DESIGNATION REPORT

# Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex

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## LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan
246 East 58th Street

## LANDMARK TYPE

Interior

## SIGNIFICANCE

A significant late work by the American architect Paul Rudolph, the Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex is unlike any interior in New York City. Built in 1993-94, this daring and experimental two-story residence is now home to the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture.

**North Living Room, view south to kitchen, 1999**
Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture




## REPORT BY

Matthew A. Postal, Research Department

## EDITED BY

Margaret E. Herman

## PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Bilge Kose and Matthew A. Postal

# Modulightor Building
# Apartment Duplex

246 East 58th Street, Manhattan

**Designation List 544**
**LP-2684**

**Built:** 1993-94
**Architect:** Paul Rudolph

**Landmark Site:** Borough of Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1331, Lot 128, consisting of the third and fourth floor duplex, including the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, which may include but are not limited to the columns, joists, stairs, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mirrors, lighting fixtures, attached furnishings, doors, railings, and attached decorative elements.

**Building Identification Number (BIN):** 1038621

**Calendared:** December 10, 2025
**Public Hearing:** February 25, 2025

On February 25, 2025, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex as a New York City Interior Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Four people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture, Docomomo US, the Historic Districts Council, and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. No one spoke in opposition. The Commission also received ten written submissions in favor of designation, including submissions from the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project and the Iconic Houses Foundation.

## Summary

Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex

The Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex is an important late work by the architect Paul Rudolph. Occupying the third and fourth floors of the Modulightor Building (a New York City Landmark) on East 58th Street in Manhattan, it was constructed in 1993-94. Named for the architectural lighting company that Rudolph founded with Ernst Wagner in 1976, the building was planned as a mixed-use structure containing commercial space and revenue-producing apartments.

Paul Rudolph was an innovative American architect and a gifted designer of late 20th-century interiors. Born in Kentucky, after World War II he developed a modern sculptural aesthetic that often-employed reinforced concrete and exposed steel. Rudolph moved his thriving architectural practice to Manhattan in the mid-1960s. Though well-known for his monumental public commissions, he also designed many residences that were acclaimed for their distinctive architectural features and daring spatial complexity.

The apartment duplex received a temporary certificate of occupancy in June 1994 and was first leased in July 1996. Following Rudolph's death in August 1997 and the settling of his estate in 2001, his partner Ernst Wagner moved into the duplex, making modest changes to display books, art, and personal mementos. Wagner co-founded the Paul Rudolph Foundation in 2001. Following a disagreement over the group's priorities, he created the Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation in 2014, which changed its name to the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture in 2022.

The Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture hosts regularly scheduled open houses, making the apartment duplex the only publicly accessible interior designed by the architect in New York City. Covering nearly 3,000 square feet, the 20-foot-wide duplex has a shifting open plan that incorporates two living rooms, four sleeping areas or bedrooms, four bathrooms, a kitchen, and a greenhouse. These fluid and interlocking spaces contain built-in furnishings, exposed joists, columns and stairs, as well as partial walls that double as bookshelves and display cases.

Since opening to the public in 2002, the duplex has been widely praised by critics. In *The New York Times*, Joseph Giovannini wrote that it has "the complexity of a geode" and was "easily as intricate as [Rudolph's] magisterial Art and Architecture Building at Yale" and Jason Farago saw these remarkable light-infused spaces as providing a "corrective to the view of Rudolph as … a maker of buildings as severe as a military haircut."

The Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex has many characteristics and design features that made Rudolph one of the leading architectural figures of his generation. It is a complex, multi-layered interior unlike any other in New York City.

## Description

Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex

The Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex occupies the third and fourth floors of a six-story residential building with ground-floor commercial space designed and partially built by Paul Rudolph in 1989-93, and later expanded in 2010-16 by architect Mark Squeo based on Rudolph's drawings. All of the interior surfaces are white, including the square and rectangular floor tiles, walls, columns and footings, steps and staircases, plant boxes, ceilings, and built-in furnishings. All of the lighting fixtures were produced by the Modulightor company, founded by Rudolph and Ernst Wagner.

### Third Floor

A **north-south elevator hallway**, between the elevator and kitchen, connects the north and south living rooms. This small space contains doors to the elevator and building stairs, doors to the living rooms, as well as a wall opening with open shelves that allows views to the north kitchen.

The **north living room** is L-shaped. Above the door, extending east-west across the ceiling, is a shelf and ventilation duct with two grilles. On the east side of the room is the north bathroom, enclosed by a partial wall of wood cabinets and shelving that frame a black metal fireplace and cylindrical flue, which rises in an opening between the shelves, allowing partial views inside the bathroom. The entrance to the bathroom is to the right of the fireplace. The bathroom contains cabinets and off-the-shelf fixtures: a sink, toilet, and bathtub/shower.

The north living room faces East 58th Street. It adjoins a shallow recessed planting terrace, accessible from slender wood panel doors with metal handles. Adjacent to the window, the tile floor is interrupted by a metal grate. In the northeast corner, some horizontal beams are supported by exposed brackets.

On the west side of the north living room, opposite the fireplace, is a built-in sofa and a wall of wood shelving. Immediately south of the sofa is the north staircase, which rises and turns right before reaching a low-walled balcony that overlooks third floor. The stairs are metal and have inset tile treads with a metal flange secured to the underside that creates a partially open riser. At the bottom of the stairs, on the right, is a low wall with an acrylic handrail.

