

Brooklyn Edison Building



Brooklyn Edison Building

LOCATION

Borough of Brooklyn
345 Adams Street (aka 372-392 Pearl
Street, 11-17 Willoughby Street)

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

Designed by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin for the Brooklyn Edison Company and built between 1922-1926, this highly visible Renaissance Revival style building is a notable landmark in the civic and commercial center of Brooklyn.



Brooklyn Edison Building
Brooklyn Public Library, 1924

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Brooklyn Edison Building

345 Adams Street (aka 372-392 Pearl Street, 11-17 Willoughby Street), Brooklyn

Designation List 541

LP-2680

Built: 1922-1926

Architect: McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 140, Lot 7503 (formerly Lot 123)

Building Identification Number (BIN): 3392969

Calendared: February 13, 2024

Public Hearing: June 4, 2024

On June 4, 2024, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Brooklyn Edison Building as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Two people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the Downtown Brooklyn Association and the Historic Districts Council. A representative of the owner of the property's commercial condominium did not oppose the designation but emphasized the importance of flexibility in making necessary changes to the commercial storefronts. There was no testimony in opposition to the designation. The Commission also received two letters in support for the designation, including from Councilmember Lincoln Restler and the Brooklyn Heights Association.

Summary

Brooklyn Edison Building

The Brooklyn Edison Building is a distinguished Renaissance Revival style office building, designed by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin for the Brooklyn Edison Company, and built between 1922-1926. Highly visible from Adams Street, Columbus Park and Fulton Streets, the monumental building is a notable landmark in the civic and commercial center of Brooklyn. Its early 20th-century Renaissance Revival design evokes the architectural styles prevalent at the time, and its imposing presence is a tangible reminder of the pivotal importance of electricity in fueling Brooklyn's development during this transformative era.

Originally headquartered at 360 Pearl Street, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn was founded in 1889 to provide electricity to Brooklyn and formally organized as the Brooklyn Edison Company after a merger in 1919. After the completion of subway lines by the 1920s, growth in residential development increased the demand for additional electricity capacity in Brooklyn. To answer this demand, the Brooklyn Edison Company purchased the adjacent lot to construct a new, larger building as its headquarters, and commissioned McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin to design it. Active between 1910 and 1925, the firm designed notable office and commercial buildings in New York City, including the Barclay-Vesey Building and Long Distance Building of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, both individual landmarks; and the Brooklyn Municipal Building, in the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District.

The Brooklyn Edison Building was constructed in two phases. The first phase occurred

in 1922-1923, and the building expanded northwards in 1926, doubling its footprint. Located prominently on the corner of Willoughby and Pearl Streets, it replaced Loew's Royal Theater. Recalling a grand Italian palazzo, it features a tripartite configuration with a stone base, white glazed brick middle section and set-back stone crown to comply with the recently-adopted 1916 Zoning Law. It is decorated with Renaissance Revival style elements, including double-sized arched windows, cartouches, festoon motifs, and quoins. Designed with the ambition of being the "last word" in office buildings, the building incorporated advanced technology in lighting and telephone systems. The auditorium of the building hosted events including charity fundraisers and meetings and played a pivotal role in Brooklyn's social life.

Originally located on the southeast corner of a larger block, the primary facades face Pearl and Willoughby Streets. The lower rear facade of the building was exposed and formed a monumental backdrop to Downtown Brooklyn's civic center when the western half of the block was removed during the 1950s construction of the Brooklyn Civic Center and expansion of Adams Street. Subsequent alterations to the ground story include the creation of storefronts along Adams Street, and modifications to replicate features on the original main facades. Despite these alterations, the building retains its historic character, and highly intact Renaissance Revival style details. Recently, the building underwent a sensitive restoration under the ownership of the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services, and Muss Development LLC, which owns the first two floors. It is still being used as an office building with commercial uses on the ground and first stories.

The Brooklyn Edison Building stands as a testament to the transformative impact of technological advancements in electricity production

on Brooklyn's urban development. The building also played an important role as a vibrant hub for social and cultural activities, drawing the community together through a variety of public events organized in it. Today, highly visible from Adams Street, Columbus Park, and Fulton Streets with its intact Renaissance Revival Style facades, the former Brooklyn Edison Building is a benchmark monument in the Downtown Brooklyn area.

Building Description

Brooklyn Edison Building¹

Description

The Brooklyn Edison Building is a 13-story office building designed by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin and located on 345 Adams Street (aka 372-392 Pearl Street, 11-17 Willoughby Street) in the heart of the commercial and civic center of Downtown Brooklyn. Designed in the Renaissance Revival style, the building is composed of two sections: the U-planned southern section—which is located on the corner of Willoughby Street, Pearl Street, and Adams Street—was constructed in 1922, and the eight-bay northern section was constructed in 1926.

The building has a tripartite configuration with a rusticated stone base offset by a cornice, a brick and stone middle section decorated with terra-cotta stringcourses and topped by an arcaded cornice, and double setback, responding to the requirements of the 1916 Zoning Law, forming the crown. Its primary facades face Pearl and Willoughby Streets. Rising above neighboring buildings and Borough Hall Plaza, the decorative cornices and hipped roof of this commercial palazzo are striking features within the neighborhood. The first setback features a metal balustrade decorated with cartouches. The building's hipped roofs are supported on modillions. There is a bulkhead and a chimney on the roof. The bulkhead features bands and modillions supporting its hipped roof, whereas the chimney features arches.

