

SUMMIT HOTEL (now Doubletree Metropolitan Hotel), 569-573 Lexington Avenue (aka 132-166 East 51st Street), Manhattan. Built 1959-61; Morris Lapidus, Harle & Liebman, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map, Block 1305, Lot 50.

On March 29, 2005 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Summit Hotel (now Doubletree Metropolitan Hotel) and the related Landmark site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been advertised in accordance with provisions of law. At this time, the owner testified, taking no position on designation. Twelve witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the Landmarks Conservancy, Historic Districts Council, Docomomo-US, Friends of the Upper East Side, Modern Architecture Working Group, Landmark West, and the Municipal Art Society. The Commission also received numerous letters and e-mails in support of designation. The hearing was continued on April 21, 2005 (Item No. 4). Three witnesses testified in support of designation, including representatives of the Modern Architecture Working Group and Docomomo-US. At this time, a representative of the owner testified, taking no position.

Summary

Admired for its unusual shape, color, and stainless steel sign, the Summit Hotel is an important work by Morris Lapidus. Begun in 1959, it was the first hotel built in Manhattan in three decades and the architect's first hotel in New York City. Lapidus was especially proud of this building and reproduced an image of the Summit on the cover of his autobiography, *The Architecture of Joy*, published in 1979. Trained at Columbia University, he enjoyed considerable success as a retail designer in the 1930s. After the Second World War, Lapidus began to design hotels, including the celebrated Fontainebleau and Eden Roc in Miami Beach. These accomplishments led to his association with the Tisch family, who commissioned the Americana Hotel in Bal Harbour, Florida, in 1956. After acquiring a controlling interest in Loew's Theaters, they commissioned the Summit, which adapts many of the devices Lapidus perfected in Florida to a challenging, constricted site at the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 51st Street. Built in reinforced concrete, a material favored for its sculptural potential, the curving north and south elevations are clad in light green glazed brick and dark green mosaic tile manufactured in Italy. The top three stories, built as penthouse suites, are faced in green structural glass. To further distinguish the building from its neighbors, the door handles were inlaid with colorful mosaics and the base along East 51st Street is illuminated by globe-shaped lighting fixtures. On Lexington Avenue, he designed a striking illuminated sign. Consisting of seven disks hung



between stainless steel pins, this unique element enhanced the hotel's street presence, making it visible from a distance. Other distinctive features include a pair of neon signs that direct drivers to the parking garage and a stainless steel ash tray that serves cigarette smokers descending into the subway. The hotel opened in August 1961, generating considerable media attention. Some writers greeted the new hotel with disappointment or amusement, while others viewed it as a disharmonious addition to the streetscape. In subsequent years, however, the hotel attracted an increasing number of admirers and aside from alterations to the Lexington Avenue entrance, this flamboyant modern structure retains much of its original character.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Morris Lapidus (1902-2000)¹

The Summit Hotel was designed by Morris Lapidus, one of the most influential hotel designers of the 20th century. Born in Odessa, Russia, in 1902, he and his family immigrated to the United States in 1903. They lived on the Lower East Side for several years, moving to Williamsburg, and later, to the East New York section of Brooklyn. Lapidus attended Boys High School (a designated New York City Landmark) in the Bedford section, and for a brief time trained as an actor at New York University. During the mid-1920s, he attended architecture school at Columbia University, studying with Frederic C. Hirons and Wallace K. Harrison. Lapidus worked as a draftsman for several firms, including Warren & Wetmore, Bloch & Hesse, Arthur Weiser, and for fifteen years, Evan Frankel (of Ross-Frankel). In the office of Ross-Frankel, during the 1930s, or working independently, he designed or supervised the construction of more the five hundred storefronts, shop interiors, and showrooms.