A door and partial wall divide the **kitchen** in two sections. The smaller north kitchen contains a wall oven and non-historic refrigerator, while the slightly larger south kitchen contains a metal sink and non-historic stove top, as well as a range hood. The counters are white, while the backsplash and some walls are partly mirrored. There are three levels of cabinets. Shallow open shelves enclose the north and south ends of the kitchen.

Between the south kitchen and **south living room** is the south staircase, which is partly enclosed by horizontal railings. It faces south and rises to a landing, where it turns right (west) before almost reaching the fourth floor. Like the north stairs, it has tile treads and partially open risers. Wood cabinets extend along the east side of the south living room, partially enclosing the south bathroom. The cabinets frame the black metal fireplace that has an exposed cylindrical flue. Entered through double panel doors at the south end, the south bathroom contains cabinets, a sink, toilet, and shower. Directly south of the bathroom is a built-in desk with shelving, as well

as an east-facing window.

The west side of the south living room has two built-in sofas, separated by a partial wall. Above the sofas, a steel beam supports a horizontal planter. Running east-west across the ceiling, near the south end of the room, is a ventilation duct with two grilles. This area functions as an alcove, with the upper floor plate pulled back from the glass-and-steel wall system, creating a space that resembles a double-height greenhouse. In the east corner of the south living room, a solid wood door opens to the rear garden. Above the door, exposed metal grates form a landing between the recessed fourth floor and the glass-and-steel wall system.

### Fourth Floor

There are four bedrooms, two bathrooms, two balconies, and a north-south hallway on the fourth (upper) floor. The **north part** of the fourth floor has two bedrooms and a bathroom. North bedroom #1 faces East 58th Street and extends the full width of the building. A small planting terrace is accessible through wood panel doors in the northeast corner. Adjacent to the terrace, the floor is interrupted by metal grates. There are vertical tripartite glazed window slots on the east and west walls.

The north bathroom is entered through closets at the north end of bedroom #1, and from the north-south hallway. It contains a toilet, sink, bathtub, and cabinets. North bedroom #2 overlooks the north opening to the third floor. Directly east, separated by a partial wall, is the north-south hallway, and to the south, separated by a wall, is south bedroom #2.

Along the west wall of north bedroom #2 and the adjacent north balcony is continuous shelving. The north balcony is separated from the north opening to the third floor by a low wall with an acrylic handrail. Steps to north bedroom #2 have metal handrails on both sides, while the steps at the north end of the balcony rise and turn right (east) before reaching north bedroom #1.

The **south part** of the fourth floor contains two bedrooms and a bathroom. South bedroom #1 occupies the space between the south opening to the third floor and the alcove that functions as the upper part of the greenhouse. South bedroom #2 is between the south stairs and the north-south elevator hallway.

An L-shaped balcony with low side walls extends along the north and west sides of the south opening to the third floor. Atop the north part of the balcony's side wall is an acrylic handrail. At the east end of the south balcony, steps rise between the door to north-south elevator hall and the south bathroom.

The south bathroom is entered from the north-south hallway, opposite the south opening to the third floor, and from the southeast corner of south bedroom #1. It contains standard off-the-shelf fixtures: bathtub, sink, toilet, cabinets. Along the east wall, directly south of the bathroom, are cabinets and a wood door that opens to exterior stairs. The flooring in the southeast corner of the bedroom is made of metal grates, allowing views to the third floor.

### Alterations

Bathroom fixtures and some kitchen fixtures have been changed over time and are not contributing to the designation. On staircases and the fourth floor, clear plexiglass panels have been installed in some openings for safety.

### Manhattan's "Design District"

The Modulightor Building is named for the lighting company that Paul Rudolph (1918-97) founded with Ernst Wagner (1943-2024) [1] in 1976. On the south side of East 58th Street, slightly west of Second Avenue, he and Wagner chose this location because a large group of design showrooms were concentrated in the area.

Except for a small group of scattered dwellings and farm buildings, Manhattan's east 50s remained mostly rural until the middle of the 19th century. A block east of the Modulightor Building are the neighborhood's oldest structures, a pair of Italianate-style houses (1856-57, both are New York City Landmarks).[2] Starting in the 1860s, speculative row houses were constructed on many east-west streets, including the block where the Modulightor Building stands, as well as groups of town houses in the Treadwell Farm Historic District on East 61st and 62nd Streets, between Second and Third Avenues. All Saint's Episcopal Church, on East 60th Street, was established during this period. Consecrated in 1872, it served "the rich and the poor, the high and the low."[3]

Bloomingdale's Great East Side Bazaar opened on Third Avenue, between East 56th and 57th Streets in 1872. Founded on the Lower East Side as a "ladies' notion shop" in 1861, the store's new location flourished, in part due to the convenience of the Third Avenue Elevated Railway, which began serving 59th Street in 1878, and the Second Avenue Elevated Railway, which began serving 57th Street in 1880. This well-known department store moved to its current location, between East 59th and 60th Streets, in 1886.

The Queensboro Bridge (a New York City Landmark) was constructed in 1901-08. With its main entrance at Second Avenue and 59th Street, it originally incorporated roadways, streetcar track, and an underground railway terminal. A decade later, in 1919, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company subway was extended north along Lexington Avenue to 59th Street, creating a transit hub with stores, theaters, and banks.

