

THE GRAYBAR BUILDING

420 Lexington Avenue (aka 420-30 Lexington Avenue), Manhattan
Built, 1925-27; architect, Sloan & Robertson, architect

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1280, Lot 7501

On July 19, 2016 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Graybar Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. A representative of the owner, S. L. Green Realty Corp., spoke in opposition to designation. Eight people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Community Board 5, Art Deco Society of New York, Historic Districts Council, Municipal Art Society of New York, New York Landmarks Conservancy, Society for the Preservation of the City. Council Member Daniel R. Garodnick and Historic Murray Hill submitted written testimony in favor of designation.

Summary

Completed in 1927, the Graybar Building was one of the last structures erected in “Terminal City,” an East Midtown development on property above the railroad tracks owned by New York Central Railroad. An integral part of Grand Central Terminal, this 30-story office building incorporates multiple train platforms, as well as a broad public passageway that connects the station with Lexington Avenue.

The Graybar Building was designed by Sloan & Robertson, an architectural firm that specialized in speculative construction during the 1920s, and later public works. While the powerful stepped massing conforms to the 1916 zoning resolution that required structures to setback as they rise, the exotic decorative program blends Art Deco and Byzantine-style aesthetics, particularly the monumental stone reliefs that frame the three portals. These impressive robed figures clutch symbols of air, water, earth and fire, as well as objects that relate to the Graybar Electric Company, a major tenant. Founded in 1869, this was the company’s corporate headquarters from 1927 to 1982. Of special interest are the rats that enliven the south portal, leading to the Graybar Passage, at 43rd Street. These animals appear on limestone reliefs above the gridded windows and seem to be climbing the metal struts that support the center marquee. John Sloan, the building’s architect, recalled that rats were selected to strike a “maritime note” since New York City is “a great transportation centre and a great seaport.”

The Graybar Building was fully leased upon its completion, encouraging subsequent commercial development on the terminal’s east side and along Lexington Avenue. In addition to Graybar, prominent tenants included the J. Walter Thompson Company, Turner Construction Company, Young Men’s Christian Association and Remington Rand, as well as the building’s developer and architects. S.L. Green Realty Corporation acquired a long-term operating lease on the building in 1998. At that time, a major restoration of the structure was undertaken, including construction of a new entrance canopy and storefronts.



BUILDING DESCRIPTION

The Graybar Building is a mostly freestanding, 30-story office building on the west side of Lexington Avenue, between East 43rd and 44th Streets. Clad with tan brick and limestone, the Lexington Avenue facade has a granite water table and three limestone-clad portals. All windows have been replaced: originally 2/1 or 2/2, they are now double-hung.

East / Lexington Avenue facade

Historic features: (south portal) three recessed entrances with glazed doors, capital lettering for Grand Central Terminal, three projecting marquees with down lights, grid of windows, slanted limestone relief above windows, angled struts, rats and baffles on three center struts, animal heads support struts over side entrances, figurative bas-reliefs flank windows above center door, decorative polychrome panels between windows; (center portal) recessed entrance, figurative bas-reliefs flank polychrome base of flagpole, chains hang down to lighting fixtures; (north portal) slanted limestone relief above window grid, figurative bas-reliefs above recessed entrance, decorative polychrome panels between windows;

Alterations: (south portal) storefront infill; (center portal) non-historic lighting fixtures, marquee and storefront infill, recessed windows above doors, dark metal lower section of flag pole, advertising panels incorporated into commercial storefronts; (north portal) metal railings on steps, recessed entrance, angled shop sign above recessed doorway, flanking storefronts enlarged, non-historic recessed storefront at north end of facade, with steps, railing, and elevator; air conditioning units on roof at west end.

South facade

Historic features: windows begin above level of Grand Central Market.

North facade

Historic features: windows begin above low section adjoining 450 Lexington Avenue.

West facade (secondary facade)

Historic features: loading docks with painted metal framework, limestone band between loading dock and windows, windows begin slightly above level of Park Avenue Viaduct.

Alterations: some brick repairs, horizontal louvers and black brick installed in some windows, yellow panels at southwest corner.

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. Transversed 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 Fisk-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 part of 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 new hotels would rise on Lexington Avenue, between 47th and 50th Streets, including the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1929-32) and the Summit Hotel (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.

