

PERSHING SQUARE BUILDING, 125 Park Avenue (aka 101-105 East 41st Street, 100-108 East 42nd Street, 117-123 Park Avenue, 127-131 Park Avenue), Manhattan
Built: 1921-23; architect, John Sloan in association with York & Sawyer

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 1

On July 19, 2016 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Pershing Square Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. A representative of the owner expressed concerns about the designation and asked the Commission to delay its decision. Council Member Daniel R. Garodnick indicated his support for the worthiness of designation but noted transportation issues involved with the site that were under review by the MTA. There were eight speakers in support of the designation including representatives of Borough President Gale Brewer, Community Board 5, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, the Municipal Arts Society, and the Society for the Architecture of the City. Four speakers urged the Commission to delay taking an action on this item including representatives of the Riders Alliance, Straphangers Campaign; the Grand Central Partnership; the NYU/Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation; and the Association for a Better New York. Two speakers representing Stantec Consulting Services and the Real Estate Board of New York spoke in opposition to the designation. The Commission also received written submissions expressing support for designation from four individuals.

Summary

The Lombard Revival style Pershing Square Building anchors a prominent corner directly across 42nd Street from Grand Central Terminal at Park Avenue. Designed by John Sloan, working with staff of York & Sawyer, the building is remarkable for the important role it played in the development of the city's mass transit system, its transitional role in the history of the city's building development, and its exceptional terra-cotta cladding. The Pershing Square Building is also noteworthy as an integral element of the redevelopment of the Grand Central Terminal area.

The Pershing Square Building and the Bowery Savings Bank (1921-23, and 1931-33, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), adjacent to the east (designed by York & Sawyer), replaced the well-known Grand Union Hotel, which was acquired in 1914 by the Public Services Commission to create a new diagonal station linking the older portions of the IRT line running beneath Park Avenue with the new extension of the line beneath Lexington Avenue. In constructing the new station the Commission's engineers provided exceptionally strong foundations that could support the weight of a 25-story building so that the site could be marketed as a development parcel once the station was complete. Due to wartime shortages that slowed subway construction the site was not ready for development until 1920. At that time it was acquired by a syndicate headed by developer Henry Mandel who obtained financing



from the Bowery Savings Bank in exchange for releasing a portion of the site to the bank for a new branch.

John Sloan, working for Mandel and the Pershing Square Building Corporation, created a design incorporating Renaissance and Romanesque elements that complemented William Louis Ayres of York & Sawyer's Romanesque Revival design for the Bowery Savings Bank. The two buildings shared a party wall (thought to be the tallest in the city) and interlocking framing. Later York & Sawyer were brought into the Pershing Square project, although Sloan remained in charge of the design. Because the Pershing Square Building utilized subway footings that were in place when the zoning ordinance was adopted in 1916 and was sold by the city as developable with a 25-story building, it received a variance from the setback requirements of the law and thus became the last tall building in New York erected without setbacks. Instead it had a large light court facing Park Avenue with tall slabs that rise straight up from the eighth story.

Faced with granite, multi-hued brick and colorful terra cotta, it features Northern Italian motifs including round-arched windows and tiled hipped roofs, suggesting old Lombardy. The bricks and terra cotta, fabricated by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, were designed to appear old and weathered, in order to create a more "artistic" design. This was the first tall office building to use textured brickwork and colored terra cotta, setting a precedent for the colorful designs of Ely Jacques Kahn and Ralph Walker later in the decade.

The Pershing Square Building has several subway entrances and direct access to Grand Central Terminal. With its multiple connections and access points, and its fine design and unique facade treatment, it continues to make a significant contribution to the visual variety and richness of East Midtown.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

The Pershing Square Building is a Lombard Romanesque-Renaissance Revival building on the east side of Park Avenue between East 42nd Street and East 41st Street. The building was originally 23 stories high, with a two setback attic stories and at the center of the east wing, a two-story penthouse with chimney towers at each end. Subsequent to construction, two mezzanine stories were installed in double-height floors changing the official building height to 25 stories plus the attics and penthouse. A two-story addition for HVAC equipment was added to the penthouse between 1985 and 2000. The three street facades are clad with granite at the first story (portions reclad) and on the upper stories with terra cotta and textured bricks, which vary in size and color and are laid in decorative patterns. All square-headed windows originally had three-over-three steel sashes.

42nd Street facade:

Historic: Base – first story, granite-clad piers first and second bays (reading east to west); granite roll molding. Upper stories, corbeling to create vertical striping at end bays; single square-headed window openings with molded sills; double-story arches set off by molded terra-cotta surrounds; 15-light steel sash at second story original (original 13-light upper sash at third story in arched portion of windows replaced); arabesqued pilasters, quarter-columns enriched with guilloche moldings; composite capitals with shields with “P square” emblem; fifth story set off by terra-cotta cornices; guilloche moldings, white brick and blue-and-white terra-cotta relief panels between windows, terra-cotta sculptural panels representing female allegorical figures in end bays.

Midsection – textured brick laid in decorative patterns; square-headed windows arranged in pairs between wide piers; vertical striping on piers, molded terra-cotta sill courses; splayed corbeled window surrounds in wider center window bays; terra-cotta arched corbel tables above 14th, 17th, and 19th story windows, midsection capped by decorative cornice.

