill, Chanin, RCA (now GE), and Empire State buildings, helped introduce the new Art Deco style to urban America. These modernistic towers defined midtown's characteristic look for the next several decades. In keeping with this style, the exterior of the Fuller Building was defined by a black, granite-faced base and light limestone-faced tower, bold geometric patterns at the crown and a powerful sculpture by the noted modern artist, Elie Nadelman, at the entrance.

The lobbies of all of these buildings, major public interior spaces serving as a welcome to the office floors, continued the modernistic design of their towers, and were highly decorative spaces in their own right. The triangular lobby of the Chrysler Building, with nickel-chrome-steel details, indirect lighting, and ceiling murals of the history of transportation, continued the metallic design and automobile symbolism of that building's exterior, identifying it as the home of the Chrysler Corporation.¹⁴ The popular science display lobby of the Daily News Building, centering on a vast globe and detailed scientific charts, expressed the conviction of the publishers of the Daily News that its aim was the education of the "common people," referred to in an inscription on the building's exterior.¹⁵ Less pointedly symbolic, the McGraw-Hill Building's lobby continued the blue-green and gold metal tubes of its entranceway into its green-walled interior, as many other modernistic towers carried their design into their lobbies.¹⁶

The architects of the Fuller Building, reflecting their Beaux Arts training, employed classical motifs interpreted in a modernistic fashion, both on the exterior and the interior of the building. On the exterior, this can be seen at the tops of the tower setbacks where geometric designs of inlaid black stone take the place of the projecting cornices of an earlier style. Inside the lobby, columns, friezes and moldings are represented by changes in color and materials while remaining flush with the surface of the wall. The traditional forms of these elements have been simplified and stylized in a geometric manner, echoing on the inside the treatment of the building's exterior.

Just as in other buildings of the period, the entranceways and lobbies of the Fuller Building were intended to be very dramatic, to make the building distinctive and to draw a visitor inside. Here, the large overdoor sculpture by Elie Nadelman draws attention to the building's main entranceway. The plain glass doors enable a visitor to glimpse inside before actually going there. Inside, the floor mosaics representing major monuments of the Fuller Company, and the bronze panels on the elevator doors showing scenes from the construction trades, serve a certain symbolic and advertising purpose, which was typical of the period. It was not all self-promotion however, as the tremendous amount of construction around Manhattan made such activities everyday scenes to most New Yorkers. This decorative scheme, which included the use of construction themes combined with stylized classical elements interpreted in elegant materials such as marble and brass, makes the lobby of the Fuller Building a truly impressive public space.

Description

The lobby of the Fuller Building consists of an entrance hall, leading from 57th Street, which joins, and is perpendicular to, an elevator hall with its own entrance on Madison Avenue. Both entrances have small vestibules with interior doors which lead to the lobby. At the far end of the hall from the Madison Avenue entrance is another doorway which serves as a rear entrance to the building's easternmost retail space. In this section of the hall are the entrances to the stairway (not included in the

designation) and to the elevators. Near the center of the building, where the two halls join, there is a small alcove with a snack stand.

The main entrance on 57th Street consists of four single-pane glass doors, each framed in polished bronze. A wide bronze lintel which runs across all the doors is decorated with five large bronze diamonds filled with three-dimensional star designs. These diamonds are linked by horizontal molding. The area above the doors contains glass which is subdivided by bronze mullions into four large sections with three narrow ones between them. A small, bronze, stepped panel is inset at the center of this glass overdoor. The interior doors, which lead from the vestibule to the main part of the lobby, are identical to those just described.

The vestibule between these two sets of doors on 57th Street has marble walls above a narrow black base, which serves, in effect, as a water table. On each wall, two vertical panels in dark brown are separated by a wider, light tan section. These darker panels are stylized representations of classical pilasters, here set flush with the wall. A black fret design at the top of each of these "pilasters" symbolizes its capital. Between these pilasters, the lower part of the wall is covered by large radiator grilles. These grilles are inset into the lower sections of the walls. Their design consists of four panels in an ornate chevron pattern set off by polished brass vertical members decorated with stylized flowers. The floor of this vestibule is covered in a mosaic in a design similar to that found on the main lobby floor. A chevron border frames the entire area and at the center is a stylized "F" set in squares. Numerous smaller circles with stars inside are scattered throughout the rest of the floor area.