Site

The Graybar Building is located on the west side of Lexington Avenue, between East 43rd and 44th Streets. An integral part of Grand Central Terminal, it contains multiple train platforms, as well as the public corridor known as the Graybar Passage that connects the station with Lexington Avenue. The rear facade faces Depew Place, which, like Vanderbilt Avenue, was created as part of the re-routing of Fourth Avenue during construction of Grand Central Depot. This public thoroughfare was named for Chauncey M. Depew, who served as counsel and president of the New York Central Railroad.² Although it appears in city records as early as 1862, Depew Place did not officially open until 1885.³ During the construction of Grand Central Terminal, however, it was permanently closed and is now partly occupied by the Park Avenue Viaduct that carries traffic across 42nd Street and around the terminal. Depew Place provides access to the loading docks at the rear of the Graybar Building and to 450 Lexington Avenue.

Prior to construction of the Graybar Building, the site was mostly occupied by the Grand Central Palace (c. 1893, demolished). Six stories tall, this facility featured a “great glass domed hall, three stories in the clear” that, according to *The New York Times*, “never fulfilled expectations, and its auditorium [had] been used only at intervals for exhibition purposes, with occasionally a political convention or a mammoth progressive euchre party.”⁴ It also contained a ground-floor branch of the United States Post Office.⁵

In July 1905 the New York Central Railroad acquired the site from Robert and Elsie Goelet. The following year, in 1906, plans were announced to erect a two-block-long post office (with offices above) beside the terminal, between Lexington Avenue and Depew Place.⁶ The north section (450 Lexington Avenue, extant but altered), between East 44th and 45th Streets, was erected in 1906-12, while the south section, where the Graybar Building would eventually stand, was never built. Among the various buildings in Terminal City, 450 Lexington Avenue was the first structure completed, followed by a new Grand Central Palace (1911, demolished), sited between East 46th and 47th Streets.⁷ Both were designed by the terminal's architect, Warren & Wetmore.

During construction of Grand Central Terminal, 14 tracks were temporarily diverted into the basement of the original Grand Central Palace, which served as the “Lexington Avenue”

commuter station, beginning in late 1906. As the terminal neared completion, the railroad announced plans to demolish a two-block-stretch of Lexington Avenue, from 42nd Street to 44th Street. This site would eventually hold the Hotel Commodore (Warren & Wetmore, 1917-19, re-clad 1980s), which was financed by the New York Central Railroad, as well as the Graybar Building.

Architect: Sloan & Robertson

The Graybar Building was designed by Sloan & Robertson. This architectural partnership was formed in Manhattan in 1924, about a year before construction began. Thomas Markoe Robertson (1879-1962) was born and grew up in New York City. A graduate of Yale University in 1901, he later attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts (1903) in Paris. From 1908 to 1919, he worked with his father, the noted architect R. H. Robertson, formerly of Potter & Robertson.

John Sloan (1878-1962) was also born in New York City. He studied architecture at New York University and worked for the War Department, supervising construction of military structures in the Philippines and Europe (1908-20). Sloan's first major Manhattan commission was the Pershing Square Building (a New York City Landmark, with York & Sawyer), a 24-story office building at 100 East 42nd Street.

Sloan & Robertson specialized in speculative projects. Prior to 1930, they designed such Manhattan office towers as the Wadsworth Building (1925-26, demolished), Fred F. French Building (with H. Douglas Ives, 1926-27, a New York City Landmark), Chanin Building (with Irwin Chanin, 1927-29, a New York City Landmark), Maritime Exchange Building (1931), and 29 Broadway (1931), as well as apartment houses at 1 Beekman Place (1929), and 895 Park Avenue (1929, part of the Upper East Side Historic District).

Sloan was an enthusiastic spokesman for the economics of high-rise construction. In 1928, he asserted: "Long before the modern skyscraper is ready to be scrapped it will have more than repaid its builder . . . the American builder's creed is long life, with efficient profitable service from start to finish."⁸ In subsequent years, the firm produced many publicly-funded works, including hospitals and prisons, as well as the New York State Building & Aquacade at the 1939-40 World's Fair.