Crown – 20th and 23rd stories set off by molded courses, single square-headed windows. Center bays 21st and 22nd articulated by double-story arcade supported by brick piers with molded terra-cotta bases, capitals, impostes, and architraves; capped by corbeled terra-cotta cornice.

Attic – 24rd story sets back about six feet from façade, brick cladding, trabeated windows, hipped roofs with gable-roofed monitors for 25th story.

Alterations: First story: two eastern bays piers reclad, recessed entrances, stoops, metal pipe railings, steel-beam “canopy”, plaque removed from front, later plaque on side face easternmost pier; other bays: four piers removed, covered by non-historic storefront; second-floor louver in easternmost bay; all windows replaced except for second story.

Park Avenue facade

Historic: Base – granite cladding capped by roll molding; molded stone entrance surround at center of façade; cartouche with “P square” emblem and laurel wreath over door; recessed subway entrances; long rectangular storefront openings except in two northernmost bays. Upper stories – triple giant arches with decorative terra-cotta surrounds in center section, single arches with terra-cotta surrounds flanked by square-headed windows in outer wings; corbeled vertical striping; fifth story set off by cornices, decorative terra cotta and glazed brick panels between windows; sculptural allegorical reliefs.

Midsection – setback court above seventh floor; textured brick facings; square-headed window openings; vertical striping, arched corbel tables.

Crown – Two-story arcade with decorative terra-cotta architrave moldings 21st and 22nd stories; capped by corbeled terra-cotta cornice.

Attic – 24rd story sets back about six feet from façade, brick cladding, trabeated windows, hipped roofs with gable-roofed monitors for 25th story except for center portion of east wing.

Alterations: Base – two northernmost bays corner piers removed, storefront reclad; masonry bulkheads removed from storefronts; storefront infill replaced; signage on masonry above second, fourth, and seventh storefronts (reading north to south); small vent in masonry above fourth storefront; subway signs; glass door side panels, center building entry converted to storefront with non-historic infill. Upper stories - all windows replaced except for 15-light steel sash at second story; grilles in second- and third-story in third bay; louver replaces window at second story; flagpoles above seventh-story setback; spandrels and window framing in large arches 20th-21st stories; two-story mechanical addition to penthouse at center east wing

41st Street façade

Historic: Base – granite cladding capped by roll molding; decorative bronze framing elements and masonry bulkhead, bronze-and-glass door in the easternmost storefront; horizontal openings with masonry bulkheads for storefronts. Upper stories – 12-light steel sashes at second story of large arched windows; terra cotta recessed panel in place of second-story window in fifth bay (reading west to east).

Midsection – square-headed window openings; vertical striping, arched corbel tables.

Crown: Two-story arcades with decorative terra-cotta architrave moldings 21st and 22nd stories; capped by corbeled terra-cotta cornice.

Attic – 24rd story sets back about six feet from façade, brick cladding, trabeated windows, hipped roofs with gable-roofed monitors for 25th story.

Alterations: Base - Storefronts replaced first, second, and third bays (reading west to east); signage over first storefront; section of stone cladding missing beneath store window; transom, vehicle door, and paired metal and glass doors in service entry; metal entry surround, replacement doors and signage in freight entry; circular louvered vent on bulkhead below easternmost store window; metal transom above window; six fire hose couplings on easternmost pier; emergency lights. Upper stories, louver replaces window at third story easternmost bay.

East façade

Historic: Visible above the 18th story of the Bowery Savings Bank; divided into three parts; outer bays conform to setbacks and articulation of the street facades; arcade at the 26th story.

Alterations: Windows replaced; windows sealed north side center section 21st-23rd stories, north end of south wing; two-story penthouse addition.

Roof

Historic: Two-story setback attic capped with hipped 24th story; gabled monitors 25th story.

Alterations: roof tiles replaced with asphalt; two story HVAC addition on penthouse on east side of roof; chimneys removed.

SITE HISTORY

Evolution of East Midtown¹

Pre-Grand Central Era

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 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 Fisk-Harkness House (1871/1906).

Terminal City

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 (Reed & Stem and Warren & Wetmore, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) was completed in February 1913.

Wilgus envisioned the terminal as part of a city-with-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 designated 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 designated New York City Landmark). Grand Central Palace, a 13-story neo-classical style convention hall and exhibition building on the east side of Lexington Avenue between 46th Street and 47th Street, built by the Grand Central Railroad to

the designs of Warren & Wetmore working in collaboration with Reed & Stem in 1910, became New York's principal venue for trade fairs and corporate displays.

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 designated New York City Landmarks).

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

Post-World War II Era

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 designated 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.

The "Grand Central Zone," Mass Transit, and the Pershing Square Building Site

Prior to the opening of the new building, Grand Central Terminal was already a major transportation hub served not only by the railroad but also by several streetcar lines, a spur line of the Third Avenue Elevated, and by the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) subway, which had a major station beneath 42nd Street, just west of Grand Central.² In 1913, at about the time the new terminal opened, the city's Public Service Commission entered into contracts to greatly expand the subway and elevated system. Key components to this expansion, known as the Dual Contract System, included the Steinway (No. 7) subway to Queens, a new shuttle to Times Square (both with underground links to Grand Central), and a new uptown extension of the IRT's Park Avenue line, which had to be routed beneath Lexington Avenue to avoid the terminal and the New Haven's tracks.³

To link the downtown and uptown sections of the IRT line the Public Service Commission planned to lay tracks and construct a station, which would extend on a diagonal from 41st Street and Park Avenue, running beneath the Grand Union Hotel at Park Avenue and 42nd Street to the site of the former Children's Hospital.⁴ In February 1914 the Public Service Commission began condemnation proceedings to acquire the Grand Union site, which proved to be very expensive.⁵ To ensure that the land costs would be recouped the Commission announced that the specifications for the new station would "provide foundations for a twenty-five-story structure" on the site of the hotel.⁶ In May 1915 the Grand Union Hotel site was excavated as an access point and staging area for the new subway construction.⁷ Construction proceeded according to the 1914 plans despite the adoption of the zoning resolution in 1916, which would have required a setback tower for the site.