General Alterations

In the 1950s, the buildings adjacent to the Brooklyn Edison Building were demolished for the construction of the Brooklyn Civic Center and the

extension of Adams Street exposing the building's west facade. During the early 1960s, the main entrance was moved from Pearl Street to Adams Street.

In the late 1990s the building underwent a major phased repair and rehabilitation project designed by Li/Salzman, P.C. The copper tiled roof and gutters were replaced with a metal standing seam roof and new drainage system. The white glazed-brick and terra-cotta ornaments on the facades were repaired and replaced as needed. Historic eight-over-eight and six-over-six double-hung sash windows were replaced with aluminum one-over-one double-hung sash windows. Large ventilation louvers were added on the three primary facades between c. 2009 and 2017.

In 2009, Muss Development, LLC converted the ground floor on Adams Street to commercial use. To create a uniform appearance and continuation of the historic storefronts on Willoughby Street and Pearl Street, the developers reconfigured and reclad the base at Adams Street with rusticated faux stone and architectural elements derived from the historic features on the east and south facades.

Primary Pearl Street Facade (East)

The building's Pearl Street facade is composed of two sections. The 16-bay south section was built in 1922, whereas the eight-bay north section was built in 1926 as an extension. The facade features a stone base with round arched openings all topped by a cornice. The brick and stone midsection begins at the third story, faced with rusticated stone, and rises to a highly ornamented arcaded terra-cotta cornice. The flat arched fenestration at the third story is set within carved surrounds while that of the fourth through ninth floors has simple sills and brick lintels incorporated within continuous soldier courses. Built at different times, the facades of the two sections have subtle differences.

The southern section features paneled piers that extend from the first story to the main cornice. They are topped with decorative plaques at the base and carved decoration with roundels between the molded sill course and the cornice at the ninth story. In the rusticated stone base the double-height round arched openings are decorated by molded lintels with keystones springing from Corinthian impostes. The main entrance is located at the seventh arched opening from the south and features a deep intrados with carved soffit, the other arches retain their historic multi-light glass tympana and embellished ironwork. The tenth story sets back slightly and features trios of double windows separated by pilasters and offset by paneled piers supporting a cornice with a highly carved frieze and topped by a metal balustrade. The three-story second setback is graced with double-height round arched window openings at the upper level that are decorated with molded lintels with keystones and united by a decorative band course. These are bracketed by flat arched windows with simple sills and carved spandrels and cartouches.² The hipped roof is supported on brackets.

The northern extension, slightly recessed from the plane of the southern section, features a smooth stone base decorated by paired Corinthian pilasters supporting the cornice, which is decorated with plaques featuring griffins. The facade sets back above the eighth, tenth, and eleventh stories. There is an arcaded cornice on top of the ninth story. The slightly setback tenth story is topped by a metal balustrade, above which is another setback with flat arched windows set within a decorative enframingent of piers with Corinthian capitals. The hipped roof rises above a simple molded cornice.

Alterations

The Pearl Street facade is highly intact. Non-historic elements include the main entrance door, which

replaced the historic entrance door and multi-light glass tympanum; historic multi-light windows in the arched openings at the base have been replaced with undivided windows and/or doors; louvers were installed in some of the surviving multi-light windows; historic lantern at the entrance was removed; a security camera has been installed. The decorated pressed metal panels featuring vases and foliate motifs on the first three arched openings from the south were installed between 1932 and 1996.

Primary Willoughby Street Facade (South)

The Willoughby Street facade of the building's southern section is similar to this section's Pearl Street facade in style, fenestration, and materials. At the base, all the arched openings retain their embellished ironwork and their multi-light tympana. Above the center windows of the third story the facade is decorated with a trio of cartouches linked by festoons. At the first setback, pairs of flat-arched multi-light windows are grouped around niches topped by scallop shells within classical enframements.

Alterations

Limited alterations on this facade include the replacement of historic multi-light windows and double-leaf doors with multi-light sidelights in storefront conversions to commercial space; signage installed in the tympanum of the westernmost arch; historic lanterns removed at entrances; and a metal-and-glass canopy added to the three easternmost arched openings. The decorated pressed metal panels featuring vases and foliate motifs on the arched openings were installed between 1932 and 1996, replicating the ones on the east facade of the northern block.

Primary Adams Street Facade (West)

The Adams Street facade largely continues the style

and materials of the Pearl Street facade above the third floor, except for a west-facing light court in the southern section, and the fenestration below the tenth story in the southern section. Storefronts on this facade were created with faux stone to match historic storefronts in the southern three bays, and to harmonize with them in the remaining bays.

The two wings of the southern section surround a deep light court. South of the light court below a molded string course at the tenth story, two widely spaced rows of windows flank solid masonry. The tenth story features a colonnade screening an open porch in the center bay flanked by panels trisected by pilasters with a decorative band course. The trio on the left features a single multi-light window flanked by two blind panels while the trio on the right is blind. The cornice with decorative frieze and metal balustrade continues from the southern elevation. The decorative moldings continue from the southern facade across the setback eleventh and twelfth stories, which have three window openings.