Clyde R. Place (1878-1946) acted as consulting engineer. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he "planned the mechanical, electrical, elevator, air-conditioning and power-plant systems" for a great number of New York City Landmarks, such as Grand Central Terminal, the Cunard Building, Fred F. French Building, and Rockefeller Center.⁹

Planning the Graybar Building

Grand Central Terminal had an extraordinary impact on East Midtown. In 1920, *The New York Times* observed:

. . . the development of the Grand Central property has in many respects surpassed original expectations. With its hotels, office buildings, apartments and underground streets it not only is a wonderful railroad terminal, but also a great civic centre.¹⁰

In August 1925, Eastern Offices, Inc. announced plans to erect the "largest office building in the world."¹¹ The 250 x 275 foot site, between Lexington Avenue, Depew Place, 43rd and 44th Streets, was probably cleared before 1919 to expand the post office and at the time sat vacant.

The developer negotiated a 21-year-lease from the New York Central Railroad Company, with two options for renewal, or a total of 63 years. As part of the agreement, a “high-grade office building” would incorporate a “passageway” to the terminal, stairs to the subway, as well as “auxiliary facilities” for the railroad.¹²

Eastern Offices, Inc. was controlled by the Todd, Robertson, Todd Engineering Corporation. Previously known as Irons & Todd and Todd, Irons & Robertson, this leading development firm was founded by lawyer John R(eynard) Todd (1867-1945) in 1920.¹³ During the period that the Graybar Building was under construction, it was also involved with the nearby Postum Building (Cross & Cross, 1923-25) and the Hotel Barclay (Cross & Cross, 1926). Partners included Dr. James M. Todd (1870-1939), Todd’s brother, and Hugh S. Robertson (1880-1951), a specialist in real estate and financial management. According to the S. W. Straus & Company, which issued \$10 million in bonds in financing, the firm “has constructed, owns and operates many of the most successful buildings in this district.”¹⁴ Todd, Robertson, Todd would be well-prepared to join the team that created Rockefeller Center (1931-39, a New York City Landmark). As the Center’s manager, it was selected to “build the thing, put it on a profitable basis, and sell it to the world.”¹⁵

The Lexington Avenue project was known as the Eastern Terminal Office Building until May 1926 when the 15th floor was leased to the Graybar Electric Company.¹⁶ As Graybar’s headquarters, it consolidated three of the company’s New York City offices. Albert L. Salt, who became the company’s president in 1925, was friends with James M. Todd. Though J. Walter Thompson had leased more floors, this prominent advertising firm did not want the building named for it and the honor was given to Graybar. A 2009 company history later described it as Salt’s “greatest publicity coup.”¹⁷ Founded by Elisha Gray and Enos Barton in 1869, this distributor of electrical supplies operated warehouses throughout the United States. Organized in 1925 as a subsidiary of Western Electric, part of AT&T, it was acquired by its employees and officers in November 1928.¹⁸ A large stone relief of an American eagle holding the Graybar shield is installed over the doors at the east end of the Graybar Passage (part of Grand Central Terminal, a Landmark Interior).

Construction

The Department of Buildings issued the permit (No. 625) to construct the Graybar Building in 1925. The estimated cost was \$12,500,000. Track 200, which provides access to a loop track in Grand Central Terminal, runs through the site and needed to remain in continuous use. Not only would it be “fully protected” but for a brief time it was re-routed onto an elevated trestle, suggesting “mining regions of the far west.”¹⁹ Excavations, which reached a depth of 90 feet – “far below the bottom of the underground streams which cross Manhattan” – began in late winter or early spring 1925. In April, the steel began to rise and by August the structural frame was approaching “street level.”²⁰

With substantial office space to lease, a constant flow of press releases documented the progress of construction and the remarkable quantity of building materials needed. For instance, newspaper stories reported how engineers devised a “pan-shaped sheet of lead imbedded in concrete” to reduce train vibrations.²¹ In September 1926, the structure was described as taller than the neighboring Commodore Hotel and the “final steel beam” was installed on October 8, 1926. To mark the event, a public ceremony was held in which Miss Willoughby Todd, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Russell Todd, raised an American flag as a worker drove the final rivet into place. Graybar president Albert L. Salt spoke at the event, as did John R. Todd.²²