Material shortages due to wartime rationing slowed construction of the subways. The Lexington Avenue line did not begin service north of 42nd Street until July 1918. In December

1918 the Board of Aldermen voted to name the part of 42nd Street “immediately in front of Grand Central Terminal looking into Park Avenue” Pershing Square in honor of General John J. Pershing, commander of the American troops serving in France during World War I.⁸ In February and March 1919 several organizations proposed turning the Grand Union Hotel site into a public park or plaza in memory of the American troops who fought in France. By June 1919 those proposals had changed into a plan to erect a three-story “Victory Hall” on the site.⁹ In February 1920, Fiorello La Guardia, then president of the Board of Alderman, announced his opposition to the memorial hall on the site, arguing for the return to the tax rolls of one of the most valuable pieces of property in the city.¹⁰ In May 1920 the Transit Commission tried to sell the site at a public auction but there were no bids.¹¹ In July 1920 developer Henry Mandel heading a syndicate of investors offered \$2,900,000 for the Grand Union, \$100,000 over the reserve price set by the city for the property. The offer was soon accepted for what the *New York Times* described as “the most desirable vacant parcel ready for immediate improvement in the midtown section of Manhattan Island ... certain to be improved in time with a monumental edifice.”¹²

Henry Mandel

Henry Mandel (1884-1942) was born in Ukraine and was brought to this country by his family when he was three.¹³ His father Samuel Mandel was a builder and real estate developer and by 1905 Henry was the general superintendent at his father’s building firm. Henry and Samuel were involved in a number of small real estate development projects between 1906 and 1910. By 1910 Henry was president of the Mandel Building Company and an officer in the Surety Land Company. In the 1910s Henry Mandel and a group of associates began investing in real estate in the Chelsea area of Manhattan and by 1913 they controlled about 45% of the frontage on both sides of Seventh Avenue from 23rd Street to 14th Street. In 1915 his Columbus Circle Construction Corporation was the general contractor for the Postal Life Building at Fifth Avenue and East 43rd Street.

By 1920 Mandel was beginning to invest in midtown Manhattan. The Pershing Square Building, built 1921-23, was his most important project to date. He soon followed it with the office building at One Park Avenue (built 1923-25, York & Sawyer, architects), several Manhattan hotels, and a large suburban subdivision in North Tarrytown, called Sleepy Hollow Manor. His two best known projects were the Parc Vendome apartment house complex at 330-360 West 57th Street (1929-31) and the enormous London Terrace complex of 14 apartment buildings extending between West 23rd and West 24th Streets between Ninth and Tenth Avenues (1929-30), both designed by Farrar and Watmough. Mandel was hit hard by the Depression and was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1932. He lost all of his real estate holdings but by the mid-1930s was again engaged in development projects, albeit on a much smaller scale.¹⁴

The Last Tall Building Without Setbacks

In July 1920, when he entered into a purchase agreement for the Grand Union Hotel site, Henry Mandel had architect John Sloan prepare preliminary plans for a modern office building. By September Mandel had formed the Pershing Square Building Corporation (he held 60% of the stock) and secured initial financing from the Bowery Savings Bank in exchange for an agreement to turn over the eastern portion of the former hotel site to the Bowery for a new branch bank and office building. When the New York Transit Construction Commission finally conveyed the former hotel property to the Pershing Square Building Corporation in January 1921, it was done subject to easements that limited the height and distribution of weight of any structures erected above the subway and required egress through the buildings to the subway station below.¹⁵ A purchase agreement between the Pershing Square Building Corporation and Bowery Savings Bank conveyed the eastern portion of the lot to the bank subject to the same covenants and contained a party wall

agreement that ensured the two buildings would have interlocking frames. In May 1921, John Sloan filed a permit with the Department of Buildings on behalf of the Pershing Square Building Corporation for a 22-story building, which would incorporate a light court facing Park Avenue, but would otherwise have no setbacks.¹⁶ The Fifth Avenue Association, concerned about enforcing the zoning code, sued to block the project. In June 1921, Sloan represented the Pershing Square Building Corporation before the Board of Standards and Appeals where he argued that it would be difficult and costly, and probably dangerous, as well as a violation of the easement, to alter the foundations already in place.¹⁷ Sloan further asserted that the provisions of the easement severely limited the character, plan, and height of any building erected on the site and that if were not for the subway, the zoning regulations would allow for a tower of practically unlimited height on 25% of the lot. The Board of Standards and Appeals ruled that in putting in foundations for a 25-story building and advertising the lot as developable with such a building, the City of New York had entered into a contract with the purchaser and therefore granted a variance to the Pershing Square Building Corporation. Thus, the Pershing Square Building became the last tall building erected in New York City without setbacks.