Lapidus formed his own office in 1943 and gradually began to design entire structures, including stores, synagogues, apartment buildings, and an estimated two hundred hotels. Early works by Lapidus in New York City include: L Motors (1948, demolished) in Washington Heights, Shaare Zion synagogue (1954) in Flatbush, and the America Fore Insurance Group Office Building (1960) in downtown Brooklyn. A retail designer at heart, he created extravagant works that challenged the minimalist trends of the 1950s. He often worked in broad strokes, juxtaposing modern and traditional forms, as well as color, texture, and light. Lapidus eschewed right angles, creating structures that had unusual floor plans and distinctive shapes. His best-known commissions are located in southern Florida, namely the crowd-pleasing Fontainebleau (1954) and Eden Roc (1955) hotels, on adjoining parcels in Miami Beach. Lapidus later observed that the plan of the Fontainebleau “resembles nothing from the past. There’s hardly a straight line in it – it just moves, one curve going one way, and another in the opposite direction. There’s no end.”²

Lapidus designed the Summit Hotel in association with Harle & Liebman. Leo Kornblath, who is listed as a partner in filings with the Department of Buildings, is not identified on the building plans and established his own firm during the hotel’s construction.³ During these years, Lapidus operated two offices: in Manhattan, on East 56th Street; and in Miami Beach, on Lincoln Road. Harle & Liebman are identified as interior designers, with offices in New York City and Miami Beach. Lapidus met Abby Harle (born Hornstein) in 1945 and they worked together until the mid-1960s. Harold Liebman joined the New York office in the late 1950s, principally to design apartment houses and remained until the mid-1960s.

Lapidus closed his Miami office in 1984, but lived long enough – 98 years – to be recognized as an American original. He was credited as being a “postmodernist long before the term existed” and even Philip Johnson praised his unabashedly flamboyant work, calling him the “father of us all.”⁴

Hotels in New York City

Since the opening of Astor House (1831, demolished), opposite City Hall, structures built to provide temporary accommodations have earned an important place in the Manhattan cityscape. At their highest level, hotels symbolize what the city aspires to be – a place of fashion, fantasy, convenience, and comfort. Among prominent architects to design hotels, three firms stand out: Henry J. Hardenbergh, Schulze & Weaver, and Lapidus. Active in distinct and successive eras, their best designs capture the spirit and taste of their generation. Hardenbergh, author of the hotel entry in the *Dictionary of Architecture and Building* (1902), edited by Russell Sturgis, was architect of the original Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1893-96, demolished 1930), the Martinique Hotel (1897-1911, a designated New York City Landmark), and the Plaza Hotel (1907, a designated New York City Landmark) in New York City, as well as the Willard Hotel (1906) in Washington, D. C., and the Copley Plaza (1912) in Boston. Built in variants of the classical style, these buildings defined the modern hotel, establishing standards of appearance and plan. Schulze & Weaver were the leading firm in the 1920s and 1930s, designing the Sherry-Netherland Hotel (with Buchman & Kahn, 1927, part of the Upper East Side Historic District), the Hotel Pierre (1928, part of the Upper East Side Historic District), and

the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1929-31, a designated New York City Landmark). They also designed the Sevilla Biltmore Hotel (1921) in Havana, Cuba, the Biltmore (1923) in Los Angeles, and the Miami-Biltmore Hotel (1926) in Coral Gables, Florida.

No hotels were built in Manhattan during the 1950s. Despite great success in Florida, in his home town Lapidus remained, for the most part, an interior designer. Initial hotel projects involved remodeling earlier structures, such as the lobby of the Hotel Governor Clinton (1957) at Seventh Avenue and 31st Street and various interiors in the Hotel New Yorker (1959-60) on Eighth Avenue, between 34th and 35th Streets. Outside New York City, however, he designed a considerable number of hotels and resorts, such as the Hollywood Hotel (1952) in Long Branch, New Jersey, the Surf Club Hotel (1954) in Atlantic Beach, New Jersey, Kutsher's Country Club (1955) in Monticello, New York, and the Concord Hotel (1958) in Kiamesha Lake, New York.