The light court features flat-arched windows, multi-light at the ninth and tenth stories, and two double-height round-arched multi-light windows in the west facing wall of the court. The decorative band courses and arcaded cornice continue through the light court.

North of the light court, the southern and northern sections of the Adams Street facade continue the fenestration and decorative moldings found in the corresponding midsections of the Pearl Street facade. In the southern section, the tenth story features trios of multi-light windows set within classically inspired enframements. The eleventh through thirteenth stories have possibly historic multi-light sash windows. In the northern section, the multi-light fenestration at the upper three stories is possibly historic. The metal balustrade continues from the northern wing of the southern section. The windows at the twelfth story have metal balconets.

Alterations

The west facade facing Adams Street historically abutted adjacent buildings that were removed in the 1950s to create Adams Street. The base of this facade was clad at that time, and the storefronts were created in 2009. The first two stories (and the third story on the southern section) are clad with EIFS panels to create a faux rusticated stone; south of the light court, arched openings and storefront infill in the southern section replicate historic arched openings and infill in modern materials; faux blind windows at third story were created to be similar to those on Pearl Street and Willoughby Street facades; north of the light court, non-historic square-headed storefronts contain modern infill; a two-story base was constructed to the building line within the light court, containing an entrance and storefront, with a parapet and mechanical equipment.

History and Significance

Brooklyn Edison Building

Early History of Downtown Brooklyn³

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the area that today encompasses Downtown Brooklyn was occupied by Indigenous Peoples known as the Marechkawieck and Canarsee, members of the larger Algonquian group, the Lenape or Delaware, who spoke a dialect called Munsee.⁴ Mareckawieck “sold” their land to the Dutch West India Company in 1637. Although European settlers considered their purchases of property from Indigenous people to be outright acquisitions, the European concept of holding title to land was foreign to the Lenape, who considered these transactions as customary exchanges of gifts smoothing the way for settlers’ temporary use of the land for camping, hunting, fishing, and the cultivation of crops.⁵

Breuckelen, now Brooklyn Heights was the closest area to the Dutch colonial capital of Nieuw Amsterdam. After the “purchase” the Borough of Brooklyn began as a constellation of six settlements, granted as vast tracts to Dutch India Company patent holders. By the 18th century, the area was home to farms and estates, owned by Dutch farmers and businessmen. The transformation of Brooklyn Heights from farms and estates to a residential suburb began with the introduction of steam ferry service between Brooklyn and Manhattan in 1814, which began to provide fast and reliable access for those who worked in Manhattan. Two years later in 1816 the Village of Brooklyn, with an initial population of approximately 4,000 citizens, was incorporated within the existing Town of Brooklyn.

With its population increasing and

businesses flourishing, the City of Brooklyn incorporated in 1834. In an effort to bring some order to the rapidly growing city, in 1839 Brooklyn adopted its first city plan, incorporating a street grid. A civic center began to grow up around the new City Hall (begun 1836, completed 1849), a New York City individual landmark, at the intersection of Fulton, Joralemon and Court streets, which eventually included a courthouse, a Hall of Records, a New York City individual landmark, and the Municipal Building, located in the Borough Hall/Skyscraper Historic District. Brooklyn's financial district, whose firms often did business with government agencies, established itself near the civic center, and included banks, insurance and title guarantee companies, as well as attorneys. As in other metropolitan centers, this area also housed cultural institutions and centers of entertainment including the Brooklyn Academy of Music,⁶ the Long Island Historical Society (now the Center for Brooklyn History, a designated interior landmark and located within the Brooklyn Heights Historic District), and the Brooklyn Public Library.

The city's population grew dramatically as the first waves of foreign-born immigrants began coming to Brooklyn in the 1840s and 1850s, and the Towns of Williamsburg and Bushwick were merged into the City of Brooklyn in 1855. By the start of the Civil War, Brooklyn's population had reached almost 267,000 and it was the third-largest city in the United States. Additional growth occurred after the Civil War, due to extensive immigration, the expansion of business in the entire New York area, and the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883.

The outlying towns of Flatbush, Flatlands, New Utrecht, and Gravesend were expanding as well, with street grids beginning to be mapped for these areas in the 1870s (although they were not incorporated into the city of Brooklyn until 1886 and 1896).⁷ Between 1800 and 1900, the population

increase rate of Brooklyn surpassed Manhattan's rate. Brooklyn's population of 566,663 in 1880 surged to 1.1 million in 1900 with a 94% increase (a figure that included these newly annexed areas), whereas Manhattan's population of 1,664,674 in 1880 reached to 1,850,093 with 58% increase. The start of the borough's first rapid transit system in the 1890s made it easier for businesses to expand and for people to move around. The rapid transit system connecting Brooklyn to Manhattan spurred residential development in Brooklyn. The swift and massive development spurred by the rapid transit system created a large demand for electricity.