The walls of the main lobby are a continuation of the decorative themes set in the vestibule. Just inside the vestibule doors from the 57th Street entrance are two large radiator grilles, one on each side. Each is divided into three panels, with the rest of their design being the same as those in the vestibule. Along each wall are five dark brown "pilasters," separated by lighter tan panels which are distinguished by two black lines inset at the wainscot level. The tops of these pilasters, their capitals, are indicated by two black lines near the ceiling. In the other section of the hall, these "pilasters" are located over the elevator and door openings and at the corner where the two halls meet. On all the lobby walls, just below the ceiling, is a frieze in a simplified fret design, of light stone set against a black ground.

Nine elevators open onto the lobby. Two are located next to the door to the stairway; six more are found across the hall. The ninth elevator is placed to the west of the intersection of the two halls which form the lobby. Each has an ornate, two-part bronze door. The doors are decorated with eight hexagonally-shaped relief panels showing scenes of contemporary building construction. Framing these panels, filling the spaces between them, and surrounding the doors themselves are a variety of ornamental bronze moldings in patterns typical of the Art Deco period, including arrows, fans, diagonal lines and concentric circles. The original floor indicators are located above each elevator.

The Madison Avenue entrance is similar to that described on 57th Street, except somewhat smaller, consisting of only two doors instead of four. The glass overdoor is also plainer, without the bronze inset found

at the other entrance. A set of three doors with the same motifs leads from the vestibule to the main lobby. Within the vestibule is a plain bronze service door which leads to the basement. The walls of the vestibule are light tan over a black base. The floor is decorated with black triangles on a light ground.

In the lobby, just beyond the Madison Avenue vestibule, is another small area which is made distinct by its decoration. The ceiling of this section has been dropped and the floor here has its own border with the symbolic double F in a square frame centered in the middle. On the southern wall of this part is one dark marble "pilaster" with a two-panel radiator grille covering its lower half. Across the hall is a bronze service door embellished by plain hexagonal panels.

Other original features of the lobby include the mail box of polished bronze, decorated with a stylized eagle, wing-like motifs and wave patterns. A building directory, located across the hall from the mail drop, is set in a bronze enframingent decorated with a stylized leaf pattern. A small bronze plaque is found on the wall near the joining of the two sections of the lobby. It bears a portrait in relief of George A. Fuller and an inscription noting the dedication of the building to him.

The floor of the lobby is one of its most remarkable features. It is laid in mosaic tile in shades of grey, tan, black and white. An elaborate chevron-patterned border outlines the entire lobby floor, with the separate section near the Madison Avenue entrance-way as previously described. Three large rondels are located along the hallway which leads in from 57th Street. These contain mosaic representations of three important structures in the history of the Fuller Company. The first is the Tacoma Building, with its name and date surrounding it, and the notation "The First Steel Structure Ever Erected." The middle circle displays an image of the original Fuller Building with the caption "Fuller Flatiron Building -- New York -- Erected A.D. 1903." The third rondel shows the new Fuller Building and is labeled "Fuller Building -- Erected A.D. 1929." Throughout the rest of the floor are mosaic circles, diamonds and semi-circles containing abstract, geometric designs.

The white plaster ceiling exists substantially in its original condition except for a small section near the Madison Avenue entrance which has been lowered. The remaining ceiling is outlined by a wide, cove-shaped anthemion molding. The same molding also borders the coffered ribs which divide the ceiling into different areas. The coffers of these ribs are filled alternately with rosettes and plain panels with two and three modern, down lights. In the larger sections of the ceiling are simple, hexagonal light fixtures which are new but retain the shape of the original fixtures.

Conclusion

The lobby of the Fuller Building is an elegant modernistic space which complements the outstanding Art Deco design of the building's exterior. Built during a period when Manhattan's midtown area was being transformed by numerous tall office towers, the Fuller Building's bold, black and white

color schemes and decorative patterns provide a strong statement of its presence in this bustling, commercial area of Manhattan. Its main lobby, with entrances on both 57th Street and Madison Avenue, continues the design ideas of the building's exterior, including the use of classical elements in a highly stylized, geometric fashion. Its handsome materials and ornate detailing provide a grand and welcoming public space. The construction theme represented here is fully appropriate to the era as well as to the building's corporate sponsor. Designed by a well-respected architectural firm and built for one of the most important construction companies in America, the Fuller Building, with its richly decorated lobby is a particularly fine representative of a significant period of building history in New York.