The Developer⁵

Lapidus began his association with the Tisch family in 1947. Al Tisch manufactured clothes and ran two children's camps in the Poconos. At the urging of his older son Laurence Tisch, who graduated from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce in 1943, these businesses were sold in 1946 and the revenue invested in Laurel-in-the-Pines, an aging 300-room-resort in Lakewood, New Jersey. Laurence's brother, Robert Preston Tisch, joined the firm in 1948. Though Lapidus described the role he played as "minor," this initial project established a professional relationship, helping him to eventually secure the opportunity to design the \$17 million Americana Hotel in Bal Harbour, Florida.⁶ Completed in 1956, this commission led to a profile of the architect in the *New York Times* that described the five-hundred room hotel as "the brightest jewel in the Tisch family's crown of resort hotels."⁷ The first hotel that they operated in New York City was the McAlpin (1913), acquired in 1951.⁸ Nine years later, Tisch Hotels, Inc. acquired a controlling interest in Loew's Theaters, Inc. Hurt by anti-trust judgments, the movie theater industry was struggling and they may have acquired the company for its plentiful real estate holdings. At this time, Laurence Tisch moved his family from Florida to the New York suburbs. He appointed himself chairman of the board and Preston Robert Tisch served as chairman of the executive committee.

The first project announced by Loew's Hotels was the Summit, initially called the Americana of New York or the Americana East. In subsequent years, the company would be involved with at least eight Manhattan hotels, including three properties designed by Lapidus: the Loew's Motor Inn (1961) on Eighth Avenue, between West 48th and 49th Streets, the Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge (1962) on Eighth Avenue, between West 51st and 52nd Streets, and the Americana Hotel (now called the Sheraton Centre, 1960-62) at 811 Seventh Avenue, between West 52nd and 53rd Streets. The last hotel was the largest of the group. Faced in marble and yellow brick, the V-shaped slab contained two thousand rooms.

The Summit was built on the site of Loew's Lexington Avenue Theater.⁹ Built by Oscar Hammerstein as an opera house in 1913, it was soon acquired by Marcus Loew who used the spacious auditorium to present vaudeville shows, and later, films. The entrance was located on Lexington Avenue but the theater itself was located mid-block, between Lexington and Third Avenue. North of the entrance, at the corner of 51st Street was a single-story retail structure, measuring fifty by one hundred feet. Demolition of both buildings began in 1959.

The area north of Grand Central Terminal was ideal for a new hotel. Many had been erected here during the 1920s, particularly along Lexington Avenue, where, from south to north, the Lexington (1928-29), Shelton (1924), Belmont Plaza (originally the Montclair, 1928), Barclay (1927), Waldorf-Astoria (1931, a designated New York City Landmark), and Beverly (1927) were found. These hotels catered to travelers and people attending events at the Grand Central Palace (1913, demolished), a convention hall. This activity increased during the 1950s; in addition to the completion of the United Nations Headquarters and the demolition of the Third Avenue el, one block away Park Avenue was fast becoming the city's most prestigious business address.

Construction

Plans were filed with the Department of Buildings in early 1960 (NB 59-60) and ground was broken in June 1960.¹⁰ The structural engineer was Farkas & Barton, and the Diesel Construction Company was general contractor, with Dic Concrete Corporation as subcontractor for the concrete frame.

The Summit Hotel has a structural frame of reinforced concrete – the first hotel in New York City to adopt this technique. Lapidus recalled: “All of my construction . . . was of concrete and I had no desire to use steel.”¹¹ American architects first began to exploit this material’s sculptural potential in the 1940s and 1950s. Several unconventional structures were planned or under construction in New York City: the Guggenheim Museum (1956-59, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior), Begrish Hall (1956-61, a designated New York City Landmark) at New York University’s University Heights Campus in the Bronx, and the TWA Flight Center (1956-62, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior) at Kennedy Airport. Plans for Chatham Green (1956-61), a 21-story middle-income cooperative apartment building near Chinatown, were filed in 1959.¹² It, too, had an S-shaped plan, suggesting that unusual forms and footprints were becoming mainstream.