Construction of the Brooklyn Bridge provided unprecedented access to and from Brooklyn while the roads leading to it disrupted traffic patterns in the historic waterfront communities of Fulton Ferry and what is now known as DUMBO (both designated New York City historic districts). These factors reoriented the commercial center from the waterfront toward Fulton Street, farther inland, near the civic center. Public transportation improvements accelerated this trend, including Long Island Railroad service to Flatbush Avenue in 1877, completion of construction of the elevated railway to Hoyt Street in 1888, and the opening of an IRT subway station at Hoyt Street in 1908. The upper Fulton Street area was rapidly redeveloped into a downtown commercial hub with the establishment of retail stores, theaters, hotels, and offices around the turn of the 20th century.⁸

The area around Willoughby and Lawrence Streets was in the path of this transition, as existing homes were torn down to make way for new and growing businesses. The tremendous growth of residential as well as business activity provided a fertile market for utility infrastructure firms, which headquartered in Downtown Brooklyn, including Brooklyn Union Gas Company and Long Island Headquarters of the New York Telephone Company,

both New York City individual landmarks, as well as the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn.

Brooklyn Edison Company (Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn)

The Brooklyn Edison Company, founded in 1889 as the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn, was the leading electric company serving Brooklyn from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. Parallel to the city's rapid growth after the completion of Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, demand for electricity increased. During this era, around 250 small local private power plants and three big companies met this demand in Brooklyn. At the beginning of the 1880s, as in most cities in the United States, electric utility pioneers in Brooklyn focused on streetlights as streets were planned and constructed and expanded service as more industrial and commercial facilities developed, and residential neighborhoods rapidly grew with the speculative development of row houses.

Established in 1889, Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn was the forerunner of the three major electric companies to serve Brooklyn, in addition to the Citizen's Electric Light Company and the Municipal Electric Company. Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn was founded at 360 Pearl Street in Downtown Brooklyn as one of the so-called Edison Electric Institutes (EEI) companies franchised in the cities across the nation following the success of the original Edison Illuminating Company in Downtown Manhattan, that was established in 1882 by Thomas Edison.⁹

In the mid-1890s, Thomas E. Murray, who would become a pioneer of electrical systems as an engineer, inventor, and patent holder, was hired by the Edison Company to oversee the formation of electric franchises in New York City and Brooklyn.

He was instrumental in the early years of Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn, as he brought the company into the 20th century, providing the latest technology in the electricity market.¹⁰

Under Murray's management, the Edison Company expanded its production by constructing more power plants in the New York City, Brooklyn, and Queens, including the Gold Street station near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, designed by Murray and operated by Kings County Electric Light and Power Company, and became one of the biggest electricity providers in Brooklyn. The company met the demands of the customers not only by providing new infrastructure but also Murray's numerous patented designs for lights, signs, controls, meters, fuses, and protective components introduced the latest technologies to the market.¹¹ Due to the tremendous growth and innovations of the company under the management of Murray, in 1919 the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn, the Kings County Electric Light and Power Company, and smaller subsidiaries were formally reorganized to form the Brooklyn Edison Company, with Mathew S. Sloan, an engineer and utility executive, selected to head the new company.¹²

As electric power was brought within the reach of the average citizen through expanded power generating capacity and consumer innovations like Murray's, the use of residential and commercial electrical devices and appliances expanded. Also, the completion of new subway lines from midtown Manhattan produced phenomenal growth in the residential development in the southern Brooklyn with consequent new electric load. With new power stations planned to be constructed in the coming years, including the Hudson Avenue Station to be opened in 1923, the Brooklyn Edison Company, still housed at 360 Pearl Street, needed a larger headquarters. The company hired one of the era's

most prominent architecture firms, McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, to design a new building next door.

Architects McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin¹³

Founded by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz in 1885, the partnership of McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin is one of the many iterations of a series of related architectural firms, including Eidlitz & McKenzie, McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, and Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker, between 1885 and 1940¹⁴. During this period, the firm was renowned for its office buildings designed for leading infrastructure firms, including the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, New York Telephone Company and the Brooklyn Edison Company.

Andrew McKenzie, born in Dunkirk, New York and educated in Buffalo, came to New York City in 1884 and worked for the firm of Babb, Cook & Willard. He later became associated with Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, son of the prominent 19th-century New York architect Leopold Eidlitz, and the two formed the partnership of Eidlitz & McKenzie in 1902. Eidlitz retired from the firm in 1910, at which point McKenzie partnered with Stephen Voorhees and Paul Gmelin as McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin. The company continued to operate under this name until 1925.

Stephen Voorhees was born near Rocky Hill, New Jersey, and was a descendent of a Dutch family that settled in Flatlands, Brooklyn in 1660. Educated as a civil engineer at Princeton University, he worked in that capacity in Newark, New Jersey from 1900, the year of his graduation, until 1902. That year he joined the newly formed partnership of Eidlitz & McKenzie as a civil engineer and superintendent of construction. Besides his work in the firm, Voorhees was president of the American Institute of Architects in 1936 and 1937, and chairman of the board of design, chief architect, and

vice president of the New York World's Fair of 1939-40. As an engineer, he believed that architects should be closer to the processes of construction and was a founder in 1921 and later president of the New York Building Congress.