In 1940, the Second Avenue elevated railway closed, followed by the Third Avenue elevated railway in 1955. The Lexington Avenue-59th Street subway station was soon expanded, adding an express stop on the lower level in 1962, and a Third Avenue entrance, serving the Broadway Line to Queens, in 1973. At this time, Roosevelt Island was redeveloped with middle-income housing. To serve this nearby East River community, an aerial tramway opened in 1976, with its Manhattan terminal on the east side of Second Avenue, a block from the site of the Modulightor Building, between 59th and 60th Streets.

Third Avenue experienced phenomenal growth in the 1950s and 1960s. While the blocks south of 57th Street attracted mainly high-rise office buildings, the northeast 50s retained some of the neighborhood's low-scale, mixed-use character. During this period, Alexander's Department Store (demolished) opened, and Bloomingdales expanded. Architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote: "the corner of 59th and Third has become the focus for the powerful attraction this neighborhood exerts on moviegoers, shoppers, and voyeurs alike."[4]

Local stakeholders tried to give the neighborhood a distinctive name in the 1960s. Dry Dock Savings Bank, for instance, launched a

campaign in 1968 that celebrated "Dry Dock Country … Isn't it great to bank where everything's at?"[5] From a branch at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 59th Street (demolished), the bank distributed colorful maps promoting area boutiques, galleries, and restaurants. The name caught on and in 1984 *The New York Times* observed: "It was gridlock in Dry Dock Country, that crossroads of residences and commerce that also serves as a loading and receiving zone for the Queensboro Bridge."[6]

Of particular importance to the neighborhood was the increasing presence of design showrooms. A 1967 article in *The New York Times* called it the "Design District." There were reportedly more than 200 "firms that supply furnishings and materials used by interior decorators and architects … concentrated in 10 structures between 56th and 63rd Streets on or near Second and Third Avenues,"[7] as well as the New York School of Interior Design, which leased floors at 155 East 56th Street, from 1962 to 1994. Many buildings still contain to-the-trade showrooms that cater to architects and interior designers. Modulightor's website currently describes the East 58th Street location as "in the middle of New York's decorative arts district."[8]

## History of the Site

246 East 58th Street was originally part of a group of Italianate-style row houses, probably faced with brownstone, dating to the 1850s or early 1860s. As originally constructed, each building had a stoop and three bays. In 1941, 246 East 58th Street was converted into a multiple dwelling with 15 furnished rooms on four floors.[9] Vacant in the 1950s, by 1966 it had been entirely rebuilt as a commercial structure, with two-story extensions in the front and back, as well as half apartments on the second and third floors. The new owner was Ellsworth & Goldie, an Asian art and antiques gallery. *Gardner's Guide to Antiques* described the mostly glass structure as a "strikingly new and modern building."[10] James R. Goldie sold the property in 1971. Subsequent occupants included retail stores specializing in printed fabrics. Paul Rudolph purchased the building from MIRA-X International Furnishings Inc. in February 1989.

## Paul Rudolph and New York City[11]

Paul Rudolph was an important mid-to-late 20th century American architect closely associated with New York City. Architect and historian Robert A. M. Stern wrote in 2008 that he "possessed the greatest talent of his generation of American architects."[12]

Rudolph moved his practice to Manhattan at the height of his career in the mid-1960s, when his seven-year tenure as chairman of the Department of Architecture at Yale University was ending. Rudolph was involved in many significant projects during this period of his career, including many commissions in the New York City metropolitan area.

Born in Kentucky in 1918, Rudolph received a bachelor's degree in architecture from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now Auburn University, in 1940. During World War II, he spent nearly four years as an officer in the United States Navy. He was based at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he oversaw ship construction and was later a reserve officer. For a brief period prior to his military service (1941-42) and after (1946), he was a student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, both formerly of the Bauhaus design school in Germany. Rudolph graduated in 1947 and, following travels in Europe, was active in coastal Florida. Under the influence of Mies van der Rohe, his crisply designed beach houses were praised for having interiors with spacious open plans and sensitivity to the natural environment.

Rudolph maintained three architectural offices in the early 1960s: in New Haven, Connecticut, where he designed the Art and Architecture Building (now Rudolph Hall) at Yale University; in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and in Manhattan. His approach to design became increasingly sculptural and projects were often executed with textured concrete. Though many of his schemes in New York City remained unrealized—such as a wildly audacious plan for the Lower Manhattan Expressway (1967-72)—he did complete a number of projects, including 101 East 63rd Street (1966, part of the Upper East Side Historic District), a multi-level penthouse at 23 Beekman Place (1977-82, a New York City Landmark), as well as three apartment complexes in the Bronx, two of which were built for the New York Housing Authority.

His first Manhattan office was on the top floor of 26 West 58th Street (1964, demolished 1969), a small office structure between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. This dramatic workspace suggested a terraced garden with distinct and overlapping interior levels that anticipate the quadraplex he built on Beekman Place, which architect-critic Michael Sorkin described as "one of the most amazing pieces of modern urban domestic architecture produced in this country," as well as the Modulightor Building's apartment duplex.[13]

## Modulightor

Paul Rudolph began designing architectural lighting in the mid-1960s. Several of his earliest fixtures were included in a survey of experimental lighting, published by *Progressive Architecture* in October 1968.[14] Rudolph sought to produce modular, flexible, project-specific fixtures that could be assembled using standard parts to "perfectly satisfy [a] designer's vision and client's needs."[15]

Rudolph met Ernst Wagner in 1975. A year later they founded the Modulightor lighting company, which was incorporated in August 1976.[16] Born in Switzerland, Wagner studied economics and marketing at the University of Basel, settling in the United States in 1974. When he applied for labor certification in 1976, Rudolph wrote that his firm "desires Mr. Wagner to develop and promote a new line of furniture, lighting fixtures, rugs, and other interior accessories." [17]