Concrete also had significant economic benefits. Not only was it faster to construct than a steel-framed structure, but the engineers reported that the Summit progressed “at the fastest rate ever achieved for a reinforced concrete building.”¹³ Beamless construction was also more efficient, permitting slightly higher ceilings and greater flexibility in layout. Furthermore, by bending the floor plan, Lapidus said he was able to produce a building of greater length, and therefore – more rooms. He wrote: “A straight line, I reasoned, is the shortest distance between two points . . . Why not bend the hall, in other words, create a squiggle or an S-shaped building with an S-shaped hall. Why not? . . . My clients were happy.”¹⁴

The Design

Shape and color are the Summit’s most distinctive characteristics. Many writers, including the architect, have called the shape an S-curve, while others have referred to it as a “serpentine slab” or an “undulating serpentine.”¹⁵ Above the base, the hotel stands free on three sides, adjoining only the windowless brick façade of the 13-story Girl Scouts Building (1957-58) to the east, at 830 Third Avenue. This arrangement enhanced the Summit’s sculptural character, while providing views from every room.

Lapidus justified the unusual shape in economic terms, but he was also inspired by early developments in European modernism, particularly the work of the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, who he described as his teacher. During the late 1920s, Mendelsohn designed several well-publicized commercial buildings in Germany. Lapidus wrote: “I found in his work a tremendous desire to break loose from cubistic and rectangular buildings. His sweeping, curving undulating buildings excited me, and he had a profound influence on my career.”¹⁶ Somewhat more surprising was his debt to Mies van der Rohe. Two early residences by the architect, the Lange House (1928) and Tughenadt House (1930), incorporate curving interior walls. Lapidus said: “I am sorry to say, that after this, he never sinned again, and so I began to use sweeping curves and S curves, and all sorts of odd-shaped spaces.”¹⁷ Comparisons can also be made to a work by the lesser-known Luckhardt Brothers, architects of Telschow House (1928, demolished), a five-story office building on Potsdamer Platz in Berlin that was distinguished by an undulating façade and setback tower. The Summit also recalls Baker House (1947-49), a brick-faced dormitory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, designed by Alvar Aalto.

Lapidus also acknowledged Brazilian sources. He traveled to South America and visited Oscar Niemeyer in 1949. “He had a great influence . . . he was a man who was doing things the way I thought they should be done,” Lapidus later commented.¹⁸ Both architects favored sinuous curving forms. In 1953-54, Niemeyer’s Copan Building was completed in the center of Sao Paulo, a monumental mixed-use structure with a 40-story undulating façade. Lapidus may have also been familiar with the Pedregulho Apartments outside Rio de Janeiro, designed by Affonso Reidy. Completed in 1952, the 260-meter-long serpentine complex was featured in *Recent Architecture in Latin America*, published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

Use of Color

Color played an important role in Lapidus' career, in his retail work and hotels. In a 1961 interview he asserted there was far too little of it in New York City. For the Summit, green is the dominant color. The main elevations juxtapose rectangles of light green brick and dark green mosaic tile. The East 51st Street storefronts and penthouse levels incorporate green structural glass and the pre-cast concrete panels that line the sidewalk are separated by strips of green mosaic tile.

Lapidus began his career in the late 1920s, a period when terra cotta and glass were available in an increasing range of colors. Raymond Hood, who predicted in 1927 that one day the city would be filled with "gayly colored buildings" was the designer of the McGraw-Hill Building (1930-31, a designated New York City Landmark), a 37-story tower wrapped in turquoise terra cotta.¹⁹ Lapidus credited his influence, praising Hood's use of "fresh blue and green."²⁰ After the Second World War, tinted glass gained popularity. The United Nations Secretariat (1952), the first of many glazed curtain wall skyscrapers, had two five-hundred-foot-tall facades of green transparent glass. Other significant examples include Lever House (1950-52, a designated New York City Landmark), the Seagram Building (1955-58, a designated New York City Landmark), and the Spring Mills Building (1962).