Notes

1. Information about George Fuller and the Fuller Company was compiled from L. Porter Moore, "100 Years Downtown," in D.A.C. Journal, (May, 1951), pp.23-31; J.A. Schweinfurth, "Great Builders I Have Known," in American Architect, 140 (November, 1931), pp.48-49; David B. Carlson, "Building's No. 1 Contractor," in Architectural Forum, 114 (April, 1961), pp.112-113; and from scrapbooks in the collection of the George A. Fuller Company.
2. Earle Shultz and Walter Simmons, Offices in the Sky, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), pp.59-60.
3. A designated New York City Landmark; it is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
4. A. Stewart Walker, obituary, New York Times, (June 11, 1952), p.29, c.4.
5. Leon Gillette, obituary, New York Times, (May 4, 1945), p.20, c.2.
6. Alwyn T. Covell, "Variety in Architectural Practice," in Architectural Record, 35 (April, 1914), pp.277-355. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Upper East Side Historic District Report (LP-1051), (New York: City of New York, May 19, 1981), pp.1364-1365.
7. All of these buildings are located within the Upper East Side Historic District. The building at No. 690 Park Avenue is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.
8. The Real Estate Board of New York, Inc. Research Department. Office Building Constructio, Manhattan, 1901-1953. Supplement No. 5, 1957, n.p.
9. New York County Register's Office, Liber Deeds. Liber 3668, p.296.
10. "Six Floors of Shops...and a separate elevator for each," in The American Architect, 136 (December, 1929), p.74.