Initially, the firm's lighting fixtures were produced in Rudolph's office on West 57th Street, which relocated to SoHo in 1981.[18] Modulightor produced fixtures for many of the architect's interiors, including his residence on Beekman Place and the Modulightor Apartment Duplex. A 1979 advertisement in *Residential Interiors* offered: "Sculptural lightgrids. Infinity lighting in tables, wall panels, ceilings, baseboards, and modular strip lighting for commercial and residential specifications."[19]

In 1988, Wagner observed a "for sale" sign at 246 East 56th Street. He suggested he and Rudolph purchase the building and reconfigure it as Rudolph's architecture office, the Modulightor showroom and workshop, and revenue-producing apartments. Rudolph's preliminary design, dated July 1988, proposed erecting a seven-story mixed-use structure, combining commercial space and five apartments.

## Construction of the Building

A month after acquiring the East 58th Street property, Rudolph proposed a mixed-use structure,[20] submitting an alteration permit to the Department of Buildings in March 1989 (ALT 340-89). This proposal expanded the 1988 scheme, with substantial revisions occurring in September and October 1989, as well as later. It was described in the permit as an addition and alteration, with five apartments. A

permit was issued in September 1989. During construction, Rudolph moved his architectural office to the second floor (sometimes referred to as the mezzanine), while Wagner opened the Modulightor showroom, selling custom lighting fixtures designed and inspired by Rudolph, on the first floor.

Construction began in late 1989 or 1990. Rudolph received a mortgage in 1990, though he soon faced financial difficulties and decided to proceed with construction in phases, starting with the lower floors, including two apartments on the third and fourth floors. Wagner secured loans from a Swiss friend, Robert Enhrenberg, who became a partial owner. Rudolph moved his architecture office out of the building in 1992 or 1993, allowing the second floor to generate revenue.

Rudolph continued to fine-tune his design in the early 1990s, modifying the appearance of the street facade, the entrance sequence, and general floor plan. Donald Luckenbill, who studied architecture at the Pratt Institute and worked in Rudolph's office from about 1969 to 1982, was the associate architect and job captain in 1989-90, followed by Mark Squeo in 1990-91. Luckenbill later told *The New York Times* that "Rudolph did hundreds of designs" for the building.[21]

Photographs show the front and rear facades under construction in August 1992. According to Kelvin Dickinson Jr., president of the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture, it was a "very personal effort" – using "skilled tradespeople," as well as "day laborers which Rudolph would hire off the street."[22] In subsequent months, glass panels were installed and by February 1993 the steel I-beams had been painted white.[23]

The cellar, first floor, and second floor mezzanine received a temporary Certificate of Occupancy from the New York City Department of Buildings in May 1993.[24]

## Constructing the Duplex

Drawings for the north and south duplex apartments were mostly complete by July 1993. Wagner recalled:

> For the interiors, Rudolph became his own contractor, meeting with the craftspeople each morning and carefully—like a sculptor—arranging mock-ups with foam-core boards: shifting, adjusting, and balancing the forms and voids until he was satisfied. Sometimes, he'd come back the next day and say "*Oh, I made a mistake—take it all down.*" So, they'd rework the elements—the kind of thing you can do when you're your own client![25]

The Department of Buildings issued an amended temporary certificate of occupancy on June 2, 1994; the third floor and fourth floor were described as two "Duplex Class A Apartments."[26]

Rudolph made changes to the apartments in early 1996, merging the north and south duplexes into a single residence. At this time, some walls between the two units were removed. Photos from June 1996 show the interiors as occupied and mostly complete, including shelving, partial walls, metal stairs, steel grates, and tile floors.[27]

## Designing the Interior

Rudolph was a gifted and daring designer of interiors. Early in his career he wrote:

> The essential element in architecture is the manipulation of space. It is the essence which separates it from all other arts. Modern architecture is

> tragically lacking in eloquent space concepts . . . We need sequences of space which arouse one's curiosity and give sense of anticipation.[28]

Such creative strategies are present in Rudolph's late interiors, particularly the projects he built for himself, such as his Manhattan office and 23 Beekman Place. Described by writers as "test sites where he could develop spatial prototypes without the risks involved in larger, high-stakes architectural projects" and "design laboratories,"[29] these projects drew inspiration from the 20th century architects he admired most, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, members of the DeStijl art movement in Holland, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe.[30]

The Modulightor Building's apartment duplex occupies the third and fourth floors. Like Le Corbusier's Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau (Paris, 1924-25, demolished and rebuilt in Bologna, Italy) and Unite d'Habitation housing complex (Marseilles, France, 1952), the main living areas are double height volumes, with exposed stairs, balconies, and large expanses of glass. Rudolph's visit to the Unite in 1948-49 may have influenced the design of his own residence in New Haven (1961-62), as well as the Hiss (aka Umbrella House, Sarasota, Florida, 1953) and Hirsch (aka Halston residence, New York, 1966) residences.

