

18 East 41st Street (aka 18-20 East 41st Street), Manhattan
Built, 1912-14; architect, George & Edward Blum

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1275, Lot 61

On September 13, 2016, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of 18 East 41st Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance of law. Seven people testified in support of designation, including representatives of the owner, Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer, Friends of Terra Cotta, Historic Districts Council, New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Municipal Art Society of New York. The Real Estate Board of New York submitted written testimony in opposition to designation. State Senator Brad Hoylman submitted testimony in support of designation.

Summary

18 East 41st Street is an early skyscraper with a striking white, beige and blue terra-cotta facade. Completed in 1914, it represents the first phase of commercial development in East Midtown, when various high-rise structures were built in the vicinity of Grand Central Terminal. It is an early work by George & Edward Blum, a firm celebrated for designing facades with unique and unusual ornamentation. Twenty-one stories tall, it precedes the 1916 zoning resolution and rises without setbacks. The alternation of thick and thin piers creates a strong vertical emphasis that recalls the pioneering skyscrapers of Louis Sullivan, while the sumptuous terra-cotta embellishment suggests the influence of both late medieval and modern sources, from Gothic cathedrals to contemporary European designs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Josef Hoffmann.

A superb example of an early 20th century office building, it was used in a 1914 article by architectural critic H. W. Frohne to illustrate “a new line of thought in exterior commercial architecture” and as “an artistic advance.” The base has been respectfully modified and the rest of the facade is mostly unchanged, particularly the ornate upper stories, which incorporate sculpted window frames in distinctive grid patterns, pointed arches, and angled projections.

The building attracted a varied group of tenants, from private clubs and publishers to doctors and architects who wanted to be close to the new train terminal. A five-room penthouse apartment was originally located on the roof. Designed to recall a bungalow-type residence, it was leased to the Broadway actor Donald Brian and movie director Dudley Murphy, as well as a speakeasy, which was closed by prohibition agents in 1932. A major work by George & Edward Blum, 18 East 41st Street is among East Midtown’s first and finest 20th century skyscrapers.



BUILDING DESCRIPTION

18 East 41st Street is a 21-story office building, between Madison and Fifth Avenues. Fifty feet wide, it is a mostly freestanding structure, with windows facing four directions. The upper floors of the rear facade are partly visible above 13 East 40th Street.

Main facade

Historic features: White glazed terra-cotta piers, beige spandrels with blue details, grids, foliated details and crests, upper three floors incorporate more elaborate ornamentation.

Alterations: Ground floor cladding and infill, signage, lighting fixtures, awning, recessed building entrance, pointed arch windows on the second floor, projecting beige and blue cornice between the second and third floors, double-hung windows, roof pediment and ornamental detail on upper floors have been removed.

East facade (visible above 22 East 41st Street)

Historic features: Brownish brick, white glazed terra cotta along north edge and framing windows on the 18th floor, gridded details below windows, some original three-over-three steel-framed windows.

Alterations: Some double-hung windows, light-colored brick repairs.

West facade (visible above 16 East 41st Street)

Historic features: white glazed terra cotta along north edge and framing windows on 18th floor, brownish brick, gridded details below windows, some original three-over-three steel-framed windows.

Alterations: Some double-hung windows, light-colored brick repairs.

Rear facade (visible above 13 East 40th Street)

Historic features: brownish brick with white terra-cotta quoining, mostly original three over three windows.

SITE HISTORY

Evolution of East Midtown¹

In 1831, the recently-established New York & Harlem Railroad signed an agreement with New York State permitting the operation of steam locomotives on Fourth (now Park) Avenue, from 23rd Street to the Harlem River. Five years later, in 1836, several important street openings occurred in East Midtown. These included 42nd Street, Lexington Avenue and Madison Avenue. Initially, trains ran at grade, sharing Fourth Avenue with pedestrians and vehicles. In 1856, locomotives were banned below 42nd Street -- the current site of a maintenance barn and fuel lot. Though rail passengers continued south by horse car, this decision set the stage for East Midtown to become an important transit hub.

Cornelius Vanderbilt acquired control of the New York & Harlem, Hudson River, and the New York Central Railroads in 1863-67. Under his direction, a single terminal for the three railroads was planned and built, known as Grand Central Depot (1868-71, demolished). It was a large structure, consisting of an L-shaped head-house inspired by the Louvre in Paris, with entrances on 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue, as well as a 652-foot-long train shed. The area immediately north, mainly between 45th and 49th Streets, served as a train yard. Traversed by pedestrian and vehicular bridges, this busy facility occupied an irregularly-shaped site that extended from Lexington to Madison Avenue.