11. Information on Art Deco was compiled from numerous sources, including: Laura Cerwinske, Tropical Deco (New York: Rizzoli, 1981); Ada Louise Huxtable, The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Arnold Lehman, "New York Skyscrapers: The Jazz Modern Neo-American Beautilitarian Style," in Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (April, 1971), pp.363-370; Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Elayne Varian, American Art Deco Architecture (New York: Finch College Museum of Art, 1975); Don Vlack, Art Deco Architecture in New York, 1920-1940 (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koepper, American Architecture, Vol. 2: 1860-1976 (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981).
12. Paul Goldberger, The Skyscraper (New York: Knopf, 1981) p.58.
13. Robinson and Bletter, p.5.
14. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Chrysler Building Interior (LP-0996), by Marjorie Pearson (New York: City of New York, 1978), pp.3-6.
15. Detailed information may be found in the Daily News Building file at the Landmarks Preservation Commission.
16. Landmarks Preservation Commission, McGraw-Hill Designation Report (LP-1050), by Anthony Robins (New York: City of New York, 1979), p.8.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Fuller Building, first floor interior consisting of the 57th Street entrance vestibule, the Madison Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, mailbox, directory boards, vent grilles, light fixtures and ornamental metal panels; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that the first floor interior of the Fuller Building is an elegant Art Deco public space; that the building with its lobby was built to be the headquarters of one of the largest and most important construction firms in America, the George A. Fuller Company; that it was designed for Fuller by the prominent architectural firm of Walker & Gillette; that the interior's stylized classical motifs joined to modernistic geometric patterns continue the striking Art Deco design of the building's exterior; that the design is elegantly executed in bronze and marble; that the design includes depictions of the Fuller Company's major works and images of the construction trades, thus promoting the Fuller Company's premier role in the industry, as well as reflecting the 1920s construction boom in midtown Manhattan; and that the lobby therefore provides an appropriately elegant and symbolic entrance to an important midtown structure.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Fuller Building, first floor interior consisting of the 57th Street entrance vestibule, the Madison Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the elevator lobby; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, mailbox, directory boards, vent grilles, light fixtures and ornamental metal panels; 593-599 Madison Avenue (a/k/a 41 East 57th Street), Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1293, Lot 26, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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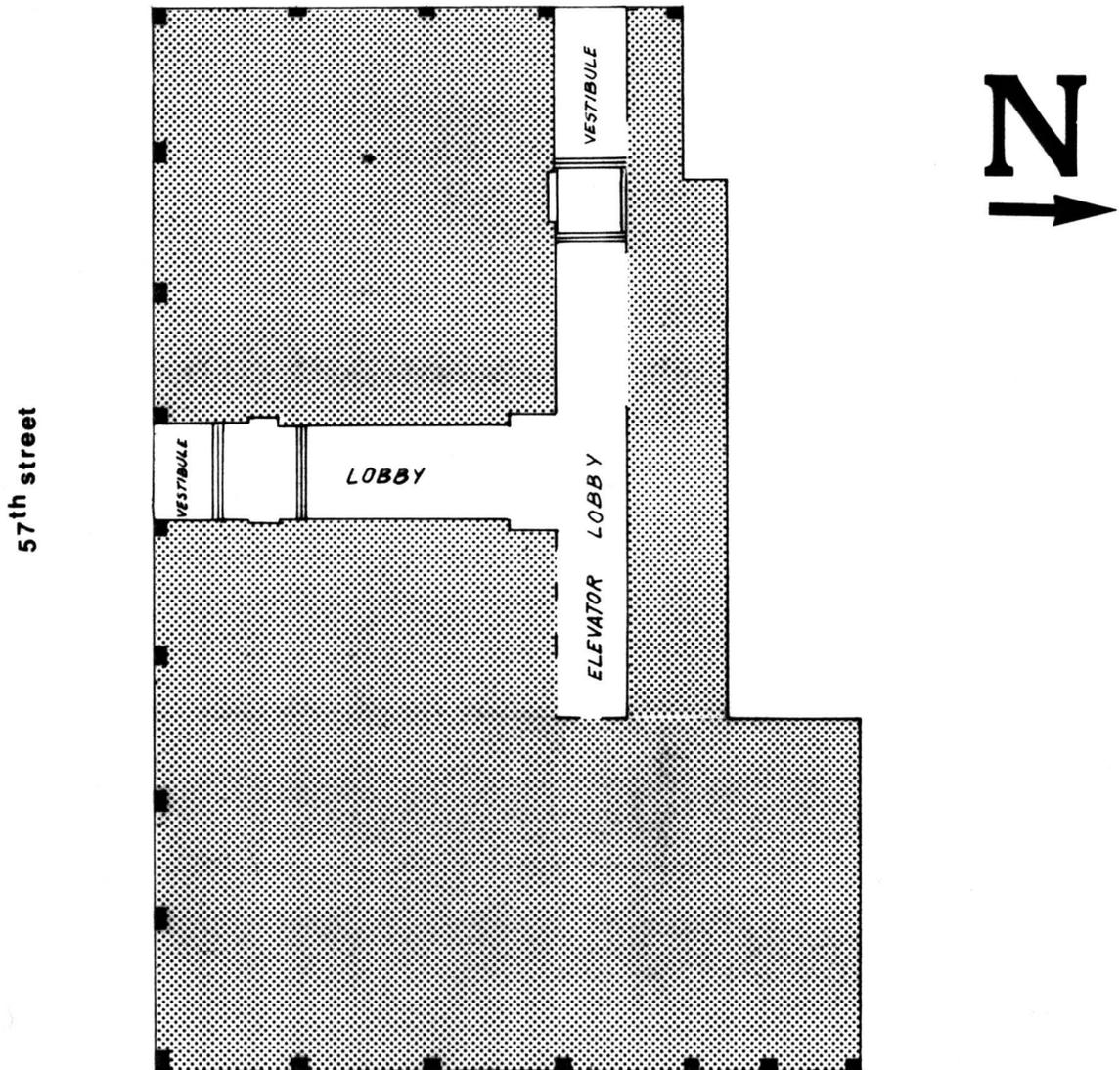
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THE FULLER BUILDING

INTERIOR

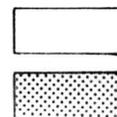
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(a/k/a 41 East 57th Street)