In contrast with Le Corbusier, Rudolph moved the living rooms away from the main windows and inside the apartment duplex. These lofty volumes function as focal points, tying the third and floors together. In the effect, they are "the emphatic center" – a term that Rudolph used to describe the "inglenook" in an early Frank Lloyd Wright house or the "simple black rug" in Mies' Barcelona Pavilion.[31]

Rudolph explored similar ideas in one of his best-known works, the Yale Art and Architecture Building (now called Rudolph Hall). In 1964, he described the open plan as a "pinwheel scheme … a kind of overlapping and interpenetrating series of platforms."[32] Yale professor Vincent Scully admired the arrangement, calling it: "furiously ambitious . . . with its infinity of levels, as complicated as any human soul . . . a never-ending wonder to explore."[33] Rudolph likewise investigated this approach in his Manhattan office. Though short-lived, he later quipped that the character of this "disconcerting" interior was "free flowing vertically, like a Mies plan turned on edge."[34]

The third floor of the Modulightor duplex has two distinct living areas, two bathrooms, and a central kitchen, while the fourth floor has four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and connecting balconies. Both floors are loosely defined by partial walls and partitions that may lead one to believe that "the space beyond is larger than it is in reality."[35] Le Corbusier often arranged residential spaces in this manner, as did Mies, in the Villa Tugendhat (Brno, Czech Republic, 1929-30) and the Edith Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois, 1946-51).

Rudolph was also intrigued by Mies' Barcelona Pavilion (Spain, 1928-29, rebuilt 1986), which he described in a 1996 conversation with Peter Blake as the architect's "greatest building . . . one of the great works of art of all time." In six drawings that analyze the pavilion's open plan, Rudolph studied the "density and flowing of space," remarking how "you are carried along by unseen felt forces."[36]

Entering either living room from the north-south elevator hallway on the third floor, visitors catch partial glimpses through each space and toward the light that streams through the north and south-facing windows. Passing through these interiors, one's "cone of vision" (a term Rudolph used in his

analysis of Mies) is constantly changing, as it is interrupted by exposed joists and columns, cantilevered cabinets, and balconies.[37] Horizontal and vertical planes constantly overlap, creating a shifting visual environment where elements are continuously revealed, partly hidden, and then, fully obscured. To enhance and multiply these effects, Rudolph employed open shelving, see-through cabinets, mirrored panels, and metal grates.[38]

Of particular significance are the two staircases. Highly sculptural in form, the narrow steps turn sharply before reaching the north and south balconies, where additional steps climb to the fourth floor bedrooms. The individual steps have open risers and deeply cantilevered treads. Not only do they appear to float but the openings between the steps permit fragmented views of people using the stairs. Additionally, users enjoy unique and unusual views of the duplex itself.

Rudolph designed many dramatic staircases during his career. Starting with his Florida houses in the 1950s, he challenged conventional ideas about their placement and form, altering their width, depth, and transparency. In subsequent years, stairs became a showcase for spatial experimentation, playing an increasingly important role in his public commissions and private interiors. Striking examples can be found throughout the Yale Art and Architecture Building, which has an estimated 37 levels, as well as in his Beekman Place residence, where floating, twisting, and mirrored risers evoke the crisscrossing forms found in images by the 18th century Italian printmaker Giovanni Batista Piranesi,[39] or, perhaps, the 20th century graphic artist M. C. Escher.

Critic Joseph Giovannini praised the spatial intricacy of the apartment duplex in a *The New York Times* article, writing:

> . . . the triumph of design is that Rudolph pulled off the kaleidoscopic complexity with wallboard and off-the-rack metal studs and joists. For Rudolph, the richness of the materials didn't matter. He aimed at the same spatial qualities regardless of materials: it was space itself, Rudolphian space, that counted.[40]

Critic William Menking shared a similarly enthusiastic view in *The Architect's Journal*, observing that Rudolph's approach was:

> . . . fantastically creative – a sort of New York version of Sir John Soane's Museum. . . But, more importantly, in much the same way that Wright broke down traditional room divisions, Rudolph's interior spaces break through floors and spiral and pinwheel up through the structure.[41]

Natural and artificial light shapes how the apartment duplex is experienced. Rudolph believed that "the psychology of architectural space is partially dependent on the way light animates that space" and that:

> . . . reflected light coming from the wall is the most humane of light. Since light travels in straight lines, the reflections from walls come back to you as an individual, putting you in direct contact with the walls themselves, it is almost as if the walls are caressing you with their light. This explains the humanism of reflected light.[42]

The walls, floors, shelves, cabinets, ceilings and stairs are white or painted white. As with many of his late residential interiors, Rudolph used a basic white paint (now discontinued).[43]

All of the lighting fixtures were manufactured by the Modulightor company, which Rudolph and Wagner owned. These fixtures include linear sconces, wall washers, pendants, and accent lights.

### History of the Apartment Duplex

Rudolph leased the apartment duplex to John A. Lack from 1996 to 1999. Lack was a cable television executive who launched MTV (Music Television) in 1981 and later worked for the ESPN sports channel. He shared the apartment with his daughter. Lack remembered Rudolph as a "generous and loving man," who added "special features" during their tenancy, including a desk, bookshelves, and hot tub in the rear garden. Lack remembered: the "light bouncing off the multi-level surfaces was quite dramatic, and when the fireplace was going in the living room, the warm glow was mesmerizing."[44]

Following Rudolph's death in August 1997, the 23 Beekman Place residence was sold, and Wagner moved into the Modulightor Building, which had been left to him as part of Rudolph's estate, which was probated in 2001.[45] Many of the small objects displayed throughout the apartment duplex were brought from Beekman Place, as well as their piano, books, and art collection.[46]

