

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 14, 1992; Designation List 241
LP-1810

GOELET BUILDING (now SWISS CENTER BUILDING),
606-608 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1930-32; architect Victor L.S. Hafner; engineer Edward Hall Faile.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 40.

On September 11, 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Goelet Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was no opposition to the designation. Four letters have been received supporting the designation. The owner and long-term lessee are not opposed to the designation.¹

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The ten-story Goelet Building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 49th Street, built in 1930-32, was designed by Victor L. S. Hafner in the Art Deco style but modified to exhibit the supporting skeletal frame devised by the engineering firm of E. H. Faile. The spare horizontality of the lower stories' glazed curtain walls suggest that, stylistically, this building is a transitional monument between the Art Deco and the International Style. The client, Robert Goelet, acting for the Estate of Ogden Goelet, desired a building that would be comparable in architectural merit and prestige to the family mansion it replaced and which would also complement the use -- street level shops and office space above -- and modern appearance of the buildings of the adjacent Rockefeller Center, then under construction. The building's steel frame -- an unusual two-story platform supporting the eight upper stories -- was dictated by the original dual-purpose character of the building. The building is faced with contrasting marbles, verde antique (deep green) marble on the lower two stories and white marble with green marble detailing above, still expressive of its internal structure and function, despite changes at the base of the building.

The Client

Robert Goelet (1881-1966), who commissioned the Goelet Building, was a member of a family that has owned property in Manhattan since the seventeenth century. The Huguenot Francis Goelet emigrated from Amsterdam to the colony of New York in 1676, bringing with him his son Jacobus.² Prominent among their descendants were the brothers Peter Goelet (1800-1879) and Robert Goelet (1809-1879), both of whom accumulated large fortunes based on real estate and banking -- both brothers were founders of the present day Chemical Bank. Their two estates were inherited by Robert's sons, Robert (1841-1899) and Ogden Goelet (1846-1897), who, in 1880, commissioned the architect Edward Hale Kendall (1842-1901) to design them handsome residences at 589 and 608 Fifth Avenue respectively.³

Ogden Goelet married Mary Rita Wilson,⁴ and they had two children, Mary Wilson Goelet (1878-1937) and Robert Goelet (1881-1966).⁵ Upon Ogden Goelet's death, the house at 608 Fifth Avenue and "Ochre Point" at Newport were left to his widow.⁶ His real-estate holdings were to be administered through an office, the Estate of Ogden Goelet, of which his son Robert Goelet became one of two principal trustees. In 1920 Robert Goelet as a trustee commissioned a two-story commercial art gallery building at 606 Fifth Avenue on the vacant lot immediately south of Mrs. Goelet's house. Designed by John H. Duncan, it was faced with limestone and Tinos green marble.⁷ It was leased to the art dealers Henry Reinhardt & Son, a commercial establishment but suitable to a still partially residential neighborhood. Mrs. Ogden Goelet retained the family mansion at 608 Fifth Avenue until her death in 1929. Then aware of the Rockefeller Center project being developed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on the same block and blocks north, Robert Goelet, acting as a trustee of the Estate of Ogden Goelet, determined to replace his mother's mansion with a commercial structure. On November 13, 1929, the first of four sales of the contents of the house was held.⁸ The following March the house was razed along with the Reinhardt art gallery next door. In December 1930, plans for a new ten-story building were announced.⁹

Fifth Avenue

In 1852 the advent of the horse car pushed the city's northern limit to 59th Street. Originally Fifth Avenue was developed as an exclusive residential thoroughfare, but in the late 1870s the dwellings from 23rd to 42nd Streets were rapidly being displaced by taller commercial structures. By 1935, five years after the Ogden Goelet house was razed, there were only five residences left on Fifth below 59th Street. The important retail shops had relocated from the Union Square area. By 1918 Tiffany's had moved to its new palazzo designed by McKim, Mead & White, at Fifth and 37th. Stern's had moved up from 23rd to 42nd, W. & J. Sloane to 46th, and Davis Collamore & Co. to 48th. Among the art dealers were Ehrich at No. 707, Duveen Brothers at No. 720 and Kleinberger at No. 725 Fifth Avenue. Fioret, Inc. (Parfums de Distinction) at No. 677, advertised its location "on the site of the old Cornelius Vanderbilt mansion." While many of the booksellers and publishers remained around 23rd Street, Charles Scribner's Sons moved into its new location at No. 597 (a designated New York City Landmark), designed by Ernest Flagg, in 1913. However, in the wake of the attendant florists, jewellers and silversmiths came the inevitable office buildings and hotels, and after World War I these were being constructed on both sides of Fifth up to 59th Street.