Paul Gmelin was born in Ulm, Germany and studied in Stuttgart. As a young man he came to the United States to be a draftsman for "The Bridge Builder Magazine," and while employed there he was asked by Charles Follen McKim, of the firm McKim, Mead & White, to make perspective drawings of that firm's Boston Public Library. Shortly afterwards Gmelin joined the firm of Babb, Cook & Willard where he likely met Andrew McKenzie. Following McKenzie's death in 1926, the firm continued as Voorhees, Gmelin and Walker until 1938.

In the 1920s, in addition to the many office buildings designed for various technological infrastructure firms, including the Long Island Headquarters of the New York Telephone Company, the Barclay-Vesey Building with Ralph Walker; and the Long Distance Building of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company with Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, all designated New York City individual landmarks, the firm also designed numerous notable office and commercial buildings throughout New York City, including the Brooklyn Municipal Building, located near the Brooklyn Edison Building in the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District.

The Design and Construction of the Brooklyn Edison Building

Following the completion of subway lines from Manhattan during the 1920s, the growth in residential development increased the demand for additional electricity capacity in Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Edison Company responded to this increased demand by expanding its production capacity.¹⁵ In parallel to this, the company's

management, headquartered at 360 Pearl Street, sought larger premises to accommodate its growing operations.¹⁶ Situated in close proximity to the Brooklyn Civic Center and the Municipal Building¹⁷, the prime location of the headquarters was advantageous, offering convenient access to various transportation options, including subways, elevated trains, and trolley lines to Manhattan's downtown financial district and beyond.¹⁸ Maintaining this valuable location, in 1922, Brooklyn Edison Company purchased the adjacent lots south of its headquarters, including the corner lot of Willoughby and Pearl Streets, where Loew's Royal Theater had been sited before being demolished for the construction of the new headquarters.¹⁹

The construction of the Brooklyn Edison Building was scheduled in two phases as a part of extensive program of improvements planned by the company.²⁰ The first phase the construction occurred in 1922-1923 on the corner lot, and the building expanded northwards in 1926.

McKenzie, Voorhees, & Gmelin selected the Renaissance Revival style for the design of the 13-story building. During the late 19th and 20th centuries, historical revival styles such as the Renaissance Revival were often utilized in the evolution of tall buildings to skyscrapers, including The American Surety Company Building, built in 1896; The Bank of the Metropolis Building, built in 1902 and The Standard Oil Company built in 1926, all New York City individual landmarks.

Symbolizing the ideals of grandeur, prosperity and stability, ornate architectural elements drawn from classical and Italian Renaissance sources decorated the extensive facades of these buildings. Classical motifs such as festoons, garlands, cartouches, and quoins were frequently used in Renaissance Revival style buildings, organized to create harmony from the symmetry, proportion, and repetition of these elements. The tripartite

configuration of facades into a base—often with rusticated stone and large windows—a more neutral middle section, and a crown was often employed in reference to Italian Renaissance palazzos.²¹ McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin successfully adapted this architectural language to the Brooklyn Edison Building.

At 13 stories, the Brooklyn Edison Building was one of the tallest buildings constructed in Downtown Brooklyn. It featured a rusticated stone base, a brick and stone middle section, and a crown with setbacks and hipped roofs, responding to the 1916 Zoning Resolution. Its Renaissance Revival style elements, particularly focused at the street level and its crown and roofline, include double-height arched windows with Corinthian impostes, multi-light glass transoms and embellished ironwork, cartouches, festoons and mascarons, quoins, and intricately detailed terra-cotta cornices. Griffins located at the main entrance intrados and the plaques on the base also reference the Renaissance period, used by the heraldry of many cities and houses in Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.²² These elaborate ornaments of the building were visible not only from the street level but also from many distant vantage points, as well as by daily commuters using the elevated train. According to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the Brooklyn Edison Building was an “attractive and worthy newcomer in the skyscraper community of the Borough Hall section.”

The building was designed with the ambition of being the “last word” in office buildings, incorporating advanced technology in lighting, heating, ventilating and telephone systems, along with rapid transit elevators. This vision aligned with the Brooklyn Edison Company’s desire to lead in electric supply provision and to pioneer the adoption and introduction of cutting-edge technological advancements.

The first and second floors of the new

building housed customer service and the Edison shop,²³ while the third through eleventh floors housed various department offices for 1,800 employees. The spacious top floor, with its broad windows and sloped roof, served as a cafeteria and recreation room for Edison employees, offering low-cost luncheon services.

According to the *Brooklyn Times Union*, “the health and comfort of the employees was the first consideration in planning” of the new building and it was built as “the cleanest, most sanitary and most comfortable office building in the Borough of Brooklyn.”

In 1926, new construction began for the building’s expansion northwards, which was deemed necessary by the company’s president Matthew S. Sloan, to keep up with Brooklyn’s and the Brooklyn Edison Company’s growth. In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sloan stated that,

Brooklyn is growing at the rate of 50,000 people a year and is in the van²⁴ [sic] of the country in new building operation. It is the fastest growing borough of the Greater City, and the Brooklyn Edison Company must meet all the demands of the borough for electric service, both for the present and projected.²⁵

The expansion was also designed by McKenzie, Voorhees and Gmelin, in the same style and nearly identical articulation, meant to seamlessly integrate with the existing structure. The 1926 expansion added office space for an additional 1,500 employees on the first eleven floors while the top floor provided supplementary spaced to the existing cafeteria and auditorium.