Wagner co-founded the Paul Rudolph Foundation in 2001. Following a "a disagreement over the group's priorities," he established the Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation in 2014, now called the Paul Rudolph Institute for Architecture.[47] Wagner started to prepare the apartment duplex for use by the foundation in February 2002. Shelving was added to the north living room, along the west wall, behind the sofa and stairs. Designed and installed by architect Donald Luckenbill, who earlier worked in Rudolph's office, they complement similar shelving in the south duplex.[48]

By September 2002, the foundation was regularly welcoming visitors and renting the apartment duplex for events. Giovannini's July 2004 article in *The New York Times* brought the duplex increased attention, as did an October 2004 Open House New York listing in *The New Yorker* magazine that featured a charming illustration of the north balcony and opening by cartoonist Ben Katchor.[49]

Wagner began planning a second phase of construction in the late 2000s. Mark Squeo, of squeo Architecture, was hired to oversee the project.[50] Using Rudolph's earlier plans as a guide, he began working on what was described as a "penthouse residence addition" in October 2007. Construction of the fifth and sixth floors (not part of this designation) began in 2010 or 2011 and continued until 2016, when the work was considered mostly complete, and the foundation reopened to visitors.

Chosen by Archtober as a "Building of the Day" in October 2017, writer Alexander Luckman observed:

> Rudolph loved off-the-shelf materials, and used white melamine, acrylic, sheetrock and his Wrightian imagination and rigor to create a mysterious and most pleasing home. The interior winter garden flows visually into the outdoor patio and the lighting designed and manufactured in the building's basement is almost invisible except for its ability to wash over walls and surfaces. On my one hundredth visit, I will still be

> discovering something new. It is difficult to piece together what one just experienced, but you are sure to walk away wowed, pleased and wanting to revisit it, like any great artwork.[51]

In a 2018 review of two exhibitions devoted to Rudolph's work, critic Jason Farago wrote in *The New York Times* that the apartment duplex provides a "corrective" to the architect's reputation for being a "Brutalist heavyweight," calling it "an artful composition of elevations, setbacks, and planes of glass framed with white I-beams."[52]

Wagner lived in the apartment duplex until September 2023. In December of 2023, a year before his death, he donated the building to the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture, a non-profit organization that is dedicated to the architect's remarkable creative legacy. The Institute hosts regularly scheduled open houses that allow visitors to explore this unique late 20th century interior.

## Conclusion

A highly significant late work by the American architect Paul Rudolph, the Modulightor Apartment Duplex is home to the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture. This extraordinarily innovative late 20th century residence is the only publicly accessible interior designed by the architect in New York City.

# Endnotes

[1] Wagner's full name was Ernst Peter Wagner Jr.

[2] Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *311 East 58th Street House Designation Report (LP-583),* (New York: City of New York, 1967); LPC, *313 East 58th Street House Designation Report (LP-584),* (New York: City of New York, 1970).

[3] For more information on All Saints Church, see: https://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2014/06/all-saints-episcopal-church-no-230-e, accessed 2023.

[4] Quoted in Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman, *New York 1960* (Monacelli Press, 1995), 431.

[5] "Antoinette in Dry Dock Country," advertisement, viewed at https://thefinancialbrand.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/dry-dock-antoinette.jpg

[6] "Residents of Clogged East Side Area," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1984.

[7] "Showrooms Grow in Design District," *The New York Times*, August 27, 1967.

[8] See "About" on Modulightor website: https://www.modulightor.com/about

[9] Certificate of Occupancy, Department of Buildings, #27584, April 17, 1941; also see "Paul Rudolph's Masterful 246 East 58th Street," *Daytonian in Manhattan*, September 17, 2013, accessed online 2023.

[10] Arron Gardner, *Gardner's Guide to Antiques and Art Buying in New York* (1969), 66.

[11] This section is based on "Paul Rudolph in New York City," part of *Paul Rudolph Penthouse & Apartments Designation Report* (LP-2390), written by Matthew A. Postal, November 16, 2010, 3-4. The most complete study of Rudolph's career is currently Timothy M. Rohan, *The Architecture of Paul Rudolph* (Yale University Press, 2014).

[12] Robert A. M. Stern, forward to *Writings on Architecture: Paul Rudolph* (Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

[13] Michael Sorkin, "The Light House," *House & Garden*, January 1988, cited by the Paul Rudolph Institute.

[14] "Floating Platform," *Progressive Architecture*, May 1967, 150-51; "Kinetic Electric Environment," *Progressive Architecture*, October 1968, 201-02.

[15] "House of Light," *Elements of Living*, March 2006, 2.

[16] According to Kelvin Dickinson Jr., president of the Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture, Wagner "moved into Paul's small rental apartment on the top floor of 23 Beekman Place" in 1975 and "convinced" the architect to purchase the building the following year. From a statement read at the Ernst Wagner memorial service, February 28, 2025.

[17] Kelvin Dickinson Jr., email to LPC/author, October 25, 2023.

[18] Dickinson Jr./Paul Rudolph Institute, materials for "The Modulightor Building – Exterior Designation," submitted to LPC, July 1, 2019, 3 and "The Modulightor Building – Interior Designation," submitted to LPC, January 7, 2025.

[19] *Residential Interiors*, March 1979, 143.

[20] Other New York City landmarks that combine commercial and residential uses include the William Lescaze House and Office, 211 East 48th Street, and the Morris B. Sanders Studio and Apartment, 219 East 49th Street.

[21] Joseph Giovannini, *The New York Times*, "An Architect's Last Word," July 8, 2004.

[22] Dickinson Jr., materials submitted to LPC, July 1, 2019, 5, 1.