When in 1929 Robert Goelet had the opportunity to build, he was confronted with Fifth Avenue's very transitional character and the rapidly rising value of his property. The Saks department store building (1923-24) occupied the block diagonally opposite. Just across 49th Street, though still in the planning phase, would loom the immense and multi-functioned presence of Rockefeller Center. To offset the high real-estate tax rates, Goelet had to determine what kind of building would give him maximum return.

Goelet took his cue from his neighbors. Anxious that a specific use might limit the building's greatest return and hasten its obsolescence, he elected to be as flexible as possible and to take advantage of all contingencies. His building would have to function both as a retail establishment and as an office building, uses not always structurally compatible especially in a relatively small building.¹⁰ Retail stores, which produced more revenue per square foot than office space, required broad show window space, while

offices did not. Show windows themselves added significantly to revenue. Indeed, when the Goelet building was projected, its show window space was worth \$3000.00 per front foot.¹¹

Founded in 1907 to safeguard the highest standards of this section of the city, the Fifth Avenue Association actively proselytized for civic improvement. Convinced that art and industry were mutually beneficial, the Association promoted architectural harmony along the Avenue. Robert Goelet was sympathetic to the Association's goals. He planned to have his own office in his new building and was eager to maintain the site's prestige. These sentiments and the need for a flexible building were, in large part, the program he presented to Edward H. Faile and his associate, the architect Victor L.S. Hafner.

The Architects

The Goelet Building was designed by Victor L. S. Hafner (1893-1947), an architect then associated with the engineering firm of E.H. Faile & Co.¹² Hafner graduated from the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1917. After the war he worked as a designer for three firms in quick succession, McKim, Mead & White, that of William Baumgarten, and Frederick G. Frost, Jr. & Associates. In 1921 Hafner won the three-year Fellowship in Architecture to the American Academy in Rome.¹³ He joined the Faile firm in 1929, staying but a year and a half.¹⁴ Hafner was associated with other firms as designer of other structures in New York, but only the Goelet Building took pride of place and was mentioned in his obituary.¹⁵

Edward Hall Faile (1884-1947) earned a master's degree from Cornell in engineering in 1906. He served as construction engineer on large industrial and transportation projects -- the Symington Malleable Iron plant in Rochester, New York, and the Third Avenue Railway Company in New York -- but buildings appear to have been his chief interest.¹⁶ He was chief engineer for the thirty-two story, steel-framed Adams Express Building (1916, Francis H. Kimball) 61 Broadway at Exchange Place. In 1925 Faile started an independent practice which he enlarged the following year. Just prior to the Goelet commission, the firm's major work was the steel-framed, twenty-eight story building, No. 270

Broadway (1929) on the southwest corner of Broadway and Chambers Street.¹⁷

Robert Goelet himself claimed a participatory role in the building's design and construction.¹⁸ The green and white marble combination recalls the first story treatment of the Reinhardt art gallery which Goelet had commissioned ten years before on behalf of the Estate of Ogden Goelet. Further, the heraldic swans and entwined "G's" are displayed proudly both within the building and incised on the exterior.

The Design of the Goelet Building

Edward Faile's solution, given Goelet's program, was at once appropriate and unconventional. Retail stores must be directly accessible from the street, while offices need not be. It became Faile's task to place eight floors of office space above two stories of uninterrupted retail space. While in most conventional buildings the outside structural piers rise from along the building lines, in this case such would have obstructed the very lucrative expanse of show window. To solve this problem Faile may have drawn upon his experience designing the Third Avenue El. He devised a cantilevered third-story platform, the same dimensions as the ground plan, with girder spans of over fifty feet (Plate 2). The two-story high, outer columns supporting this heavy platform are pulled back five feet from the building lines along Fifth Avenue and 49th Street. The second story, or mezzanine (not in diagram), is suspended from the platform and anchored to the columns. In this manner he rid the retail space of all supporting columns and provided both stories with uninterrupted show window frontage on both avenue and street.