John Sloan and York & Sawyer: Their roles in Pershing Square Project

In September 1921, after it secured approval from the Board of Standards and Appeals, the Pershing Square Building Corporation entered into a contract with the architectural firm of York & Sawyer to take over the project. John Sloan agreed to turn over his drawings and share his ideas with York & Sawyer in exchange for a credit as Associate Architect and a \$10,000 payment from the Pershing Square Building Corporation to be deducted from York & Sawyers' usual fee. John Sloan (1887-1962) was an NYU graduate, who had worked for the War Department, supervising construction of military structures in the Philippines and the United States from 1908 to 1917 and was the commander of the 72nd Army Air Service Squadron from 1917-1919. He was just establishing his own practice and lacked the resources for such a big project. York & Sawyer, established in 1898 by Edward Palmer York (1863-1928) and Philip Sawyer (1868-1949) was one of the leading firms of the day specializing in hospitals, banks, schools, and office buildings and had a large staff with considerable engineering expertise. Moreover, it had already been awarded the commission for the 42nd Street branch of Bowery Savings Bank Building, which had broken ground in July 1921.¹⁸

In October 1921 the opponents of Pershing Square Building appealed BSA's ruling to the New York State Court of Appeals. For many months it appeared doubtful that the developers would secure a construction loan.¹⁹ York & Sawyer did not assign staff to the project and instead left it up to Sloan to do whatever work was needed for presentations to potential investors. When financing was secured in May 1922, Edward York asked Sloan to continue as architect in charge of the project responsible for preparing a complete set of preliminary drawings, supervising the draftsmen at York & Sawyer as they prepared working drawings, meeting with prospective tenants and preparing plans and specifications to adapt the interior spaces to their needs, dealing with contractors, the Department of Buildings, and the Transit Commission. York & Sawyer promised Sloan additional compensation for this work, and then reneged, resulting in a lawsuit that was ultimately decided in Sloan's favor in 1928.

In 1923, Sloan working in association with Adolph E. Nast designed an apartment house at 898 Park Avenue (within the Upper East Side Historic District) for Henry Mandel, which was closely related in design to the Pershing Square Building. The following year, Sloan formed a partnership with T. Markoe Robertson who had been educated at Yale University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and had worked in partnership with his father, the noted architect R. H. Robertson from 1908 to 1919. Sloan & Robertson specialized in speculative projects. Prior to 1930, they designed

such Manhattan office towers as the Wadsworth Building (1925-26, demolished), the Graybar Building (1925-27), the Fred F. French Building (with H. Douglas Ives, 1926-27, a designated New York City Landmark), Chanin Building (with Irwin Chanin, 1927-29, a designated New York City Landmark), as well as apartment houses at 1 Beekman Place (1929), and 895 Park Avenue (1929, within the Upper East Side Historic District). 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.

York & Sawyer continued their association with Henry Mandel through their work on the One Park Avenue Building. The firm remained one of the most prominent in New York City and moved its offices to an upper floor of the Pershing Square Building in 1924, continuing there until at least 1940.

The Design of the Pershing Square Building

In designing the Pershing Square Building, Sloan utilized a U-shaped plan popular for tall buildings prior to the adoption of the zoning code, incorporating a deep light court above the eighth story on the western (Park Avenue) side of the building. The building's complex program included stores and restaurants at the ground story and subway level, a monumental second story banking hall, and office floors, all of which were reflected in the building's façade design, which employed a traditional tripartite articulation with a five-story base, 14-story midsection, and five-story cap topped by two set back attic stories.

Comparison of Sloan's initial design for the building published in March 1921 with the executed building suggest that he modified his plans to harmonize with York & Sawyer's designs for the Bowery Savings Bank Building, which was making rapid progress while the Pershing Square Building project was delayed.²⁰ Sloan complemented York & Sawyer's Italian Romanesque, Ohio sandstone-clad facades, using a similar greyish-tan palette for his stone, brick, and terra-cotta cladding, echoed the arcades and vertical striping, and matched some of the cornice lines. While York & Sawyer drew almost exclusively on Italian Romanesque models for the Bowery Bank Building's decorative detailing, Sloan employed a mixture of Romanesque and Early Renaissance Lombard Italian details, handled in a somewhat looser manner appropriate to the larger scale of the Pershing Square building.

Francisco Mujica in his *History of the Skyscraper* asserted that the Pershing Square Building was "one of first skyscrapers in which brick cladding was used for decorative purposes," forming various designs either through projections or by varying the size and pattern of the bricks.²¹ So unusual was this treatment that in October 1922 the Department of Buildings required a special report on the stability of the façade.²² The inspiration for this treatment might well have been Arthur Kingsley Porter's book *Lombard Architecture*, published in 1915-17, which took advantage of the new technology of telephoto photography to present stunning close-ups of medieval and early Renaissance buildings, employing brick diaperwork and corbelling with picturesque irregular shapes, rough surfaces, and coarse jointing that appealed greatly to the aesthetic sensibilities of the 1910s and 1920s.²³