[23] These photographs were viewed at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/198801-modulightor

[24] Rudolph described the apartments as "currently under construction" in February 1993. Letter to Tony Amato, Douglas-Elliman, Paul Rudolph Institute for Modern Architecture.

[25] Ernst Wagner, "Paul Rudolph: Inspiration, Design, and Friendship," August 12, 2018, viewed at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/tribute-by-ernst-wagner

[26] "Certificate of Occupancy: Temporary," New York City Department of Buildings, June 2, 1994.

[27] See "Photos – Completed Project," at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/198801-modulightor. One image shows the front part of the duplex being

painted in June 1996.

[28] Paul Rudolph, "To Enrich Our Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* (Spring 1958), 10.

[29] *Materialized Space: The Architecture of Paul Rudolph* exhibition wall label, curated by Abraham Thomas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2024-25.

[30] Ibid.; Joseph Giovannini.

[31] Conversation at 23 Beekman Place (interview with Peter Blake, c. 1996), viewed at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/interview-peter-blake

[32] Paul Rudolph, Yale Art and Architecture Building, *Arts & Architecture* (February 1964), 34.

[33] Vincent Scully, "Art & Architecture Building, Yale University," *Architectural Review* (May 1964), viewed at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/s/Yale-AA-Building-by-Vincent-Scully.pdf

[34] Paul Rudolph quote, viewed at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/196402-rudolph-architectural-office.

[35] Dickinson Jr./Paul Rudolph Institute, materials, 23.

[36] "Conversation at 23 Beekman Place."

[37] Ibid.

[38] Rudolph and Wagner called them "subway grating." Dickinson Jr. email, January 27, 2025.

[39] Wagner, "Paul Rudolph: Inspiration, Design, and Friendship."

[40] Joseph Giovannini.

[41] William Menking, "Manhattan Masterpiece," *Architect's Journal*, October 2004. Martin Filler was far less enthusiastic. In a 2015 essay, he praised Rudolph's early "dynamic manipulation of space" but criticized his subsequent "incorrigible urge to overcomplicate things." See "The Hard Case of Paul Rudolph," *The New York Review of Books*, February 2, 2015, 37.

[42] "Conversation at 23 Beekman Place;" "On Light," *Paul Rudolph 1983-84 recipient of the Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture*, School of Architecture, University of Illinois, not paginated.

[43] Email to LPC/author, January 27, 2025. Dickinson wrote that the paint color BEHR Dynasty White 52u "matches."

[44] John Lack, email to LPC/author, January 15, 2025.

[45] Paul Rudolph Foundation v. Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation, United States District Court, September 30, 2021, 2-3.

[46] These objects are not part of the designation, but include Transformer toys, textile combs, folk charms, and ancient terracotta heads.

[47] See "Our Mission Began From A Personal Promise" at https://www.paulrudolph.institute/what-we-do#:~:text=The%20Paul%20Rudolph%20Institute%20for%20Modern%20Architecture%20(formerly%20the%20Paul,1997%2C%20and%20Rudolph%20named%20Mr. The Modulightor website began referring to the 246 East 58th Street building as the "Modulightor Building" in 2004. Dickinson Jr. email to LPC, 2023.

[48] Dickinson Jr., 20.

[49] "Open House New York," *New Yorker* magazine, October 1, 2004, part of "Modulightor Building – Interior Designation."

[50] Squeo studied architecture at Syracuse University and the University of Texas. During his time with Rudolph, he was involved with a number of unbuilt projects in southeast Asia.

[51] Guest post by Alexander Luckman, "Archtober Building of the Day #6: The Modulightor Building," October 6, 2017.

[52] Jason Farago, "Paul Rudolph at 100: The Mischief Maker in a New Light," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018. The other exhibition was "Paul Rudolph: The Hong Kong Journey," held at the Center for Architecture in 2018-19.

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

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 an Interior Landmark the Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1331, Lot 128, consisting of the third and fourth floor duplex, including the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, which may include but are not limited to the columns, joists, stairs, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mirrors, lighting fixtures, attached furnishings, doors, railings, and attached decorative elements as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.


**Modulightor Building, 246 East 58th Street**
LPC, December 2023

**Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex, third floor, north living room, view north**, LPC, May 2025

**Third floor, north living room, view south to kitchen**
**Third floor, south living room, view south to rear garden**
LPC, May 2025