The Brooklyn Edison Company formally merged with Consolidated Edison (Con Ed) in 1943, and until the early 1970s, continued to use the Brooklyn Edison Building for its headquarters.

Beyond its role as a corporate hub, the building also played a pivotal role in Brooklyn's social scene. Historic newspapers show that the building regularly hosted conferences, fashion shows, charity fundraisers, and philanthropic meetings in its auditorium between the 1920s and 1950s. Its ground floor showroom featured exhibitions such as the "Wonder House" in the 1930s, showcasing the latest technologies and demonstrating the possibilities of electricity in a home, attracting public interest.²⁶

Later History of the Brooklyn Edison Building

In the late 1940s, the building began to house offices for various institutions, including Long Island University between 1948 and 1951.²⁷ South Brooklyn Saving and Loan Bank, with an address at 15 Willoughby Street was one of the longest tenants of the building, occupying the ground floor of the southern part of the building between 1954 and 1970.

During the implementation of the Master Plan of Brooklyn Civic Center and Downtown Area, and the expansion of Adams Street in the mid-1950s, the western half of the block on which the Brooklyn Edison Building is located was demolished. Replacing the demolished buildings, the widened Adams Street and redesigned civic center of Downtown Brooklyn dramatically changed the urban setting in the area. Following demolition of the adjacent buildings, the lower floors of the Brooklyn Edison Building's west facade became exposed. Adapting to this urban transformation, the building's main entrance was relocated to Adams Street in the early 1960s and the building began to use the address 345 Adams Street. Con Ed continued to use its

existing address in the building, at 380 Pearl Street, until the early 1970s, when it moved out of the building.²⁸

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, under Con Ed ownership, office spaces were rented to many different tenants. Tenants included attorneys' offices, charitable organizations like the Catholic Charities Diocese of Brooklyn, insurance companies like Long Island Insurance Co., and government offices such as the New York City Elections Board, the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the Social Security Administration, and an Army recruiting office.²⁹

In the 1980s, during the Koch administration, the city promoted the relocation of private companies to boroughs other than Manhattan to stimulate the economic development in those boroughs and sought to move city agency offices accordingly. One of the first and biggest moves was the relocation of the Department of Finance to 345 Adams Street in 1982.³⁰ Subsequently, in 1989, the New York City Department of Administrative Services purchased the building.

In 2004, the city approved a significant rezoning of Downtown Brooklyn that created new public open spaces, pedestrian and transit improvements, new retail and housing, and other improvements to support a multi-use neighborhood and foster expanded academic and cultural facilities.³¹ In 2009, under the Bloomberg administration, the first two floors of the Brooklyn Edison Building were sold for commercial purposes, contributing to the economic revitalization of Downtown Brooklyn.³² Muss Development LLC, which had worked with the city to develop the adjacent Marriott Hotel, purchased the first two floors and created new retail spaces, activating the Adams Street facade frontage with retail and animating the street with more activity. The new storefronts interpreted and replicated the building's

historic street-level window openings and infill in modern materials. More recently, a comprehensive restoration of the building facades was completed under the ownership of the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services. The building continues to serve as an office building with commercial activities on its first and second floors.

Conclusion

The Brooklyn Edison Building, designed by one of the most prominent architectural firms in the city, features a monumental Renaissance Revival style and became a hallmark of Downtown Brooklyn's evolving urban fabric. As the headquarters of the Brooklyn Edison Company, the leading electricity provider in Brooklyn, it was central to the borough's electrification. The building not only stood as a testament to the technological advancement of electricity but also played an important role in Brooklyn's social and cultural activities.

Today highly visible from Adams Street, Columbus Park and Fulton Streets, the building continues to provide a monumental backdrop to Brooklyn's civic center, with dramatic setback massing and elaborate Renaissance Revival style ornamentation.

Endnotes

¹ Sources for this section include “Brooklyn Edison Co. Bldg., Pearl & Willoughby Sts., Brooklyn,” c1932, Irving Underhill, Library of Congress, accessed May 16, 2024 from <https://www.loc.gov/item/00650104/>; “Dodger Victory Celebration Day,” 1955, UPI, Bettmann Archive, Getty Images, accessed May 16, 2024 from <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/huge-banner-is-draped-across-the-facade-of-brooklyn-borough-news-photo/1311097198>; “Wide Open Spaces,” 1955, Brooklyn Daily Eagle photographs, Brooklyn Public Library, Center for Brooklyn History, accessed May 16, 2024, from <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/digitalcollections/item/5150ee78-9345-435f-8493-0f6fd1024b02>; “Brooklyn Edison Building,” 1924, Irving Underhill, Brooklyn Museum/Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection, accessed on May 16, 2024, from <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/193993>; Application documents for the rehabilitation project of 345 Adams Street (19335), March 13, 1996, Art Commission of the City of New York; and Application documents of mechanical work project (26183), July 17, 2017, Public Design Commission of the City of New York.