The outer columns of the skeletal framework of the upper eight stories rest upon the platform's outer, cantilevered edge. From the third story up, the framing and fenestration here is like Faile's more conventional design for 270 Broadway. Though 270 Broadway is seventeen stories higher than the Goelet Building, both buildings have indented light courts along their side street elevations above their second stories, an amenity Faile adapted from the Adams Express Building. However, to insure the flexibility of use that so concerned his client, Faile made certain that the office floors were strong enough so that the structure could be extended into the light court

should more office space be required. Thus the structural two-in-one framing of the Goelet Building was a synthesis of the requirements of stores and offices, a reflection in steel of Fifth Avenue's vigorous though fickle economics.

It fell to Hafner to give this skeletal frame the distinction that Robert Goelet thought appropriate and he did so with a polychromatic program. The Goelet Building is faced with two contrasting marbles, Vermont verde antique and white Dover cream (Plate 3). These materials, recalling the Tinos green marble and limestone first story of the Reinhardt art gallery facade, were organized by Hafner to articulate the building's major parts -- base, shaft and top. Substituting the more straightforward horizontal bands of glass for the pretty screen wall with its rhythm of arched entrances and show windows not only maximized revenue and was a step to revealing the cantilevered structure within, but it introduced a new horizontal character to the design of the building's facades. Where not glazed, the first two stories are revetted with the deep green of the verde antique marble in strips parallel to the glass. Complementing the horizontality of the building's base, the eight office stories above are expressed in horizontal bands of the Dover cream marble. The horizontal definition between the upper stories was sharpened by adding the bronzed aluminum window and corner mullions. The verde antique sheathes the eleventh story penthouse and utility housing above. Other horizontal elements -- moldings, copings and the frieze around the top of the utility housing -- are of the same bronzed aluminum. Hafner employed slender, vertical, verde antique ribs, in series, to link the dark green base with the dark green top of the building, but as realized the ribs no longer just link the building's base and top but appear to contain the eight layered stories in between. The unconventional steel-frame of the ten-story Goelet Building is revealed in part through the glazing of the lower two stories but overall it is the building's chromatic program of deep green verde antique marble and white Dover Cream marble revetment that distinguishes its functions.

The exterior of the Goelet Building was first conceived as a quarter-scale model (Plate 4).¹⁹ But the building as executed differs from this model in several respects. Only two of the arched entrances were retained, 608 Fifth Avenue and 4 West 49th Street; the individual windows on both

the lower two floors of the model were replaced by glazed curtain walls; and the window and corner mullions on the office stories above are sheathed with bronzed aluminum rather than the Dover cream revetment apparent on the model. Stylistically the differences between the model and the Goelet Building as built (Plate 5) can be seen as a transitional phase between the elegance of the Art Deco and the pared down simplicity of the International Style. The unusual cantilever construction of Faile's Goelet Building is an example of experimentation with skeletal steel framing for tall, multi-use buildings. The subsequent expression of greater horizontality in Hafner's final scheme, as well as the use of polychromy and Art Deco detail, suggest a debt to Raymond Hood, perhaps the most innovative modernist of the 1920s in New York. His McGraw-Hill Building (1930-31, a designated New York City Landmark) on West 42nd Street was completed just before the Goelet Building.

Description

The ten-story Goelet Building, located on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 49th Street, has two facades; the breadth of the Fifth Avenue facade is seventy feet wide and the West 49th Street facade is 161.6 feet wide. The two lower stories are fronted by a curtain wall of glass and verde antique marble. A bronze-colored metal screen has been added at the second story (see Subsequent Additions). An open light well breaks the 49th Street facade above the second floor. Juxtaposed one-over-one sash windows and spandrels of Dover cream marble articulate each of the upper seven office stories. The tenth story and the penthouse are revetted with the verde antique marble. Vertical ribs, of alternating widths, of the verde antique marble, rise up each bay of the upper seven stories. The broader central pair determine the tenth story dormer above each bay.

These ribs rise from corbels attached to the broad, green marble surface masking the large girders of the cantilevered platform behind it and traverse the white marble office stories till they reach the tenth and penthouse story parapets. The wider ribs are capped with panels incised with stylized foliate motifs. The three thin ribs between these broad ribs terminate as fin-like elements on the tenth story coping. The penthouse (originally Robert Goelet's office) and utility housing, faced

with the verde antique, have Dover cream trim.