**Fourth floor, north opening, view south to north bedroom #2**
LPC, May 2025

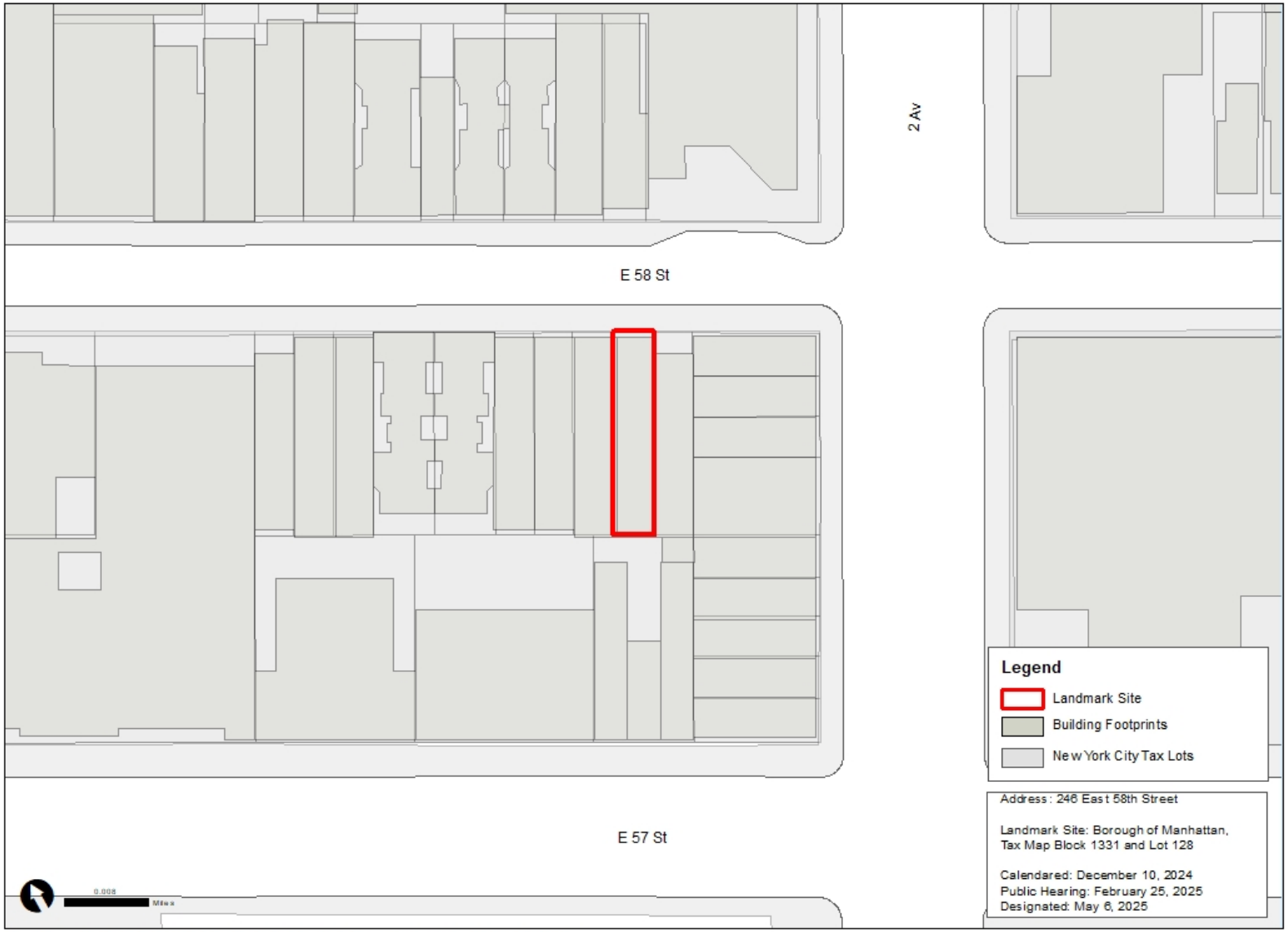
**Fourth floor, south opening, view south to south bedroom #1**
LPC, May 2025

**Third floor, south stairs, rising between south living room and south kitchen**
LPC, May 2025

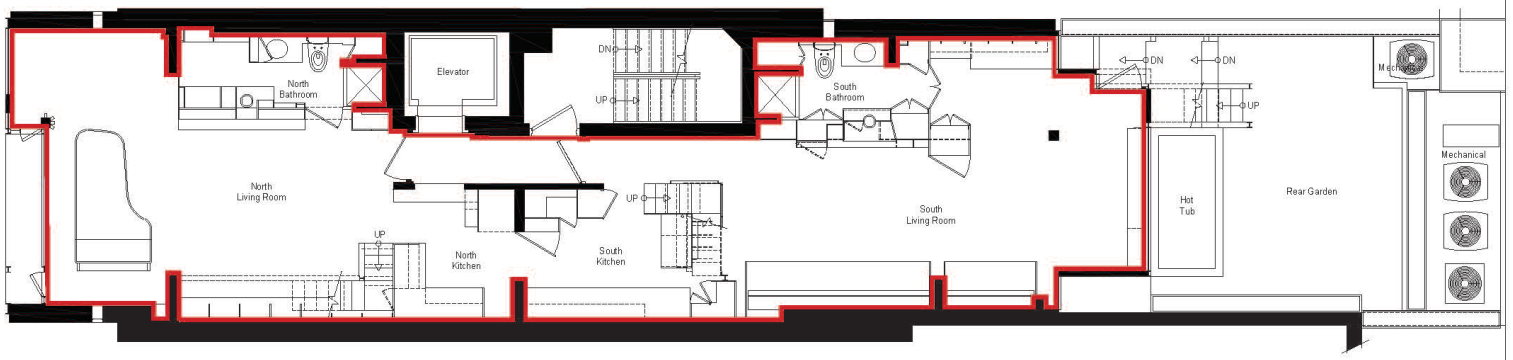
**North balcony, view north, including steps to fourth floor north bedroom #1 and #2**
LPC, May 2025

**Third floor, south kitchen, west wall**
LPC, May 2025

## Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex | LP-2684




Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22v2, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, SE, Date: 01.31.2025




**Legend**

- Third Floor Plan
- Interior Landmark

Address: 246 East 58th Street

Landmark Site: Manhattan Block 1331 and Lot 128

Calendared: December 10, 2024
Public Hearing: February 25, 2025
Designated: May 6, 2025

## Third Floor Plan

NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

Modulightor Building Apartment Duplex | LP-2684