² The lower level of the setback is hidden for a full description of its current condition. Based on historic images a continuous stringcourse separates the lower level of flat-headed windows from the arched windows of the upper level.

³ Much of the information in this section is compiled from the following: Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *People’s Trust Company Building Designation Report (LP2586)*, (NY: City of NY, 2017) report prepared by Sara Moses; and Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *(Former) New York and New Jersey Telephone and Telegraph Building Designation Report (LP2156)*, (NY: City of NY, 2004) report prepared by Virginia Kurshan; Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Fire Alarm Telegraph Bureau, Bronx Central Office Designation Report (LP2668)*, (NY: City of NY, 2023) report prepared by Marianne S. Percival.

⁴ According to Ann-Marie Cantwell, the Munsee had social and economic ties with other Munsee speaking peoples in communities “across a territory that stretched from the lower Hudson Valley and western Long Island across northern New Jersey,” including the region now

defined as New York City. Robert Grumet highlights the difficulty of establishing the identity of specific Indigenous communities in what is now New York City during the early colonial period as the names that have come to be associated with 17th-century Indigenous groups historically represented a diversity of things including place names, an individual or community leader, a village, or a longhouse community. In turn, these identities shifted as groups moved or were forced to relocate. For example, the Mareckawieck lived in the downtown Brooklyn section of New York City, Wallabout Bay, now the Brooklyn Navy Yard, was known as the “Bight or Bend of Marechkawieck,” whereas other scholars located main Marechkawieck settlement near Borough Hall in the Brooklyn Heights. See: Anne-Marie Cantwell “Penhawitz and Wampage and the Seventeenth-Century World They Dominated” in Meta F. Janowitz and Diane Dallal, eds., *Tales of Gotham, Historical Archaeology, Ethnohistory and Microhistory of New York City* (New York: Springer, 2013), 7–28; Robert Steven Grumet, *Native American Place Names in New York City* (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1981), 24–26, 53, 59–62; Robert Steven Grumet, *The Munsee Indians: A History* (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 309–310. The present-day descendants of the area’s Indigenous people are members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, the Delaware Nation, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, the Shinnecock Nation, and the Unkechaug Nation.

⁵ Reginald Pelham Bolton, *New York City in Indian Possession, Indian Notes and Monographs*, v. II, no. 7, 2nd ed. (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1975), 14; Grumet, *The Munsee Indians*, 310.

⁶ The Brooklyn Academy of Music was originally located at 176–194 Montague Street until 1903, when the building was burned to the ground and the facility was relocated to Fort Greene.

⁷ Flatbush, New Utrecht, and Gravesend were annexed in Brooklyn in 1894 and Flatlands was annexed in Brooklyn in 1896.

⁸ Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *A.I.Namm & Son Department Store Designation Report (LP2170)*, (NY: City of NY, 2005) report prepared by Jay Shockley.

⁹ Joseph J. Cunningham, “Brooklyn Electrification, reflective of national trends and practices,” published in

IEEE Power and Energy Magazine, volume 14, no 1, (January/February 2015), 105-114.

¹⁰ “Guide to the Thomas E. Murray family papers,” Brooklyn Public Library, Center for Brooklyn History, accessed May 16, 2024, from https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/cbh/arc_064_murray/; and “Deaths,” *Brooklyn Life and Activities of Long Island Society*, July 24, 1929, 3; and Joseph J. Cunningham, “Architect of Power Thomas E. Murray and New York’s Electrical System,” published in *IEEE Power and Energy Magazine*, March/April 2012), accessed on May 16, 2024 from <https://magazine.ieee-pes.org/marchapril-2012/history/>.

¹¹ Joseph J. Cunningham, 2015, 108-112.

¹² Joseph J. Cunningham, 2012.

¹³ Much of the information in this section is compiled from Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District Designation Report (LP2449)* (NY: City of NY, 2017), report prepared by Christopher D. Brazee.

¹⁴ The firm continued to operate under different names between 1940 and 1968. In 1968, the company changed its name to Haines, Lundberg & Waehler (HLW), which is still an active architectural firm in New York City.

¹⁵ Joseph J. Cunningham, 2015, 113-114.

¹⁶ “Brooklyn Edison Gets New Home,” *The Brooklyn Times Union*, October 28, 1923, 12.

¹⁷ Now the Brooklyn Borough Hall.

¹⁸ “Handsome New Office Buildings, Theater in Downtown Section,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 21, 1923, C3.

¹⁹ “Plan Skyscraper for Edison Co.,” *The Brooklyn Times Union*, July 25, 1922; “New Nine-Story Edison Company Building to be Erected at Pearl and Willoughby Sts.,” *The Standard Union*, July 26, 1922; “Brooklyn Edison Co. Plans Big Structure,” *New York Herald*, July 26, 1922; and E.B. Hyde & Co, *Atlas of The Borough of Brooklyn City of New York*, Brooklyn and Manhattan: E. Belcher Hyde, 1916), v1, pl2.

²⁰ “A \$1,000,000 Building, Brooklyn Edison Will Erect Twelve-Story Office Structure,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 1922.