Carved, decorative, heraldic detail ornaments the extreme ends of the vertical ribs -- on top within the panels that served as capitals of the broader ribs, and on the corbels at their point of origin. The broader corbels are enriched with stylized, foliate forms carved in low relief. The central element carved in the two broad corbels on the Fifth Avenue facade (just below the flagpole bases) is the Goelet crest -- the swan -- above the entwined "G"s monogram. The carved, tripartite decoration of the four broad corbels on the West 49th Street elevation differs in that the swan is no longer a crest for but is flanked by the monograms (plate 6). The swans and the "G"s reappeared on the cast metal tympanum within the arched main entrance at 608 Fifth Avenue, as built; below a shield inscribed with the Goelet "G"s monogram, two swans floated on stylized rivulets, facing one another above the double doors.

The window and corner mullions as well as the moldings, copings and the frieze around the top of the penthouse are bronzed aluminum; all are vertically fluted or reeded except the ninth story coping which is horizontally fluted.

Subsequent Additions

Only four years after the Goelet Building was completed, plans for an addition at 6 West 49th Street were announced,²⁰ replacing an older rowhouse, originally purchased by the Goelets, to

protect the family residence. Initially to be five stories, the addition was built as four. Again Faile designed the structure to accommodate both retail and office use; that it had to be a potential extension of the space within the main building was a requirement. It is likely that Hafner was responsible for its architectural expression. The contrasting horizontal green and vertical white marble elements were repeated but the corbel carving lacks the intricacy of the earlier work.

In 1964 the building was leased to the Swiss Center.²¹ In 1965 the Center's administrators commissioned Lester Tichy to undertake the remodelling of portions of the first and second, or mezzanine, stories both inside and outside. The majority of the work was on the interior. However, Tichy removed the Fifth Avenue entrance arch (only the arch at 4 West 49th remains), flattening the top with marble infill to match both the verde antique and the Dover cream soffit.²² On the ground floor Tichy eliminated the raised sill of the show windows and reset the glass curtain wall at grade. With the old entrance arch out of the way, Tichy superimposed a bronze colored metal screen of tall vertical fins upon the continuous horizontal of the mezzanine's glazed curtain wall above both Fifth Avenue and West 49th Street (plate 1). What originally had been designed as retail space now became offices.

*Report prepared by Charles Savage,
Research Department
Report Edited by Marjorie Pearson
Director of Research*

NOTES

1. The Goelet Building was first heard on January 11, 1983 (Item No. 8). The hearing was continued to February 8, 1983 (Item No. 5) and March 22, 1983 (Item No. 1). All three hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The owner and long-term lessee were not opposed to the designation. At that time the Commission received several letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.
2. Goelet genealogical sources are Frank Allaben, "Goelet Genealogy, 1676-1911," (typescript), n.d., and the Washburn Genealogical Collection, Goelet #76, 1911, New York Public Library.
3. Other notable buildings designed by Kendall were the Equitable and Washington Buildings in the French Renaissance style and the Methodist Book Exchange (1888-1890, a designated New York City Landmark) in the style of the Italian Renaissance. The Gorham or Reiss Building at 889 Broadway (also a designated New York City Landmark), on the site of Peter Goelet's house, was designed by Kendall for the Goelets

in 1883.