Directly across from the hotel stood the Grolier Building (1957-58, altered) at 575 Lexington Avenue. Faced in anodized aluminum panels, the 34-story structure had what was described as a "gleaming gold" skin.²¹ A similar solution was adopted for the Administration Building of the Fashion Institute of Technology on West 27th Street in 1956-59. Designed by De Young, Moscovitz & Rosenberg, the faceted façade features brown aluminum panels and gold-framed windows.²² Also of note was Wallace Harrison's Caspary Auditorium (1958, altered) at Rockefeller University, originally consisting of a single concrete dome clad in vibrant multi-colored Italian tile.²³

White marble panels originally covered the windowless Lexington Avenue facade. It had a rich constellation of green marble veins, complementing the colors used on the north and south elevations. It recalls the arrangement at the United Nations Secretariat, which also juxtaposes white marble and green glass. Photographs suggest that the marble chosen was quite rich in appearance but it quickly began to deteriorate and was soon replaced by beige-colored aluminum panels.

The Sign

The absence of windows on Lexington Avenue highlights the hotel's remarkable stainless steel sign. It consists of seven oval illuminated disks, each displaying a single letter in the hotel's name and resting between banner-like supports. Unlike most of his colleagues, Lapidus had considerable experience with signage, particularly in his retail work. He favored dramatic billboard-like effects, silhouetting three-dimensional lettering against backgrounds of contrasting materials and color. He employed this technique at the San Souci (1949), Algiers (1951), and Eden Roc (1955) hotels.

The sign at the Summit, however, was unique in his career. Framed in stainless steel, it was planned from the start and appears in early renderings when the hotel was called the Americana.²⁴ It projects above Lexington Avenue, making the name of the hotel visible from the north, south, and west. Early electric signs were modestly incorporated into clocks, and, in other instances, brightly illuminated in neon, especially in buildings that were devoted to entertainment. These signs were often positioned above the marquee to spell out the name of a theater. Rooftop signs gained popularity in the early 20th century. Most had no relationship to the architect's design and were installed for maximum visibility. Memorable examples include: the Germania Life Insurance Company Building (1910-11, now W Hotel) and Tudor City (late 1920s, both are designated New York City Landmarks). A rare exception to this pattern is the McGraw Hill Building (1931, a designated New York City Landmark) in which Hood integrated a sign of handsome 11-foot-high terra-cotta letters across both sides of the top floor.

Lapidus designed the Summit at a time when an increasing number of commercial buildings were identified by large illuminated signs, such as 666 Fifth Avenue (1957) and the Pan Am Building (1963). But it is the three-dimensional quality of this sign that makes it most distinctive. This can be interpreted as a response to roadside signage in Florida, Las Vegas, or possibly southern California,

but also as a gentle personal critique of the tasteful character that most modern office buildings, especially on Park Avenue, projected. More importantly, the sign enhanced the hotel's presence on Lexington Avenue. The main façade is quite narrow and Lapidus turned the width of the lot to his advantage, producing an eye-catching, three-dimensional advertisement for the hotel. In a city where flamboyant roadside or "Googie" architecture is in short supply, the sign is one of the building's most distinctive features.

Entrances

The main entrance is located at the base of the Lexington Avenue façade. The original entry sequence (now altered) began with a small plaza, paved in light-colored terrazzo. On the south side, set behind a raised marble planter, was the El Gaucho restaurant. Set below and apart from the main structure, the restaurant façade originally featured a "molded stone-like lattice work . . . fitted with small pieces of stained glass."²⁵ To the north was the Casa del Café, a restaurant claiming to serve nineteen varieties of coffee. To reach the lobby, guests passed between stainless pillars, each marked with vertical lines. From here, the underside of the tower was visible and was probably clad with mosaics.