²¹ Robert A. M Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and John Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890-1915* (New York:Rizzoli Architectural Publications, 1995), 144-202; Robert A. M Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and Thomas Mellins, *New York*

1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars (New York:Rizzoli Architectural Publications, 1987), 505-603; David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture* (Great Britain: Laurance King Publishing, 1996), 442-464; Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 37-49.

²² Franz Sales Meyer, *A Handbook of Ornament* (USA: Wilcox & Follett Co, 1945), p.70.

²³ Brooklyn Edison Shop was a store at the ground floor of the building, displaying and selling electrical appliances produced by the company.

²⁴ Vanguard.

²⁵ The quotation of Matthew Sloan, the President of the Brooklyn Edison Company is included to illustrate his vision for the company’s growth in tandem with Brooklyn’s expansion. However, the specific numbers and his assertion of Brooklyn being the fastest growing city have not been independently verified within the scope of this report. See “Brooklyn Edison Plans \$1,500,000 Offices Addition,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 2, 1926, 49.

²⁶ “Wonder House” was a 10-room house created in the lobby of the building in the 1930s to demonstrate the possibilities of electricity in a home. See “Guide to the Brooklyn Edison Company, Edison Wonder House Records,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center, 2011, accessed on May 20, 2024, from <https://sirismm.si.edu/EADpdfs/NMAH.AC.1237.pdf>

²⁷ Brooklyn Address Telephone Directory, 1948-1951, New York Public Library.

²⁸ Brooklyn Address Telephone Directory, 1963-1970, and 1972, New York Public Library.

²⁹ Brooklyn Address Telephone Directory, 1963-1970, and 1972-1980, and 1986, New York Public Library.

³⁰ Michael Goodwin, “City to Move Some Staff and Offices to Brooklyn,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 1982, accessed on January 11, 2024, B3.

³¹ New York City Downtown Brooklyn Rezoning Plan, accessed June 12, 2024, from <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/downtown-brooklyn2/dwnbklyn2.pdf>.

³² Patrick McGeehan, “City Selling Space in Brooklyn,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2011, accessed May 20, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/16/nyregion/city-to-sell-space-in-brooklyn-municipal-building.html>.

Findings and Designation

Brooklyn Edison Building

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 Brooklyn Edison 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, 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 a Landmark the Brooklyn Edison Building and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 140, Lot 7503 (formerly Lot 123) as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.



South and East facades of the Brooklyn Edison Building, from the intersection of Willoughby and Pearl Streets

Bilge Kose, February 2024



South facade of the Brooklyn Edison Building, from the intersection of Fulton and Pearl Streets

Sarah Eccles, June 2024



East (Pearl Street) facade of the Brooklyn Edison Building

Sarah Eccles, June 2024



West and South facades of the Brooklyn Edison Building, from Boerum Place

Sarah Eccles, June 2024



West (Adam Street) facade of the Brooklyn Edison Building, from Adams Street

Sarah Eccles, June 2024



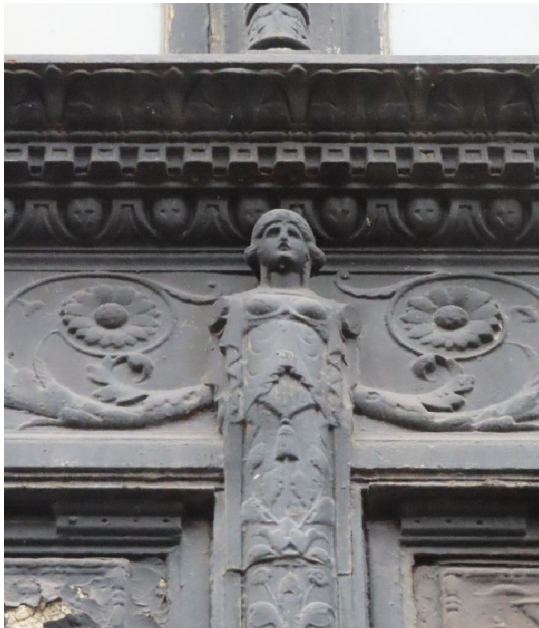
West (Adams Street) facade of the Brooklyn Edison Building, from Columbus Park

Bilge Kose, February 2024



Main entrance on Pearl Street with highly elaborate Renaissance Revival style intrado

Sarah Eccles, June 2024



**One of the double-height arched windows
on Pearl Street**

Kate Lemos McHale, August 2023

**Detail of embellished ironwork on the
double-height arched windows on Pearl
and Willoughby Streets**

Bilge Kose, February 2024



Renaissance Revival style elements on the South (Willoughby Street) facade

Bilge Kose, February 2024



Renaissance Revival style terra-cotta details on the ninth story of the Adams Street facade

Bilge Kose, February 2024



Renaissance Revival style cartouches and festoons on the Pearl Street facade

Bilge Kose, February 2024



Legend

- Proposed Landmark Site
- Building Footprints
- New York City Tax Lots

Address: 345 Adams Street, Brooklyn
(aka 372-382 Pearl Street, 11-17 Willoughby Street)

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn,
Tax Map Block 140, Lot 7503 (previously 123)

Calendared: February 13, 2024
Public Hearing: June 4, 2024
Designated: June 18, 2024

Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22v2. Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. SE. Date: 6.18.2024