The earliest surviving buildings in midtown are residences in Murray Hill, directly south of 42nd Street. An 1847 covenant stipulated that all houses be built with brick and stone and many handsome ones survive, particularly east of Park Avenue. Following the Civil War, residential development continued up Fifth Avenue, transforming the area between St. Patrick's Cathedral (1853-88) and Central Park (begun 1857, both are New York City Landmarks). Though most of the large mansions -- many owned by members of the Vanderbilt family -- have been lost, other impressive residences survive on the side streets, between Park and Fifth Avenues. New York City Landmarks in the East 50s include: The Villard Houses (1883-85), William & Ada Moore House (1898-1900), Morton & Nellie Plant House (1903-05), and the Fiske Harkness House (1871/1906).

In 1902, 15 railroad passengers were killed in a rear-end collision in the Park Avenue Tunnel, near 56th Street. In response to this tragic accident, William J. Wilgus, chief engineer of the New York Central Railroad, proposed that not only should steam locomotives be eliminated from Manhattan but that the terminal be expanded and completely rebuilt. The city agreed and Grand Central Terminal (a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) was completed in February 1913.

Wilgus envisioned the new terminal as a city-within-the-city, knitted together by more than two dozen buildings constructed above the newly-submerged rail tracks. Faced with tan brick and limestone, these handsome neo-classical style buildings formed an understated backdrop to the monumental Beaux-Arts style terminal. A key example is the New York Central Building, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark. Erected by the railroad in 1927-29, it stands directly above the tracks and incorporates monumental archways that direct automobile traffic towards the Park Avenue Viaduct (1917-19, a New York City Landmark).

The new terminal and subway attracted considerable commercial development to East Midtown, especially near 42nd Street, the original route of the IRT subway. Most of these buildings date to the 1910s and 1920s. In contrast to the neo-classical, City Beautiful, aesthetics that shaped Terminal City, these distinctive skyscrapers frequently incorporate unusual terra-

cotta ornamentation inspired by medieval (and later, Art Deco) sources. Memorable examples include: the Bowery Savings Bank Building (1921-23, 1931-33) and the Chanin Building (1927-29, both New York City Landmarks).

In 1918, subway service was extended up Lexington Avenue, north of 42nd Street. Though Terminal City had been planned with several hotels, such as the Biltmore and Commodore (both have been re-clad), additional rooms were needed. A substantial number of hotels would rise on Lexington Avenue, between 47th and 50th Streets, including the Waldorf-Astoria (1929-32) and the Summit (1959-61, both are New York City Landmarks).

Following the end of the Second World War, the New York Central Railroad struggled with debt and entered a significant period of decline. In response, it began to terminate lot leases and sell off real estate properties. The impact of the situation was most powerfully felt on Park Avenue. Apartment buildings and hotels were quickly replaced by an influx of glassy office towers, with such pioneering mid-20th century Modern works as Lever House (1949-52, a New York City Landmark) and the Seagram Building (1954-56, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark). The success of these and other projects helped make Park Avenue (and East Midtown) one of Manhattan's most prestigious corporate addresses.

Construction of 18 East 41st Street

In the latter half of the 19th century, both sides of East 41st Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, were lined with four-story residences. The “4-sty and basement dwelling” at No. 18 was sold in March 1902, and again, in February 1903.² The adjacent “4-sty private dwelling” at No. 20 was sold in December 1904.³ The decorating firm Hamilton Bell & Company then sold these two buildings to the Martin Holding Company (C. Grayson Martin and Frank Martin) in May 1910.⁴

Plans to construct a 20-story fireproof office building (with stores) at 18(-20) East 41st Street were filed with the New York City Department of Buildings in September 1912. The estimated cost of construction was \$450,000 and the owner was the Holland Holding Company, headed by real estate lawyer Judson S(cott). Todd. The contract was awarded to mason George H. McEntee. Clark MacMullen & Riley were selected as the steam and electrical engineers.⁵

Completed in 1914, 18 East 41st Street has windows on four sides. To “give protection to the easterly light,” in 1912 the owner “obtained a long term protective lease” on the buildings at 22 and 24 East 41st Street.⁶ Previously owned by stage actress Maud Adams, these row houses were replaced with a four-story loft building in 1912-13, also designed by George & Edward Blum. When 18 East 41st Street was refinanced by the new owners in 1925, an advertisement claimed that “Through the control of the low building and land immediately adjoining on the east, leased under very favorable terms, this advantage of outside light will be maintained.”⁷