Produced by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, the terra cotta at the Pershing Square Building was cast in small size pieces "reminiscent of early Italian manufacture."²⁴ This treatment permitted a similarity in scale and jointing between the terra cotta and the brickwork. The terra cotta also harmonized in color and texture with the bricks. Great care was exercised "to prevent too great a mechanical nicety" with many of the terra cotta pieces "purposely roughened before kiln burning" to create a rugged and ragged texture.²⁵ Both the brick and terra cotta varied greatly in color and were carefully matched. The color was "a soft gray fire-flashed with golden brown, with a rough surface almost like coarse sandpaper."²⁶ Golden brown dominated with touches of coffee and

cerulean blue accentuating the natural shadows of the lower story detail.²⁷ This color spotting was carefully calculated with the idea that city dust would eventually “tone the marked variations down into a softly harmonious play of color.”²⁸

The terra-cotta ornament is largely concentrated at the base of the building and is especially rich around the arches illuminating the banking room where the molded surrounds incorporate patterned column shafts and composite capitals ornamented with stylized dolphins and shields and arabesqued pilasters topped by eagles, emblems of victory. At the ends of the façade at the fifth story are paired female allegorical figures related to the building’s dedication to “patriotism, peace, and prosperity.”²⁹

Sloan’s handling of the Pershing Square Building’s upper stories was also noteworthy. Because the variance for the building granted by Board of Standard and Appeals stipulated that the cornice projection had to be limited to 12 inches, he terminated the main portion of the building at 23 stories capping it with a series of corbel tables, then provided “an architectural finish” with a red tile-roofed setback attic. The 24th story was set back about seven feet from the building line and topped by a hipped roof, the small 25th story penthouses on the 42nd and 41st Street wings were capped by gabled roofs, and the taller center section along the east wall articulated with arcades set between pylon-like chimney stacks. The overall effect, in the words of architectural critic Charles Downing Lay, looked “like a villa on the hilltop.”³⁰ (Additions to the center wing have diminished the effect but the attics on the side wings remain largely intact.)

The treatment of the building’s brick and terra cotta cladding frankly “emphasizing the qualities of the medium which are quite natural to it,”³¹ the clear articulation of structure, and sculptural treatment of the skyline earned the Pershing Square Building considerable critical praise. Robert A. M. Stern particularly singled out the use of patterned and textured brick saying that the technique would “become increasingly important with the flowering of the Lombard Revival, and would be further developed in the Dutch and German Expressionist-influenced works of Ely Jacques Kahn and Ralph Walker.”³² For Sloan’s own work, the Pershing Square Building was an important formative work in which he first displayed his interest in color and texture, innovative cladding materials, decorative detailing, and, within the limited scope permitted by this last pre-zoning skyscraper, picturesque terminations, that was so evident in his later more modernistic skyscrapers: the Graybar, Chanin, and Fred French Buildings.

Pershing Square Building: Tenants and Later History

Built directly atop a subway station linked to three major lines and connected to Grand Central Terminal through tunnels at the subway concourse level, the Pershing Square Building was an integral part of the Terminal City development. By January 1923, several months before it was completed, 60% of the Pershing Square Building had already been leased to tenants including the International Paper Company, the Royal Baking Powder Company, the Royal Indemnity Company, and the London and Liverpool and Globe Insurance Company.³³ In 1924 Pacific Bank rented the large second-story banking hall and added a third-story mezzanine designed by John Sloan.³⁴ By 1930, the Irving Trust Company had taken over the second-story banking room and remained a tenant until the 1980s, although it moved from the second and third floors to the first floor and basement in 1970. In addition to its large corporate tenants, the building housed many attorneys, insurance brokers, investment firms, and realtors.³⁵ It was also popular with architects, builders, and building supply companies.³⁶ Long-term tenants included the American Maize Products Company (1929-66?), the William Esty advertising agency (1935-1995?), the New York State Republican Party (1930s-early 1940s), and American Airlines, which began leasing four stories and a portion of the ground story for its executive offices in 1943.³⁷ In 1945, the American Can Company, which had been occupying the 24th and 25th stories, leased additional space and the building was renamed

the American Can Building, retaining the name through the 1970, when the company was acquired by a conglomerate. It then was renamed the Pershing Square Building; in recent years it has been known as 125 Park Avenue.

In later years, the building continued to be a favored location for airlines, including Trans Canada and Northwest, and air-related transportation companies, such as Carey Transportation. North American Philips Company (now Philips Electronics North America), makers of Philips electronics and Norelco razors, moved to the building by the early 1950s and remains a major tenant. Other recent tenants include the Pandora Media Company and Robert Half International.

The Pershing Square Building Company retained ownership of the building until 1971 when it was sold to the Prudential Insurance Company.³⁸ Between 2006 and 2008 Shorestein Properties renovated the lobby and added a new glass-and-metal entry on 42nd Street designed by Jeff Gertler of Gertler & Wentz Architects.³⁹ In 2010 the building was acquired by 125 Park Owner LLC, an affiliate of S. L. Green Realty Corporation. Recent changes have included the recladding of the 42nd Street ground story façade to the west of the entrance bays and the northernmost bay of the Park Avenue ground story façade. Most of the upper story windows have been replaced. In 2000 the upper story masonry was carefully restored. Today the building retains its exceptional brick and terra cotta cladding and continues to make a significant contribution to the visual variety and richness of East Midtown.