The “first of a procession of 800 truckloads of face brick” started to arrive at the site in August 1926, followed by 2,500 truckloads of common brick.²³ The laying of the brick, as well as the installation of 31 acres of concrete floor arches and cement floors, occurred towards the end of 1926.²⁴ During winter of 1926-27, the interiors were framed and finished, requiring the hanging of nearly 5,000 doors by 1,100 workers.²⁵ In March 1927, the American painter Edward Trumbull (1884-1968) completed the four ceiling murals in the Graybar passageway.²⁶ The first tenants began to occupy their offices in April 1927 and a certificate of occupancy was issued by the Department of Buildings in July.²⁷

Design

The Graybar Building was one of the last additions to “Terminal City.” A massive free-standing structure with a hybrid plan, it was one of the first buildings erected above the railroad tracks without classical ornament and one of the first buildings within Terminal City to demonstrate the aesthetic potential of the 1916 zoning ordinance. While the west part of each floor has an H-shaped plan, the east part, facing Lexington Avenue, is U-shaped. Above the base are three light courts, facing east, north and south. The 70-foot-deep east court, which contains numerous side windows, opens towards Lexington Avenue.

The elevator core was placed near the center of the block, where the east and west sections meet. This type of floor plan increases the number of perimeter offices and windows. In the era before the introduction of fluorescent lighting, access to sunlight was important for tenants and the Graybar Building incorporates more than 4,300 windows.²⁸

In terms of massing, the general shape was determined by the 1916 zoning resolution. *The New York Times* reported, this law was conceived to:

. . . provide for a reasonable amount of light and air in buildings and in the streets, and in general to make the business of the city more efficient and the life of the city more healthful, convenient, and agreeable.²⁹

To accomplish this admirable goal, buildings were required to set back at a certain height, which was determined by location and street width. Bulk was regulated and diminished in stages, creating stepped silhouettes in which the uppermost floors cover 25 per cent of the lot.

The new law also encouraged architects to rethink skyscraper aesthetics. While some initially found the rules restrictive, others, like architect-delineator Hugh Ferriss, saw great potential. Writing in *The New York Times* in 1922, he said “the result will be altitude poised and unified. Summits will have the composition of mountain ranges.”³⁰ One of the first buildings in New York City to absorb these ideas was the Shelton Hotel (Arthur Loomis Harmon, 1922-24, a New York City Landmark). Located just five blocks north of the Graybar site, this acclaimed skyscraper anticipated Sloan & Robertson’s stepped design in various ways. Not only do these buildings share similar materials and medieval-style details, but they both employ symmetrical geometric massing to enhance the vertical axes.

Faced with buff brick and Indiana limestone, there is hardly any ornament or carved detail above the base, only limestone bands that trim the lower windows and setbacks. *The Brooklyn Eagle* saw this treatment as “modern . . . treated in broad, flat surfaces instead of heavy ornamentation.”³¹ Black brick fills some window spandrels, creating subtle vertical bands. Centered within the more highly-visible sections of the facade, these bands accentuate the structure’s height and verticality. Near the top of the Lexington Avenue facade, aligned with the

flagpole, are four projecting elements. Reminiscent of gargoyles, these water spouts give the building a somewhat medieval feel.

The secondary facades adjoin private streets. Though the south and north facades have deep light courts, these facades were not required to setback and contain numerous rows of long line windows. Forty-Third Street is now mostly occupied by a low structure housing the Grand Central Market (adjacent to the Graybar Passage) and 44th Street contains a low section of the Graybar Building.³² The unassuming rear facade also has no setbacks. It faces onto Depew Place, as well as the viaduct that travels northbound around the east side of Grand Central Terminal.

Lexington Avenue Portals

The Graybar Building has three portals. The south portal opens to the Graybar Passage.³³ Tenants can enter the elevator lobby from this off-street passage, as well as through the center portal.³⁴ The north portal was probably conceived as a third entrance. Though never used for this purpose, it would have intersected with a north-south passage connecting Grand Central and Graybar with a proposed and unbuilt expansion of the adjoining Post Office Building.³⁵

There are three sets of doors in the south portal, each with its own marquee. The large center marquee is supported by three metal struts (the other portals have two), on which metal rats climb toward “inverted, funnel-shaped guards” known as “bafflers” on ships. The struts are attached to a slanted limestone bas-relief, above the gridded windows. A pack of eight rats, with ears erect, encircle each strut. Additional rats, depicted in profile with long tails, slither around the circle that entwines each pack.