Architect

George & Edward Blum designed 18 East 41st Street.⁸ George M. Blum (1870-1928) was born in New York City to French parents. His brother Edward Isaac Blum (1876-1944) was born in a suburb of Paris. Their family returned to New York City in 1888. After attending the College of the City of New York in 1891-94, George graduated from Columbia College with a degree in architecture in 1899. Both he and Edward also attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts, though neither received a diploma. In Paris, Edward worked in the atelier of Jean Louis Pascal and George with Jean Baptiste (Edmond?) Paulin. Edward returned to New York in 1905. When

George moved back in c. 1908, he worked with the architect William L. Rouse, later of Rouse & Goldstone.

George & Edward Blum received their first independent commissions in 1909. During the next two decades the firm was exceptionally prolific, working on more than 170 projects in Manhattan. Most were apartment buildings with richly-detailed facades, particularly on the Upper West Side, in Morningside Heights, Washington Heights and along Park Avenue, but they also designed town houses, two synagogues and a number of commercial buildings, such as the Hotel Theresa (1912-13, a New York City Landmark).⁹ Though the firm continued until 1935, the Blums were most active and innovative during their first decade, producing inventive terra-cotta designs of consistently high quality. From 1909 to 1925, their firm's office was located at 505 Fifth Avenue, close to 18 East 41st Street and the corner of 42nd Street.

Design

18 East 41st Street was most likely George & Edward Blum's first office building,¹⁰ as well as the first high-rise constructed on the block. This was an ideal location for a speculative property, near the Madison Avenue entrance to the 42nd Street subway station (now the 42nd Street Shuttle) and the recently-completed main building of New York Public Library (1898-1911, a New York City Landmark and Landmark Interior), as well as the lively Fifth Avenue shopping corridor. Shortly after construction ended, *The New York Tribune* observed: "To own property in the heart of the Grand Central Terminal district is the most ardent wish of a large number of professional traders or buyers in the real estate field ... because no other part of the city has a brighter realty future."¹¹

Twenty-one stories tall, the main facade is embellished with sumptuous terra-cotta details. Above the multi-story base, thick and thin piers create a strong vertical emphasis, directing the eye towards a somewhat elaborate crown. This distribution of architectural elements recalls works by the important Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, particularly his ornate Bayard-Condict Building (1897-99, a New York City Landmark) a mid-block loft structure on Bleecker Street in Manhattan. Sullivan wrote "The Tall Building Artistically Considered" (1896, reprinted 1905) in which he memorably argued that skyscrapers should be "every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation."¹² For this project, the Blums certainly followed his advice.

With the construction of Grand Central Terminal (1903-13), many new office buildings opened in midtown Manhattan. In contrast to buildings that were within "Terminal City," where most of the facades were embellished with complementary tan brick and classical details, 18 East 41st Street is neo-Gothic, a style that gained great popularity during the first decades of the 20th century. Associated with medieval cathedrals in Europe, it shaped the design of many early skyscrapers, including the nearby New York Times Building (1903-05, re-clad), The Trinity and United States Realty Buildings (1904-07), Liberty Tower (1909-10), and the Woolworth Building (1910-13).¹³ In 1914, critic H. W. Frohne observed that such structures exemplify a "new line of thought in exterior commercial architecture . . . [possessing] demonstrable practical advantages as well as an artistic advance in the building art of our time."¹⁴ To illustrate this trend toward "Medievalism," his essay was accompanied by four photographs, including a view of 18 East 41st Street.

Throughout their careers, George & Edward Blum made innovative use of surface ornament. Rather than choose terra-cotta components from manufacturer's catalogues, they appear to have frequently designed their own reliefs. While some of the forms are abstract and

rectilinear, others resemble leaves, flowers and buds. The piers that run the full height of the facade have a whitish glaze, while the projecting spandrels are beige with blue details. These neo-Gothic features certainly recall the Woolworth Building, which also has terra cotta with polychrome elements, but a closer look may also suggest a broader range of influences. For instance, the heraldic shields, recessed grid patterns and foliate details may indicate the influence of the Arts and Crafts and Secessionist movements, and possibly the work of the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Austrian designer Josef Hoffmann.