STATEMENT OF REGULATORY INTENT

The Pershing Square Building is noteworthy as an integral element of the redevelopment of the Grand Central Terminal area and its history and design are intimately related to the development of the city's mass transit system. It is built directly atop a subway station, including the platform and tracks serving three major transit lines and connected to Grand Central Terminal through tunnels at the subway concourse level. Pursuant to covenants in the original sale, the new building was required to provide access to the subway. As a result, the building's base provides access from street level to a mezzanine level and track level for the subways and Grand Central Terminal.

The Commission recognizes that the mass transit system that runs below the Pershing Square Building may continue to evolve and adapt to new technologies and needs, resulting in potential modifications to the building, and that the Commission will consider the historical connection between the transit system and the building when evaluating such modifications, in order to ensure that the site continues to serve its important historical function in the transit system.

Report researched and written by
Gale Harris
Evolution of East Midtown by
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Research Department

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* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2001); 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); Robert A.M. Stern and others, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 1987).

²The IRT line originally turned west on 42nd Street and terminated at Times Square. For public transportation serving Grand Central see Schlichting, 57.

³ For the Dual Contract System see Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 135-161; "New Terminal the Heart of City's Transit System," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1913, 72; "New Station Plans for Steinway Tunnel on East Forty-Second Street," *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 1915, XX3; "Dual Contracts," *Wikipedia*, Sept. 14, 2015 @ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dual_Contracts, accessed Nov. 4, 2015.

⁴ "Alter Subway Plan at Grand Central," *New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1913, 8; "Plan New Building on Grand Union Site," *New York Times*, July 25, 1913, 7; "Board Again Votes for Diagonal Plan," *New York Times*, June 28, 1913, 6; "Adopts New Route to Link Subways," *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1913, 8.

⁵ "Diagonal Route for Subway Link," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1914, 7; "The Passing of Old Hotels," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, May 5, 1914, 818; "Added Subway Cost Was Anticipated," *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1915, 10.

⁶"Plans Submitted for Subway Link," *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1914, 6.

⁷ "Miracles Done in New Subway," *New York Times*, May 16, 1915, SM15.

⁸ "Name Street for Pershing," *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1918, 15. See also "Wants 'Pershing Square,'" *New York Times*, *New York Times*, July 22, 1918, 9; "Plea for Pershing Square," *New York Times*, Sep. 20, 1918, 9.

⁹ "Plan to Create New Public Square on East Forty-Second Street," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1919, 102; "Favor Proposed Plaza," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1919, 94; "For War Memorial Plaza," *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1919, 3; "For Memorial Hall On Grand Union Site," *New York Times*, June 7, 1919, 13; "Plans for Victory Hall," *New York Times*, June 13, 1919, 10.

¹⁰ "Assails Victory Hall Plan," *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1920, 32.

¹¹ The high reserve price set by the Commission, the requirement for full payment within a few weeks of the sale, and the possibility that the Victory Hall project might somehow go forward made banks reluctant to finance the project. See "Grand Union Hotel Site To Be Sold at Auction This Week," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, May 22, 1920, 673; "Grand Union Hotel Site Goes Begging at Auction Sale," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, May 29, 1920, 708; "Victory Hall Site Draws No Buyers," *New York Times*, May 27, 1920, 32.

¹² "Bids \$2,900,000 for Grand Union Site," *New York Times*, July 21, 1920. See also "Builders Buy Grand Union Site," *Real Estate Record & Guide*, Aug. 7, 1920, 787.

¹³ This biography of Henry Mandel was compiled from “Henry Mandel, 58, Realty Man, Dies,” *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1942, 57; Andrew Alpern, *Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan: An Illustrated History* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992); “Bosses and Employees in Joint Celebration,” *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 1905, 4; *Trows Company Co-Partnership Directory*, 1910, 158; Christopher Gray, “Streetscapes: Seventh Avenue Between 15th and 16th Streets; Four 30’s Apartment Buildings on 4 Chelsea Corners,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2004, “Passing of ‘Last Vacant Corner,’” *Real Estate Record & Guide*, Oct. 9, 1915, 603; “Henry Mandel Buys Midtown Realty,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1920, 29; “Skyscraper Office Building Planned for Site of Old Dwellings,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Mar. 8, 1925, E7; “New Development in Sleepy Hollow,” *New York Evening Post*, Mar. 24, 1928, 12; “Henry Mandel-The Builder,” *New York Sun*, Dec. 11, 1928, 53; “Mandel Interests Buy 42nd Street Site,” *New York Evening Post*, Aug. 14, 1931, 11.

¹⁴ His later projects included the conversion of the Joseph and Kate Pulitzer House at 11 East 73rd Street to apartments in 1934 and apartment buildings in Flushing and St. Albans, Queens, erected in the late 1930s.

¹⁵ New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 3190, p. 440; p. 446; Liber 3201, p. 165.

¹⁶ New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Permit 189-1921. “\$6,000,000 Office Building for Pershing Square Site,” *New York Tribune*, May 8, 1921.

¹⁷ New York City Board of Standards and Appeals, file 49-21BZ; “Bulletin of Appeals,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 19, 1921, 2. The decision was appealed and upheld by the Court of Appeals, see “Pershing Square Legal Barriers Removed by Court,” *New York Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1921, A10; “Decision Favors Builders,” *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1921, RE20; “Office Building Contract Ready,” *The Evening Telegram*, Nov. 27, 1921, 22.

¹⁸ “New Bowery Bank,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1921, 88.