Madison Avenue



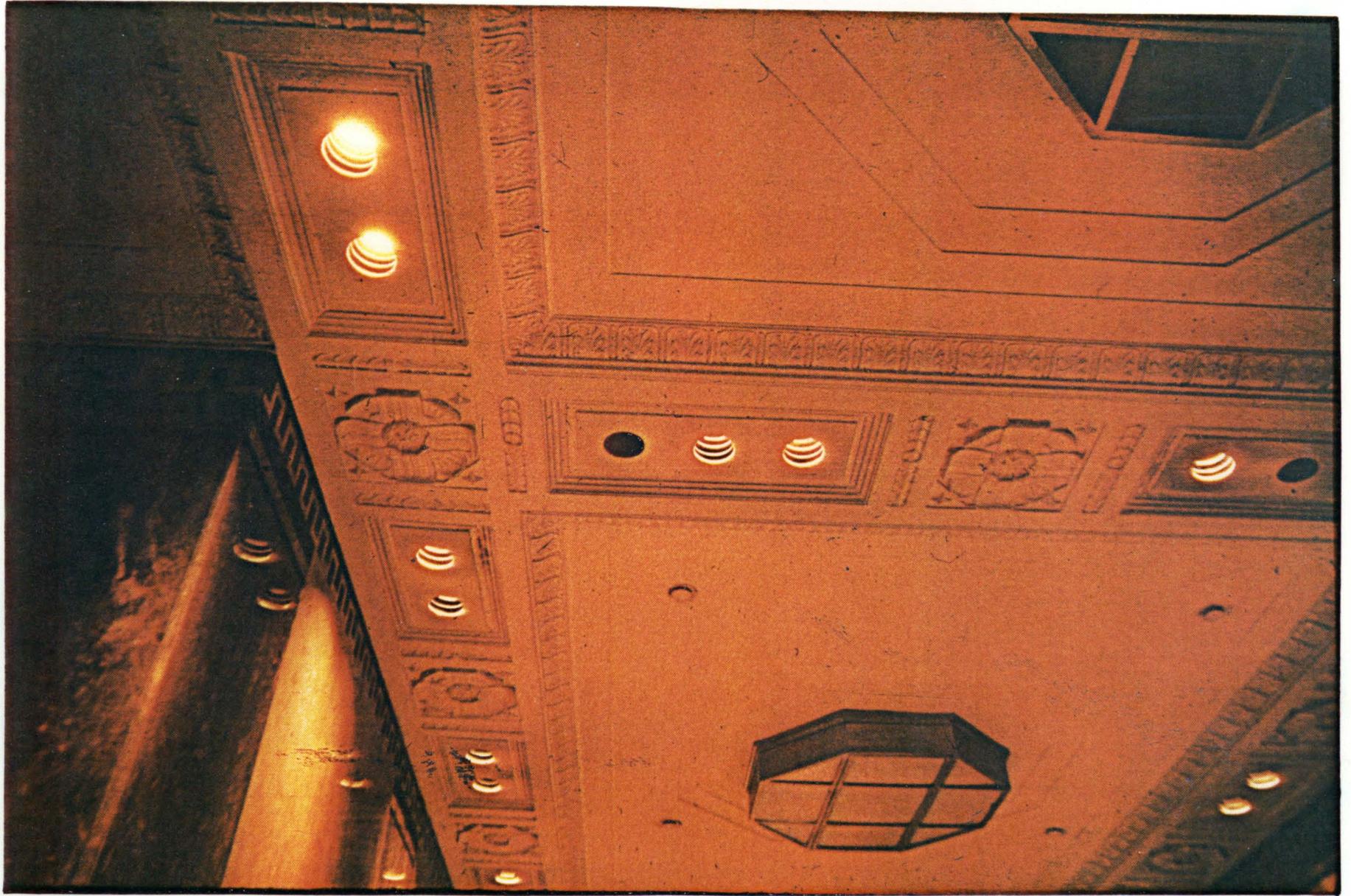
DESIGNATED March 18, 1986

key



Designated area

Not designated



THE FULLER BUILDING INTERIOR

Ceiling Detail



THE FULLER BUILDING INTERIOR

Elevator Hall



THE FULLER BUILDING

LOBBY

593-599 Madison Avenue
(a/k/a 41 East 57th Street)

Built: 1928-29

Architects:

Walker & Gillette

Photo Credit:

Carl Forster
LPC



THE FULLER BUILDING INTERIOR

Detail of Floor Mosaic



THE FULLER BUILDING INTERIOR

Elevator Door