These unusual decorative features were discussed in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1933. According to the building’s architect, John Sloan, rats were chosen to strike a “maritime note” because New York is a “great transportation centre and a great seaport.”³⁶ Herbert Metz, the building manager, shared a similar explanation with *The New York Times* in 1955:

The architect . . . tried to symbolize the fact that the Graybar Building was the focal point of the country’s greatest maritime and railroad center. The rat-and-hawser motif is there to symbolize a ship and, in turn, a port. The rat on the hawser, baffled by the rat guard, is trying to get into the ship. The circle of rat heads on the side of the hawser typify the rats in the ship.³⁷

The center portal originally contained a relief with the building’s name in capital letters. Later removed, this panel incorporated a pair of winged guardian creatures, probably griffins. Other vaguely Moorish features that have been removed (but were originally part of the lower facade) include metal-and-glass lighting fixtures that flanked the doors, three vertical stone grilles, and a colorful band of relief flanking the base of the flagpole. Divided into sections, the uppermost part of the flagpole incorporates an eagle, while the brightly-colored mid-section displays geometric relief.³⁸ Sloan unconvincingly explained to a journalist that this type of exotic ornament was selected because the building’s owner was Eastern Offices and “We thought it would be appropriate to decorate it in the Eastern Manner.”³⁹

Each portal incorporates two standing figures. Like the imagery on Sloan & Robertson’s Fred F. French Building (1926-27) and Cass Gilbert’s 130 West 30th Street (1927-28, both are New York City Landmarks), the monumental male figures were possibly influenced by Assyrian bas-reliefs excavated at Nimrud (now Iraq) during the 19th century. Depicted in profile, the

figures on the south portal represent air (birds) and water (fish), while the bearded figures in the north portal hold symbols of the earth and fire.

The youthful robed figures in the center portal had a more contemporary focus, symbolizing communication or electricity, and transportation. One holds a candlestick telephone, and the other, a delivery truck, representing the types of equipment that the Graybar Electric Company sold, as well as the firm's national distribution network. Additionally, each figure's head is surrounded by lively electric rays – a motif that would later appear at the top of the General Electric Building (1929-30, a New York City Landmark). S. J. Vickers, critic for *The New York Herald Tribune*, praised the way the designers blended various aesthetic sources, and how the figures “symbolize still further the tremendous forces responsible for the architectural giants in our seething city.”⁴⁰

Reception

Despite considerable publicity about construction, relatively little was written about the building's design. Most articles continued to address the size of the building. For instance, *The New Yorker* said it was “probably the largest something, or the highest something, or the most capacious something, in the world – but we didn't know what.”⁴¹ Several months later, an unidentified architecture critic in *The New Yorker* called the building “impressive.”⁴²

When the author of a lengthy letter to *The New York Herald Tribune* praised the “great portals” but expressed disappointment with the “bare buff cliffs,” the newspaper's critic, S. J. Vickers, praised the structure's “dominant vertical line.” And *Brooklyn Life and Activities of Long Island Society* commented “there is the impressive beauty of sheer bulk – the Graybar Building with its severe and exotic statuary.”⁴³

Photographs of the lower floors were reproduced in “Modern Architectural Decoration,” published in *The Architectural Forum* in 1928. Though the architect-author Parker Morse Hooper categorized the ornament as “conservative,” he described it as “successful” and “unusually interesting.”⁴⁴ Decades later, the authors of *New York 1930* called the building the “quintessential commercial colossus . . . the most vivid symbol to date of the culture of congestion.”⁴⁵

Tenants

Fully leased by the end of 1927, the Graybar Building was an instant success. Not only did it benefit the owner and investors but, according to *The New York Times*, it confirmed that “high-class office tenants could be induced to accept a Lexington Avenue address.”⁴⁶ One of the first companies to sign a lease was Conde Nast Publishing, which occupied the 19th floor. In March 1928, one of its magazines, *Vanity Fair*, published a full-page drawing of the building by Hugh Ferriss. The text called their new offices a “slightly more pretentious maisonette” and “an integral part of Grand Central Station.” Additional prestigious tenants included Graybar, J. Walter Thompson Company, New York League of Women Voters, Robert Gair Company, Remington Rand, Turner Construction Company, Young Men's Christian Association, and the Associated Architects, the architectural team that designed Rockefeller Center, working with the project's manager Todd, Robertson & Todd. In addition, the architect of Graybar, Sloan & Robertson, leased top floor for at least ten years. Various estimates were given as to the building's total population, from as little as 12,500 to as many as 20,000.