¹⁹ New York County, Supreme Court, Case 46346-1925, Philip Sawyer, Edward P. York, Frederick S. Benedict, Lindley M. Franklin, Louis Ayres vs John Sloan; “Architects Sue Over Fee,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1928, 13.

²⁰ See “New Skyscraper for Pershing Square,” *New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1921, S6. John Vincent “The Pershing Square Building, Park Avenue, 41st and 42nd Streets,” *Pencil Points*, 3, no. 4 (Apr 1922), cover.

²¹ Francisco Mujica, *History of the Skyscraper* (New York: Archaeology & Architecture Press, 1930), 60-61.

²² The departmental inspector reported that “the piers were bonded by diagonal headers used every sixth course, that the space between the sills and lintels was filled by ornamental panels laid in herringbone patterns, and that the brickwork was reinforced with wire anchors and laid with Portland cement” stating that “the work [had been] done in as practicable a manner as could be done.” Special Report, Oct. 7, 1922, New Building Permit, 189-1921.

²³ Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Lombard Architecture* (1915-17; rpt. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1967).

²⁴ F. S. Laurence, “The Pershing Square Building: Its Technique of Materials,” *American Architect & Architecture* 124 (Oct. 10, 1923), 323.

²⁵ “Pershing Square Building, New York, 1923,” *Atlantic Terra Cotta* 6, n. 3 (July 1923), 1; “Rugged and Ragged,” [Atlantic Terra Cotta Company advertisement], *Pencil Points*, Nov. 1922.

²⁶ “Pershing Square Building,” 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Laurence, 323.

²⁹ One figure carries a cornucopia and a caduceus, emblems usually associated with Felicitas, the personification of peace, prosperity, and good fortune. On her head is a mural crown, a headpiece representing city walls or towers, worn by city goddesses such as Fortuna/Tyche, which is encircled by a wreath of laurel leaves. During Roman times both mural crowns and laurel crowns were honorific military decorations. The other figure wears a helmet capped by a horse drawn chariot and wears a breastplate emblazoned with an eagle, suggesting that she represents Nike/Victoria, the goddess of victory, who served as the charioteer for Zeus/Jupiter. She carries a laurel wreath and a sheathed sword. Thus, the sculptural program seems to address the dual missions for the building - as a commemorative monument to America’s victory in World War I and its fallen soldiers and as a multipurpose business building dedicated to peace and prosperity. The Commission is indebted to Dr. Thomas Biggs for his insights into the symbolism of these sculptures.

The formal dedication ceremonies for the building were delayed until May 1924, so that General Pershing could attend. See “Pershing Makes Offhand Preparedness Plea at Luncheon in his Honor,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* May 18, 1924, 19; “To Broadcast Speech By Pershing Tonight,” *Telegram and Evening Mail Radio*, May 17, 1924, 14.

³⁰ Charles Downing Lay, “New Architecture in New York,” *The Arts* 4 (Aug. 1923), 68.

³¹ Laurence, 323.

³² Stern, *New York 1930*, 528.

³³ “Big Business Firms Claim New Space In Terminal Zone,” *New York Tribune*, Jan. 14, 1923, B1; \$1,000,000 Lease by Paper Company, *New York Times*, May 24, 1922, 38.

³⁴ Alteration Permit 721-1924; “Pacific Bank Takes Grand Central Site,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Apr. 27, 1924, 10; Anne Seward, “Banking, One Flight Up, New City Business Feature,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1924, XX10; “The Pacific Bank in New Quarters,” *Bankers Magazine* 109 (Nov. 1924), 971.

³⁵ New York Telephone, Address Directories, 1930, 1935; “Latest Dealings In Realty Field: Royal Indemnity Company Leases Three Floors in New Pershing Square Building,” *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1922, 34.

³⁶ In addition to York & Sawyer, the architectural firms included Ballinger Company (1923-35), H. I Feldman & Horace Ginsberg (1923-24), Henry Killam Murphy (1924-25, 1928-32), and in the 1950s and 1960s Eggers & Higgins. Builders included the Domill Construction Company, a Canadian firm building paper mills for the International Paper Company (1924-32) and Marc Eidlitz & Son (c. 1928-c. 1938) and building supply firms included the Certain-Teed Products Corporation (late 1920s-1950s) and the Bridgeport Brass Company.

³⁷ “American Airlines Rents Four Floors: Executive Offices Being Moved to Pershing Square Building,” [Newspaper?], Feb. 3 1943, 32.

³⁸ Subsequent owners included Sutom NV (1977-1994); General Electric Capital (1994-97); 125 Park Avenue LLC (1997-98); Watch Holdings LLC, a subsidiary of General Electric Capital (1998-2004); and Sri Six Operating Company, an investment fund in which Shorenstein Properties was a major investor (2004-2010). Information on ownership is from New York Department of Finance, *ACRIS*, block 1296, lot 1.

³⁹ Shorenstein Press Center “125 Park Avenue Lobby gets \$4.5M Facelift,” @http://shorenstein.com/about/press/press/press-article?article_id=1110, accessed Dec. 21, 2015.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Pershing Square Building 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.