The entrance to the garage is located at the rear of the East 51st Street façade. Accommodating drivers was perceived as an important modern convenience and beginning in 1960 most Manhattan hotels, including those designed by Lapidus, were planned with parking facilities. Large vertical metal signs with red neon lettering identified the entrance. The *New York Times* enthusiastically reported that the arrangement at the Summit "will permit a patron to drive his automobile into a five-story, 250-car garage and then be whisked up to a huge modernistic lobby in a high-speed elevator."²⁶

The Summit Opens

The planning and opening of the \$25 million Summit Hotel was heralded as an important event. About \$300,000 was spent to promote the hotel. Strategies included chain letters, radio commercials, and "ads flashed across movie screens."²⁷ Numerous ads were placed in international publications with an eye to attracting international visitors. A dozen languages were spoken by the staff and the general manager was Robert Huyot, formerly of the celebrated Hotel de Crillon in Paris.

As the first hotel to open in Manhattan in thirty years, it marked the beginning a hotel construction boom. These hotels not only filled a real need but many were built in anticipation of the 1964 World's Fair. Originally named the Americana and the Americana East, the name Summit Hotel is likely to have been chosen for having diplomatic associations. In the raised planter located in the south section of the plaza were three flagpoles. At the opening ceremony, Carlos P. Romulo, Ambassador of the Philippines, raised the flag of the United Nations, Deputy Mayor Paul Screvance, the flag of the United States, and Robert W. Watt, of the Department of Commerce and Industry, the flag of New York City. The top three floors were devoted to suites – Presidential, Continental, Summit, Sunset, and Villa Este. Clad in floor-to-ceiling glass, each suite had its own terrace. The first occupant of the Presidential suite was Groucho Marx.²⁸

Reception

The opening generated considerable attention from the media. The attention, however, was not entirely flattering and in the months that followed the opening was used by writers to criticize Lapidus and particularly the design of the interiors. He had built relatively few buildings in New York City and the Summit provided them with the opportunity to evaluate a local architect's work. Some greeted the new hotel with disappointment or amusement, while others viewed it as inappropriate addition to the midtown streetscape. These, often harsh, comments deserve attention, but often overshadow more positive viewpoints. Olga Guelf, editor of *Interiors*, though critical of the interior scheme, praised Lapidus, describing the overall design as "daring, capable, and relatively successful." In the *Nation*, Walter McQuade, who introduced the overheard and much-repeated quip that the location was "too far from the beach" was generally positive. He called the Summit a "prime example of the Miami Beach style" distinguished by a "deliberately diverting shape." *Time* magazine disliked

the green color but viewed the serpentine curve as a “welcome change from Manhattan’s orange-crate regularity.”²⁹

In September 1962, following the opening of the Americana, CBS News devoted a one-hour television show to Lapidus and his work in Manhattan. While the editor of *Architectural Forum*, Peter Blake, condemned the curving design, saying “Let’s not have anymore snake dances on Lexington Avenue,” the moderator Mike Wallace asked: “Why must all buildings be square boxes and why did they all have to be red brick or white brick? Why not use curves, why not use color.” Philip Johnson, who at the time was beginning to doubt his long-standing allegiance to Bauhaus aesthetics and Mies van der Rohe, refused to criticize Lapidus, saying “I, for one, will pass no judgment, but will watch his career.”³⁰

Lapidus defended his design, arguing that the same people who stayed in his Florida hotels, attacked the Summit. In later years, he grew increasingly proud of the hotel and featured it on the book jacket of his 1979 autobiography, *An Architecture of Joy*. Lapidus clearly enjoyed controversy and did not attempt to silence or hide his critics. When Loews began renovations in 2000, Lapidus proudly told the *New York Times* that it has been “the most hated hotel in New York.”³¹

Subsequent History

In October 1961, just three months after the opening, the lobby was remodeled.³² These alterations appeased critics but had no significant effect on the exteriors. The windowless Lexington Avenue façade was refaced with aluminum panels in the 1960s. A major renovation was undertaken in the late 1980s. At this time, the south planter and flagpoles were removed and a larger restaurant, with a maroon-colored exterior, was introduced. The coffee shop on the north side of the main entrance was also enlarged through the addition of a greenhouse-like pavilion. This feature has since been removed. In 1999-2000 Michael E. Granville of Darius Toraby Architects conducted an extensive restoration of the building. At this time, many repairs were made and missing tiles were replaced. Michael Ferrara, director of facilities at Loews Hotels, said that he and the design team “felt strongly about keeping the sign” and they figured out how adapt it to the hotel’s new and longer name.³³