4. The Wilsons moved to New York from Georgia following the Civil War. Her brother Marshall married Caroline Astor, daughter of Caroline Schermerhorn Astor. Her sister Grace married Cornelius Vanderbilt.
5. Robert married Elsie Whelen of Philadelphia in 1904. Mary married Henry John Innes-Ker (1876-1932), eighth Duke of Roxburghe in 1903.
6. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, Liber 467, p.458.
7. Duncan Correspondence, Boxes 1, 2, and 4, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University. Initially American green serpentine marble was specified. But the Tinos, although much more expensive, was preferred for its greater exterior durability and deeper green color. Until his death in 1929, Duncan executed other commissions for Robert Goelet as well. Robert Goelet's own taste -- formed through wealth, privilege and precedent -- emerged slowly. Correspondence between Duncan and Goelet relative to the nine-story apartment houses (1923) at 204-218 East 48th Street reveal Robert Goelet's interest in certain details. For example, the marble squares of the lobby floor were to be the same size and pattern as those in the hall of Delano and Aldrich's Knickerbocker Club (1914). Relative to the Goelet Building commission is the drawing of a cartouche displaying the Goelet crest, a swan above a monogram of two entwined "G's," copied from the family stationery. Duncan carried out renovations to the Gorham Building, 889 Broadway, which Goelet's father and uncle had commissioned from Edward Hale Kendall in 1883 on the site of Peter Goelet's house. Duncan also was commissioned to design the renovation of Ogden Goelet's former stable at 7 East 52nd Street for new tenants, the British china and glassware firm of Davis Collamore, Ltd.(1925-26).
8. *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1929, p. 27:4.
9. *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1930, Sections 12 and 13, p. 1:1.
10. *Architecture and Building*, 63 (Dec. 1931), 158-160.
11. *Architecture and Building*, 159.
12. It is to E.H. Faile & Co., Engineers that credit for the building is given in both the daily and the architectural press, *New York Times*, *op.cit.* and *Architecture and Building*, 158-160. The architect responsible for filing the building permit was Roy Clinton Morris, New Building Permit 47, March 3, 1930, (NB 47-1930). Hafner's participation is cited in an interview with Robert Goelet, *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung*, May 13, 1964, p.8. The author thanks Mr. Helmut Klee, President of Swiss Air Transport, for this citation. The attribution is corroborated in Hafner's obituary, *New York Times*, April 28, 1947.

Explanation for this triplication of authors lies in the nature of the engineering firm itself, where the more obscure associates, rather than the principals, are the registered architects. In 1930 Hafner and Morris, both architects, were listed individually in the telephone directory at 441 Lexington Avenue, the same address as E.H. Faile & Co., Engineers. The number listed was the same for all three.
13. *Pencil Points*, 2 (Sept., 1921), 35. The author thanks Carol Willis for this citation.
14. In 1936 both Hafner and Faile maintained offices at 608 Fifth Avenue, and each had individual phone listings. Perhaps Robert Goelet provided each of them with space during their collaboration on the four-story addition to the original Goelet building at 6 West 49th Street.

15. *New York Times*, April 28, 1947. In 1934 Hafner carried out alterations on both the Rectory and the School of Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church at 211 West 82nd Street and 212 West 83rd Street respectively, Alt.1121/34 and Alt.1664/34. At this time his address was Scarsdale, N.Y.
16. *Who's Who in Engineering*, ed. Winfield Scott Brown (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1931), p.404.
17. NB 500-1928. 270 Broadway echoes Kimball's Adams Express Building both in material--white brick--and in form--displaying an indented light well above the second floor on the unobstructed Chambers Street side. The client of 270 Broadway was the Chemical Bank. Robert Goelet was a Chemical Bank director and may thus have become aware of Faile's work.
18. *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung*, 8.
19. *Architecture and Building*, 158.
20. *New York Times*, March 7, 1936, p. 31:2; Nov. 1, XX, p. 3:5.
21. In 1962 ownership of the Goelet Building was transferred to the Chemical [New York Trust Company] Bank as trustee. After Robert Goelet's death his trustees sold the building in 1967 to Sarah Korein who continued the lease with the Swiss Center. This lease can be extended until 2026.

The Center was an outgrowth of the Swiss Federated Railroads agency which first opened a New York information office in 1908. The S.F.R.R. agency opened an office at 475 Fifth Avenue in 1928. In 1951 it moved to Rockefeller Center at 10 West 49th Street as the Swiss National Travel Office, until it leased its own home across the street at 608 Fifth Avenue in 1964 as the Swiss Center. *Swiss National Tourist Office - 75 Years in the United States*, nd., np.

22. The tympanum was removed, crated and shipped to Ochre Court, Newport, *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung*, Jan. 26, 1966. In the autumn of 1991, inquiries made at Ochre Court, now Salve Regina-Newport College, have failed to locate this tympanum. Plans: "Exterior Elevations," Sheet #105, The Swiss Center, through the courtesy of Dr. Helmut Klee.