Later History

Webb & Knapp acquired the Graybar Building, along with the Chrysler Building (a New York City Landmark and Landmark Interior) and the Chrysler Building East, in October 1953. At the time of the deal, *The New York Times* reported the current stockholders in Eastern Offices, Inc., included Graybar, John Sloan and T. Markoe Robertson, as well as various members of the Todd family. S.L. Green Realty Corporation acquired a 31-year operating sublease on the building in 1998. At this time, a major restoration of the structure was begun, supervised by the architects Beyer Blinder Belle. This work included a new entrance canopy and storefronts. At this time, at least one of the “missing rats” above the center marquee in the south portal was recreated.⁴⁷

STATEMENT OF REGULATORY INTENT

The Graybar Building is an integral part of Grand Central Terminal. It incorporates multiple train platforms, as well as a broad public corridor known as the Graybar Passage that connects the station with Lexington Avenue. The Commission recognizes that the building’s south portal, providing access to the Graybar Passage at 43rd Street, is important to Grand Central Terminal and will consider these historic transit connections when evaluating future alterations.

NOTES

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 “A Street Named After Depew,” *Rome Daily Sentinel*, April 22, 1885, 1.

³ *Court of Appeals: New York*, No. 465, p. 49; “A Street Named After Depew.”

⁴ “New York Central Adds Two Blocks To Terminal,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1904, 1.

⁵ “In And About The City: An Up-town Post Office,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 1893, 10.

⁶ New York Central acquired the site in late 1904. See “New York Central Adds Two Blocks To Terminal.”

⁷ “New Grand Central Palace,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1911, 3.

⁸ “Praises Skyscraper For Its Usefulness,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1928, RE1.

⁹ “Clyde R. Place, 68, Engineer, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1946, 20.

¹⁰ “Another Building For Terminal Zone,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 1920, 31; Deed

¹¹ “Office Building Here To Be Largest Yet,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 1925, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Todd, who was trained as a lawyer, was previously associated with Irons & Todd, builder of the Equitable Trust Building, the Cunard Building, and the Architect’s Building.

¹⁴ “10,000,000 Eastern Terminal Office Building,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1925, 37.

¹⁵ Cited in “Rockefeller Center Designation Report,” various authors, (City of New York, 1985), 15.

¹⁶ In 1926, Graybar occupied four floors in the recently-completed Pershing Square Building. See “Graybar Co. Leases Lexington Av. Floor,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1926, 35.

¹⁷ Richard Blodgett, *Timeless Values, Enduring Innovation – The Graybar Story* (Greenwich Publishing Group, 2009), accessed online, 43.

¹⁸ “Western Electric Forms Unit for Supply Branch,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 23, 1925, 26.

¹⁹ “Switching Plan Aids Commuters,” *The Scarsdale Inquirer*, August 17, 1926, 3. “Track Is Still In Use As Skyscraper Rises,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1926, W20.

²⁰ “Graybar Co. Leases Lexington Av. Floor;” “Graybar Building Record,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1926, RE2.

²¹ “Eastern Offices” Graybar Building Will Not Vibrate,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, August 8, 1926, 3.

²² “Swing Last Steel Beam in Graybar Building,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1926, 7.

²³ “Brick for City’s Newest Giant Would Build 170 Apartments,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 15, 1926.

²⁴ “Gerbino Explains Building Figures For Skyscraper,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 12, 1926, 4.

²⁵ “New Graybar Building Will Have 4,825 Doors,” *New York Herald Tribune*, February 20, 1927.

²⁶ A student of Frank Brangwynn, he moved to New York from Pittsburgh in the 1920s. “Frescoes Portray Modern Industry,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 1927, 7.

²⁷ “Giant Structure To House 15,000 Ready on April 1,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 6, 1927, 4.

²⁸ “Cleaning Windows Of Architectural Giants Big Task,” *New York Herald Tribune*, July 24, 1927.