The building was acquired by Metropolitan Hotel Realty in August 2003.³⁴ At this time, there were 722 rooms. The owner undertook several significant alterations to the exterior in 2004 and 2005, approving replacement of the original steel-framed windows with thicker silver-colored aluminum windows. This change, replacing one-over-one windows with sliding panes, alters the façade’s rhythm. In addition, the base along East 51st Street (west of the storefronts) has been mostly refaced with light green glass, covering but not destroying the original marble aggregate panels and green mosaic tile.

At the close of his life, Lapidus was extremely proud of Summit. In a letter to the developer, Robert Preston Tisch, sent in September 2000, he recalled his experience with candor, writing: “And in many ways all of my talent was used to remedy a program that might have been a fiasco . . . It is a hotel where I used every bit of talent to do something that I would always be proud of. I don’t think that any building design change could improve what I have designed for you over 40 years ago. I don’t think any designer could surpass in building what I did for your Summit.”³⁵

Description

The Summit (formerly the Loew’s New York Hotel) is now called the Doubletree Metropolitan Hotel. It is located on a 100 by 320 foot parcel at the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and East 51st Street. The base, incorporating the lobby and storefronts, fills the entire site. One story (plus mezzanine) tall along Lexington Avenue, the height increases as it approaches Third Avenue. Above the base, the S-shaped slab contains fifteen stories of guest rooms, crowned by a set-back penthouse and an irregularly-shaped mid-block mechanical tower.

The main entrance faces Lexington Avenue. It is set between two non-historic storefronts, each occupying space that was once part of a small plaza. Along **East 51st Street**, the walls are mostly faced in non-historic green glass squares. These panels, installed in early 2005, conceal the original pre-cast concrete panels and strips of green mosaic tile. Globe-shaped aluminum lighting fixtures, projecting from the mosaic tile, are located above. On the roof of the base are stainless steel planters

and railings. Though not currently in use, both are original to the building. A recessed service entrance, located midway between Lexington Avenue and the mid-block storefronts, is non-historic.

Three storefronts, clad in stainless steel and clear glass, are recessed below the second story, forming a shallow arcade. To the east, a non-historic vinyl awning and doors lead to a vestibule and the rear of the lobby. This secondary entrance incorporates a pair of glass doors with the original bow-tie shaped handles inlaid with colorful mosaics. The second story is divided into three bays, each having four vertical windows, flanked above and below by dark green glass. Farther east is the entrance to the loading dock, trimmed in the original metal. Near the east end of the building is the entrance to the garage, crowned by the original metal louvers. The pre-cast concrete panels and strips of green mosaic tile that surround the entrance are original, as are the two metal “PARKING” signs that have red neon lettering and arrows. The width of these panels is similar to the width of the windows in the penthouse.

The **main entrance** faces Lexington Avenue. The stainless steel marquee, with recessed lighting, is non-historic. There is a non-historic revolving glass door flanked by metal-framed doors and non-historic green glass rectangles. Set at a slight angle to the avenue, the entrance is flanked by storefronts. Both are larger than originally built, filling part of what was once a small plaza. Near the corner of East 51st Street, projecting from the north storefront is the original raised planting bed. Clad in the granite, it incorporates a stainless steel ashtray, as well as three lighting fixtures, currently without glass covers. The south storefront is faced with dark red metal panels and dates from c. 1990. It is taller than the structure it replaced (obscuring the base of the tower) and has streamlined features that suggest the Art Deco style, including glass brick and curved corners.

Above the ground story, the entire **west façade** is windowless. The beige-colored aluminum panels, replacing marble, are not original to the building. Close to the north edge of the west facade, extending from approximately the seventh to the thirteenth floor is a projecting illuminated sign, consisting of seven oval disks balanced between triangular stainless steel supports. It is approximately seventy feet tall. The sign is original, though the arrangement of letters and imagery has been changed.