Additional References

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the ten-story Goelet Building, built in 1930-32 at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 49th Street, was designed by the architect Victor L. S. Hafner in the Art Deco style but modified to exhibit the skeletal frame devised by the engineering firm of Edward H. Faile; that the spare horizontality of the lower stories' glazed curtain walls and the horizontal expression of the upper stories suggest that, stylistically this building is a transitional monument between the Art Deco style and the International Style; that the client, Robert Goelet, desired a building that would be comparable in architectural merit and prestige to the family mansion it replaced and which would also complement the use -- street level shops and office space above -- and modern appearance of the buildings of the adjacent Rockefeller Center, then under construction; that the building's steel frame -- an unusual two-story platform supporting the eight upper stories -- was dictated by the original dual-purpose character of the building; that the building is faced with contrasting marbles, verde antique (deep green) marble on the lower two stories and white marble with green marble detailing above, still expressive of the internal structure and function, despite changes at the base of the building.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Goelet Building, 606-608 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1264, Lot 40, as its Landmark Site.

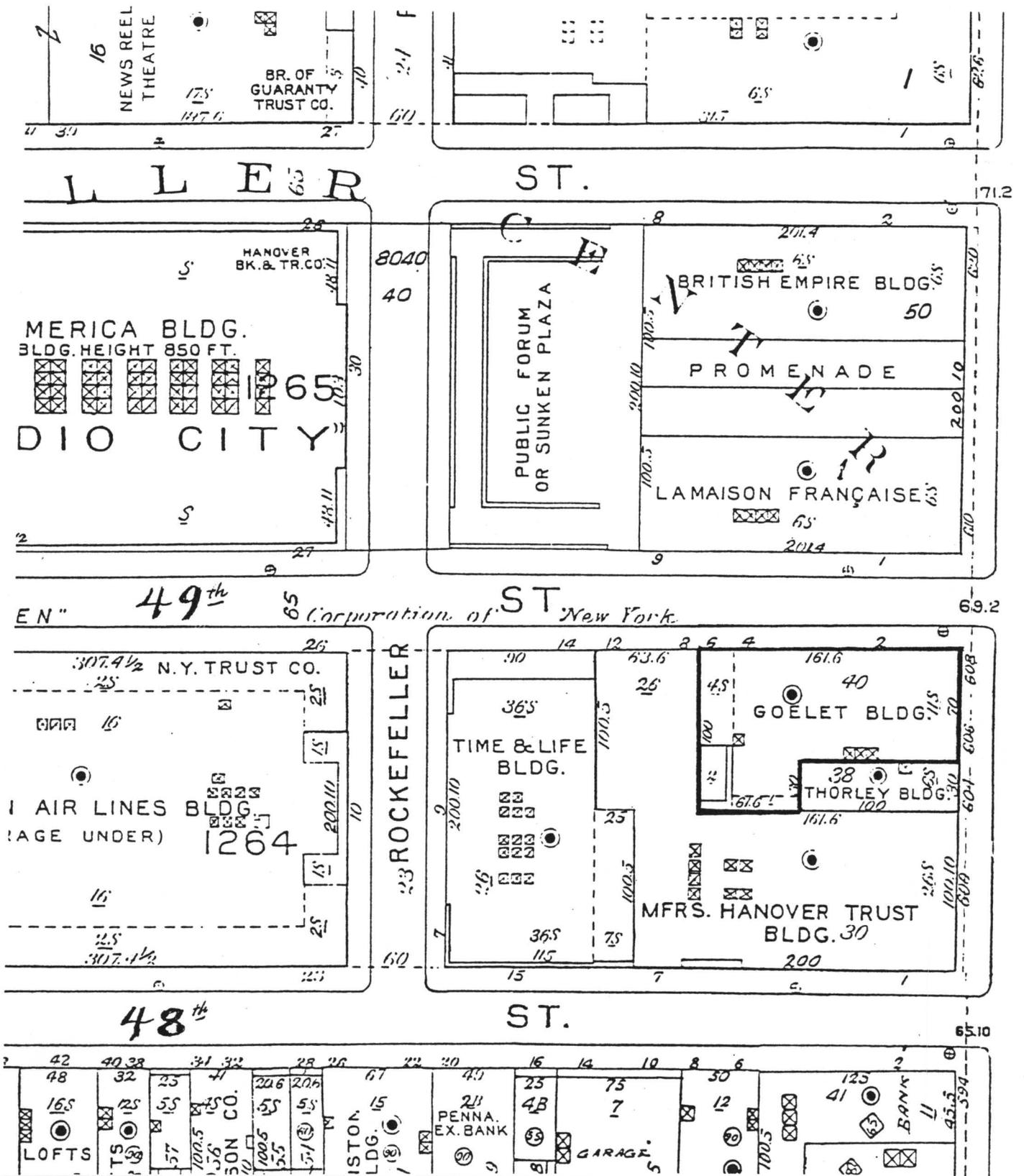
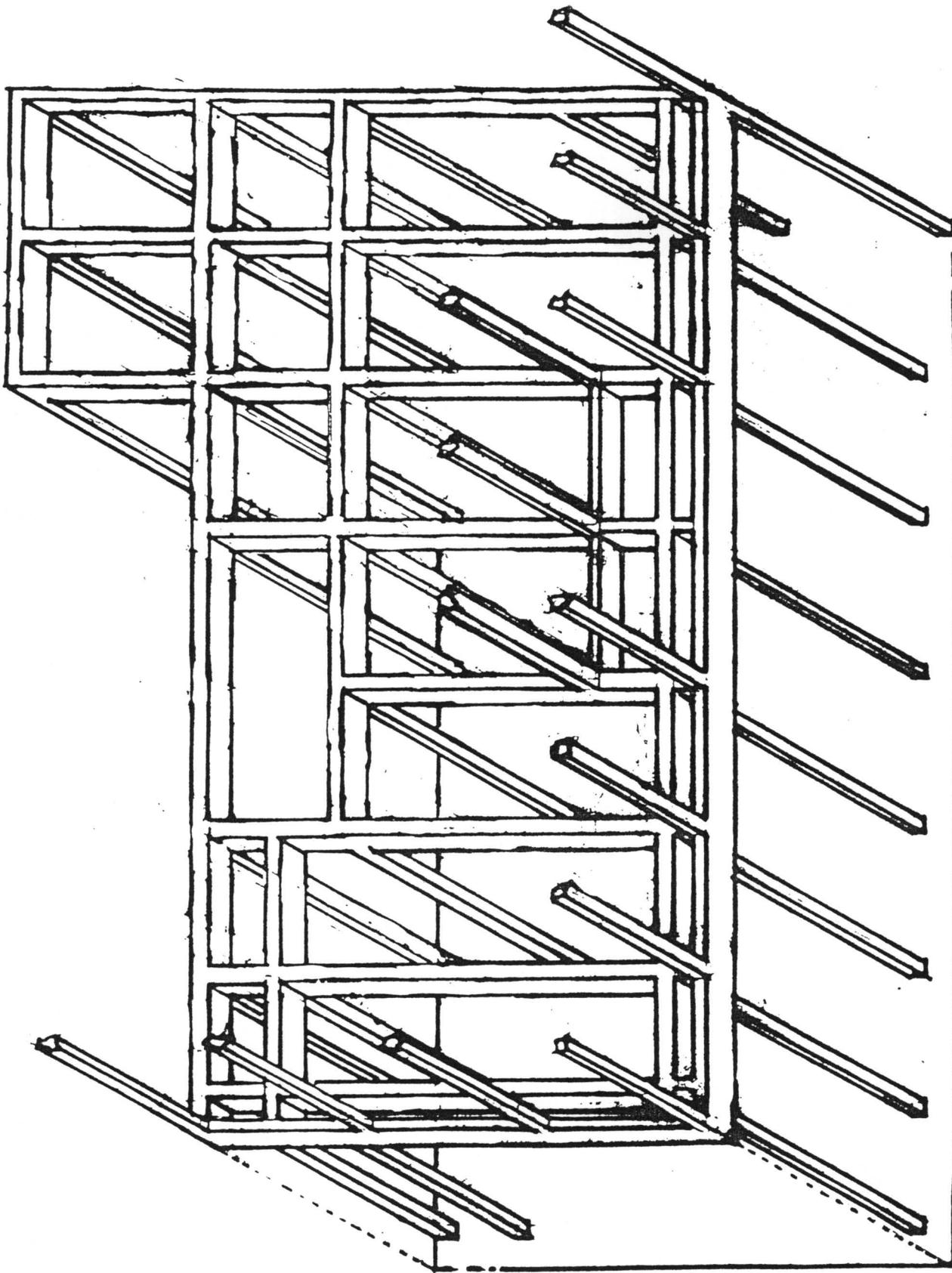


Plate 1. Goelet Building, 606-608 Fifth Avenue. Detail, *Manhattan Land Book* (New York: Redi/Sanborn, 1991-92), plate 77.



Fifth Avenue building line

Plate 2. Axonometric projection, Goelet Building, third story cantilevered platform. The suspended second story is not shown here.