The Commission further finds that the Pershing Square Building, designed in the Lombard Revival style by John Sloan, working with staff of York & Sawyer, and built in 1921-23, is remarkable for the important role it played in the development of the city's mass transit system, its transitional role in the history of the city's building development, and its exceptional terra-cotta cladding; that anchoring a prominent corner directly across 42nd Street from Grand Central Terminal at Park Avenue, the Pershing Square Building is also noteworthy as an integral element of the redevelopment of the Grand Central Terminal area; that the Pershing Square Building replaced the well-known Grand Union Hotel, which was acquired in 1914 by the Public Services Commission to create a new diagonal station linking the older portions of the IRT line running beneath Park Avenue with the new extension of the line beneath Lexington Avenue; that in constructing the new station the Commission's engineers provided exceptionally strong foundations that could support the weight of a 25-story building so that the site could be sold as a development parcel once the station was complete; that due to wartime shortages that slowed subway construction the site was not ready for development until 1920; that at that time it was acquired by a syndicate headed by developer Henry Mandel who obtained financing from the Bowery Savings Bank in exchange for releasing a portion of the site to the bank for a new branch; that because the Pershing Square Building utilized subway footings that were in place when the zoning ordinance was adopted in 1916 and the site was sold by the city as developable with a 25-story building, it received a variance from the setback requirements of the law and thus became the last tall building in New York erected without setbacks; that instead it had a large light court facing Park Avenue with tall slabs that rise straight up from the eighth story; that John Sloan, working for Mandel and the Pershing Square Building Corporation, created a design incorporating Renaissance and Romanesque elements that complemented William Louis Ayres of York & Sawyer's Romanesque Revival design for the Bowery Savings Bank of 1921-23 (a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), adjacent to the east and the two buildings shared a party wall (thought to be the tallest in the city) and interlocking framing; that York & Sawyer were later brought into the Pershing Square project, although Sloan remained in charge of the design; that faced with granite, multi-hued brick and colorful terra cotta, the Pershing Square Building features Northern Italian motifs including round-arched windows and tiled hipped roofs; that the bricks and terra cotta, fabricated for its facades by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, were designed to appear old and weathered, in order to create a more "artistic" design; that this was the first tall office building to use textured brickwork and colored terra cotta, setting a precedent for the colorful designs of Ely Jacques Kahn and Ralph Walker later in the decade; that integral to the construction of the East Midtown subway system, the Pershing Square Building was built with several subway entrances and direct access to Grand Central Terminal; that with its multiple connections and access points, it has played an important role in the history of the East Midtown transit system and with designation it can continue to play that role in the future; that the building also remains notable for its fine design and unique facade treatment; and that it continues to make a significant contribution to the visual variety and richness of East Midtown.

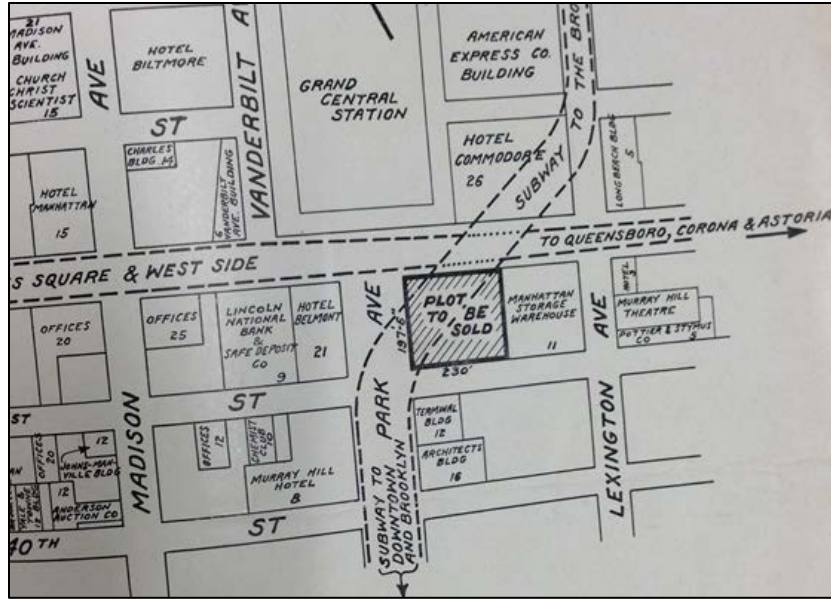
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Shelton Hotel, 525 Lexington Avenue (aka 523-527 Lexington Avenue, 137-139 East 48th Street, 136-140 East 49th Street), Manhattan, and designates as its Landmark Site Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1303, Lot 53.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

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



Pershing Square Building
125 Park Avenue
(aka 101-105 East 41st Street, 100-108 East 42nd Street, 117-123 Park Avenue,
127-131 Park Avenue), Manhattan
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



Top: Map showing the transit lines running below and adjacent to the Pershing Square Building site

Bottom: Pershing Square site with temporary entrances to the Lexington Avenue subway line

Source: *New York City Board of Standards and Appeals files*



“Pershing Square Building, Forty-Second Street and
Park Avenue, New York”
Source: Architectural League of New York Yearbook, 1922



Park Avenue and East 41st Street façades
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



East 42nd Street façade
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



Park Avenue light court
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



Former Park Avenue entry and subway entrances
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



Decorative brickwork 42nd Street façade
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016



Terra-cotta details Park Avenue facade
Photo: Gale Harris, April 2015



Allegorical figure, Park Avenue facade
Photo: Gale Harris, April 2015



Allegorical figure, Park Avenue facade
Photo: Sarah Moses, June 2016

Pershing Square Building | LP-2556



Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 16v1, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, DHW, Date: 11.22.2016