²⁹ Quoted by Ferris, *The New York Times*, May 19, 1922, 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ “Eastern Offices, 30-Story Building, Has Been Started,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, November 29, 1925, D15.

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- ³² Until the late 20th century, a closed section of 43rd Street was used as the terminal's loading dock.
- ³³ The 40-foot-wide concourse (sometimes called the Eastern Concourse) features ceiling murals by Edward Trumbull, who later did the ceiling mural in the Chrysler Building. See "Frescoes Portray Modern Industry."
- ³⁴ There are four banks of elevators, each serving different floors. Each of the 32 elevators were said to "start, move and stop automatically at the will of the passenger instead of the operator." "Elevators Obey Passengers' Wish," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1926, RE16.
- ³⁵ "Eastern Offices Expand Project," *New York Evening Post*, August 19, 1925, 22; "Two Big Operations on Lexington Avenue," *The New York Times*, October 4, 1929, RE24.
- ³⁶ An identical relief is located in the north portal. See "Rats," *The New Yorker* (September 9, 1933), 10.
- ³⁷ Meyer Berger, "About New York," *The New York Times*, August 10, 1955, 27.
- ³⁸ The slender bronze-colored base dates to about 1998.
- ³⁹ "Rats," *The New Yorker* (September 9, 1933), 10.
- ⁴⁰ *The New York Herald Tribune*, June 28, 1927, 20; "The Graybar Building, New York City," *Architectural Record* (September 1927), 177.
- ⁴¹ "The Talk of the Town: Notes and Comments," *The New Yorker* (April 9, 1927), 17.
- ⁴² "The Skyline," *The New Yorker* (September 10, 1927), 42.
- ⁴³ "New York's Varied Beauty," quoted in *Brooklyn Life and Activities of Long Island Society* (July 29, 1929), 1.
- ⁴⁴ "Modern Architectural Decoration," *Architectural Forum* (February 1928, Vol. 48), 158-60.
- ⁴⁵ Robert Stern and others, *New York 1930; Architecture and Urbanism Between Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987), 530.
- ⁴⁶ "Rental Conditions In Central Zone," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1928, 153.
- ⁴⁷ David W. Dunlap, "Commercial Real Estate; For Graybar, Restoring a Lost Luster," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1998, viewed at nytimes.com

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 the Graybar Building 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 the Graybar Building was completed in 1927; that this 30-story office building was among the last structures built as part of “Terminal City” in midtown Manhattan; that it is an integral part of Grand Central Terminal; that the lowest floors incorporate multiple train platforms as well as a broad public passageway that connects the station with Lexington Avenue; that it was designed by Sloan & Robertson; that the stepped massing conforms to the 1916 zoning resolution requiring tall structures to set back as they rise; that the exotic decorative program blends Art Deco and Byzantine aesthetics, particularly the monumental reliefs that frame the three portals; that the reliefs portray figures who clutch symbols of air, water, earth and fire, as well as the Graybar Electric Company, which had its headquarters here from 1927 to 1982; that metal sculptures of rats enliven the south portal at 43rd Street; that these small animals appear on the limestone relief above the windows and seem to be climbing the metal struts that support the center marquee; that the building’s architect, John Sloan, claimed rats were selected to strike a “maritime note” since New York City is “a great transportation centre and a great seaport;” that the building was an immediate financial success, encouraging commercial development along the terminal’s east side and Lexington Avenue; that prominent early tenants included the J. Walter Thompson Company, Turner Construction Company, Young Men’s Christian Association, Conde Nast, as well as the building’s owner and architect; and that a long-term operating lease on the building was acquired by S. L. Green Realty Corporation in 1998, which undertook a major restoration of the structure, including construction of a new entrance canopy and storefronts.

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 420 Lexington Avenue (aka 420-30 Lexington Avenue), and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1280, Lot 7501, as its Landmark Site.

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



The Graybar Building
420 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1280, Lot 7501
View of central court / reliefs on center portal
Photos: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
View southwest
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
North portal, 2013
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
Center Portal / Base
Photos: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
South Portal
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
South portal entrance with rat sculptures
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
North façade, from 45th Street
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
South facade
Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016



The Graybar Building
Details
Photos: Sarah Moses, 2016

Graybar Building I LP-2554



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