Plate 3. Goelet Building (now Swiss Center Building), 606-608 Fifth Avenue. (Carl Forster)

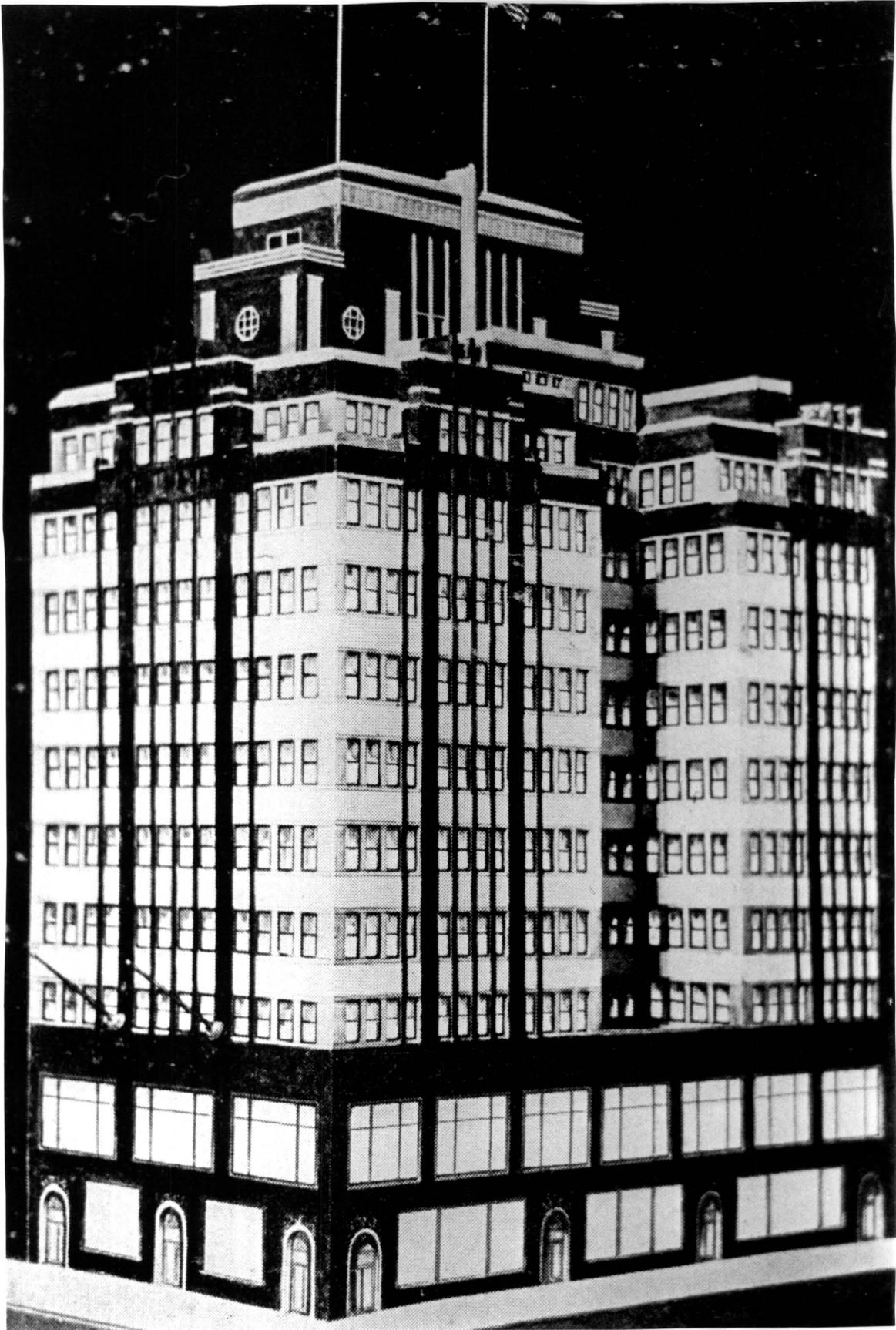


Plate 4. Goelet Building; Hafner's original conception. *Architecture & Building*, 63 (December, 1931), 158.



Plate 5. Goelet Building, December, 1931. *Architecture & Building*, 63 (December, 1931), 158.



Plate 6. Corbel detail, West 49th Street elevation, Goelet Building. (C. Savage)