As with most tripartite skyscrapers a great deal of attention was paid to the uppermost floors, where the fenestration shifts from two to three windows per bay. At this level, the ornamentation is quite ornate, with sculpted window frames, distinctive grid patterns, pointed arches, and angled projections. As visible in early photographs, these floors were originally crowned by a large pediment, trimmed with what appears to have been foliate ornament. Vaguely classical in feel, the Blums used similar pediments in their Oxford and Cambridge Hall apartments (1911), as well as atop the Hotel Theresa. The pediment was possibly removed in the 1980s.

The ground floor was originally divided into three sections. At the center was a prominent display window flanked by slender side windows. On the left was the entrance to the store, and on the right, the entrance to the office building, trimmed with low decorative relief. Above the storefront and building entrance was a multi-light transom. A similar grid was originally integrated into the lower floors of the neighboring building at 22 East 41st Street (not part of this designation).

Later History

The building attracted a varied mix of office tenants. Most floors had just three interior columns, allowing flexible office and loft configurations.¹⁵ The neighboring buildings were just four- and five-stories-tall and advertisements boasted “light on four sides.”¹⁶ In contrast to buildings with front and rear windows only, this was a major marketing point, even in the age of electricity. No manufacturing was permitted and all floors were served by “high speed elevators.”¹⁷ Early tenants included medical professionals and educational tenants, as well as the short-lived Motion Picture Board of Trade of America.

Due to its proximity to various private clubs, 18 East 41st Street attracted the midtown offices of the Turf & Field Club, the National Steeplechase & Hunt Club, and the Jockey Club. It was also briefly home to the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, as well as the New York chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects and The Homeland Company, a suburban real estate firm. Other notable tenants included the architect-engineer William Higginson (c. 1920-22) and the architectural firm Boak & Paris (1940-42).

On the roof was a “five room apartment arranged like a bungalow, with a summer garden.”¹⁸ It was initially leased to the “well-known actor” Donald Brian, who often performed on Broadway.¹⁹ In later years, the apartment gained unfortunate notoriety. In January 1930, during the period that it was occupied by movie director Dudley Murphy and advertising designer John M. Barbour, it was the setting for a mysterious death that made first-page news.²⁰ Murphy had recently directed *St. Louis Blues* (released summer 1929), an early sound film showcasing blues singer Bessie Smith, at the Paramount (now Astoria) Studios in Queens. Jazz pianist Fats Waller was remembered as a frequent guest. Murphy recalled:

My apartment, being close to the theatrical district, was always open and on many occasions I would come home and find people assembled for a late snack . . . Fats Waller, who was playing in a show on 46th Street, used to come up and compose on my piano. My apartment being in an office building, no one was ever disturbed by the noise.”²¹

For brief period, the penthouse was converted into an “elaborately furnished resort” with an “ebony bar” which was raided by prohibition agents in April 1932.²²

Throughout the 20th century, the building had various owners. In 1916, two years after completion, it was sold to 18 East Forty-First Street Company. The new owners were Peters, White & Company, American chemical dealers who were reportedly profiting from Britain’s blockade of Germany during the First World War.²³ In 1934, the Manufacturers Trust Company acquired the building, then owned by the Twenty East 41st Street Corporation, through foreclosure proceedings.²⁴ Subsequent owners have included Gladwin Properties, Tarima Properties, the Nordic Realty Corporation, and RFR Holding LLC (18 East 41st Street Partners, Inc.).²⁵ In 2008, the current owners undertook a repair and restoration using cast-stone panels that blend with the historic terra cotta.

The original storefront and entrances were probably removed in 1958 (ALT 616-58) and Modern-style glass-and-aluminum panels were substituted. These simple panels were replaced in c. 1990 with projecting blue, white and beige cast-concrete elements that resemble some of the historic terra-cotta details on the upper floors. At this time, the six pointed arch windows were created on the second floor. The current storefront dates to about 2001.

Researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

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- ¹ This section is mostly based on designation reports prepared by members of the research staff at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Also see Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal* (John Hopkins University Press, 2003), Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999), Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 1983) and Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between Two World Wars* (New York Rizzoli Books, 1987).
- ² *Real Estate Record & Guide*, March 29, 1902, 555.
- ³ *Real Estate Record & Guide*, December 24, 1904, 1424.
- ⁴ "Real Estate Notes," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, May 21, 1910, 1103.
- ⁵ "Contracts Awarded," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, November 23, 1912, 974.
- ⁶ "Plot Leased," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 27, 1912; "Real Estate News," *New York Herald*, September 11, 1912, 15. For more on the building at 22-24 East 41st Street, see <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-terra-cotta-beauty-at-nos-22-24-e.html>.
- ⁷ Advertisement, *The New York Times*, June 2, 1925, 32. The building had recently been sold to the Amri Realty Company, see: "Central Section Large Building in Quick Resale," *New York Herald*, April 11, 1925, 20.
- ⁸ Andrew Dolkart and Susan Tunick, *George & Edward Blum* (New York: The Friends of Terra Cotta Press, 1993).
- ⁹ "Big Hotel For Harlem," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, December 14, 1912, 1118.
- ¹⁰ The Blums' second commercial commission may have been 15 West 44th Street, a 12-story structure between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. See "New 44th St. Structure," *New York Tribune*, October 11, 1914, C2.
- ¹¹ "First in Esteem of Many Realty Traders," *New York Tribune*, February 21, 1915, C1.
- ¹² Sullivan's influential essay was first published in *Lippincott's Magazine* (March 1896), followed by *Inland Architect and News Record* (May 1896), *The Craftsman* (July 1905), and *Western Architect* (January 1922). It can be viewed at googlebooks.com
- ¹³ All but the New York Times Building are New York City Landmarks.
- ¹⁴ H.W. Frohne, "Rationalizing the Architectural Treatment of the Tall Building," *The American Architect*, Vol. 6 (July 29, 1914), 63.
- ¹⁵ An early floor plan is displayed in the building lobby. The source is not identified.
- ¹⁶ Quote from *New-York Tribune*, cited in "The Gothic Skyscraper at 18-20 East 41st Street," see <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-gothic-skyscraper-at-18-20-east.html>
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ "Real Estate News," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, October 8, 1914, 6.
- ¹⁹ "Bungalow on Roof of an Office Building," *The Building Age* (December 1914), 30, viewed at googlebooks.com
- ²⁰ "Woman is Found Dead in Film Man's Rooms; Choked, Police View," *New York Evening Post*, January 15, 1930, 1.
- ²¹ Quoted in Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 101, viewed at googlebooks.com
- ²² "Raid Penthouse Bar in East 41st Street," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1932, 38.
- ²³ "War Profits Buy Tall Building," *The New York Sun*, December 23, 1916., viewed at proquest.com
- ²⁴ "25 Properties Go At Auction Sales," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1934, 29. The ground lease on 22-24 East 41st Street was "surrendered" in August 1933.
- ²⁵ "Office Building Sold," *The New York Times*, August 26, 1998, B6. Diaz Architects supervised restoration of the facade.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that 18 East 41st Street has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, history, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that 18 East 41st Street is a superb example of an early 20th century office building; that it has a striking white, beige and blue terra-cotta street facade; that it was completed in 1914 and represents that first phase of commercial development in the East Midtown section of Manhattan, when various high-rise structures were built in the vicinity of Grand Central Terminal; that it is an early work by George & Edward Blum, a firm that is celebrated for designing facades with unique and unusual ornamentation; that it was completed before passage of the 1916 zoning resolution and rises 21 stories without setbacks; that the alternation of thick and thin piers creates a strong vertical emphasis that recalls the pioneering skyscrapers of Louis Sullivan; that the sumptuous terra-cotta ornament suggests the influence of both late medieval and modern sources, from Gothic cathedrals to contemporary European designs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Josef Hoffmann; that in 1914 architecture critic H. W. Frohne used an image of the building in an essay to illustrate a “new line of thought in exterior commercial architecture;” that the exterior is mostly unchanged, particularly the ornate upper stories, which incorporate sculpted window frames with distinctive grid patterns, pointed arches and angled projections; that it attracted a varied group of tenants, from private clubs and publishers to doctors and architects who wanted to be close to the new train terminal; that a five-room penthouse that recalled a bungalow-type residence was leased to actor Donald Brian and movie director Dudley Murphy, as well as a speakeasy, which was closed by prohibition agents in 1932; and that 18 East 41st is one of East Midtown’s earliest and finest 20th century skyscrapers.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark 18 East 41st Street, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1275, Lot 61, as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
Diana Chapin, Wellington Chen
Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, John Gustafsson
Adi Shamir-Baron, Kim Vauss, Commissioners



18 East 41st Street (aka 18-20 East 41st Street)
Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1275, Lot 61
Main facade

Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



18 East 41st Street
Main and west facade
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



18 East 41st Street
Main and east facade
Photo: Matthew A. Postal, 2016



18 East 41st Street
Rear facade, view from 40th Street
Photo: Matthew A. Postal, 2016

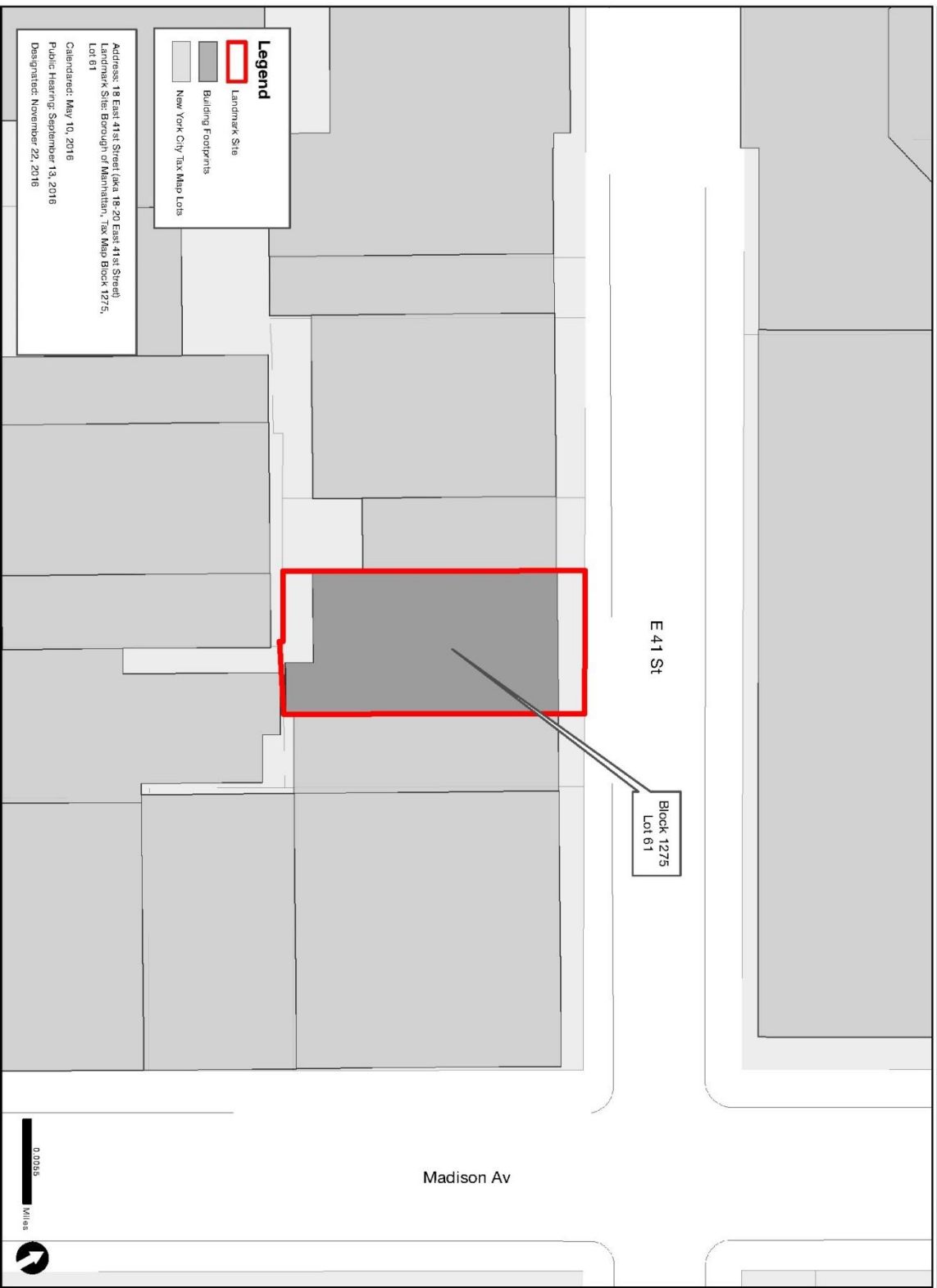


18 East 41st Street
Facade details
Photos: Sarah Moses and Matthew A. Postal, 2016



18 East 41st Street
Facade details
Photos: Matthew A. Postal and Sarah Moses, 2016

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