The north or **East 51st Street elevation** is the building’s most distinctive and visible feature – a flattened S curve. This well-preserved façade can be best appreciated from 51st Street or looking south along the west side of Lexington Avenue. At the lowest floor, it is engaged with the base, obscuring part of the lowest floor. From the east edge of the site, where it meets the rear façade of 830 Third Avenue, it veers north and then south again before nearing Lexington Avenue. Each bay consists of a projecting light green brick rectangle that floats against a dark green mosaic tile background. At the center of each rectangle are two small air vents. The windows are non-historic and were installed in 2005. Thicker than the original fenestration, the new windows appear to rest between the brick panels. The width of each set of windows is identical, except for the set that aligns with the tower, which is a third wider. The top of the uppermost floor (below the penthouse) is faced with non-historic beige-colored aluminum panels. The penthouse, faced with green and clear glass and vertical metal moldings, is three stories tall. Each suite adjoins a small outdoor terrace. The top level is crowned by a projecting roof cornice. Above the penthouse, at mid-block, is a tall mechanical tower, housing ventilation equipment and a water tower. The north side is faced with metal grilles and the west side is clad with green brick. The south and east sides of the tower are difficult to see from the street.

The **south elevation** is visible from Lexington Avenue with difficulty. Viewed at an acute angle, it is nearly identical to the East 51st Street façade except mid block where the non-historic windows are interrupted by a solid wall of green brick.

Researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

- ¹ The section on Lapidus is mostly based on two versions of the architect's autobiography: Morris Lapidus, *An Architecture of Joy* (1979) and Morris Lapidus, *Too Much is Never Enough* (Rizzoli, 1996).
- ² Joseph Giovanni, "Life Throws Morris Lapidus a Few Good Curves," *New York Times*, December 23, 1999, F8.
- ³ "New Concern by Building Designer," *New York Times*, February 16, 1961, 51.
- ⁴ Giovanni; Mervyn Rothstein, "Morris Lapidus, an Architect Who Built Flamboyance Into Hotels, Is Dead at 98," *New York Times*, January 19, 2001, C11.
- ⁵ The section on the Tisch family is based on "Al Tisch, 63, Head of Hotel Chain," *New York Times*, February 3, 1960; "Hotel Man With a Bankroll," *New York Times*, September 6, 1968, 59, and Christopher Winans, *The King of Cash: The Inside Story of Laurence Tisch* (Wiley: New York, 1995).
- ⁶ Lapidus, *Too Much Is Never Enough*, 190-91.
- ⁷ Gilbert Millstein, "Architect De Luxe of Miami Beach," *New York Times*, January 6, 1957, SM114.
- ⁸ Tisch purchased the hotel from Joseph Levy, president of Crawford Clothes. Lapidus designed several stores for Crawford Clothes in the late 1940s.
- ⁹ Before the theater was built, the Nursery and Child's Hospital complex was located on the site. Established on St. Mark's Place in 1854, the 51st Street hospital had brick buildings constructed in 1855, 1863, and 1888.
- ¹⁰ "Ground Will Be Broken Today for 21-Story Hotel," *New York Times*, June 21, 1960, 29; "A Hotel Boom is On," *New York Times*, August 14, 1960, X18.
- ¹¹ Lapidus, *Too Much is Never Enough*, 234.
- ¹² Lapidus was familiar with Chatham Green. In 1973, he said: "So a snake dance on Lexington Avenue is not satisfactory, while the one on Chatham Square is all right. Frankly, these barbs hurt." John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, *Conversations With Architects* (New York, 1973), 155.
- ¹³ Glenn Fowler, "First Reinforced Concrete Hotel in City Rises on Lexington Avenue," *New York Times*, March 19, 1961, R1. Also see, Morris Gilbert, "Proving Ground for Hotels," *New York Times*, January 8, 1961, XXI.
- ¹⁴ Lapidus, *An Architecture of Joy*, 193.
- ¹⁵ "Ground Will Be Broken," Olga Guelft, "What Do You Think of The Summit?" *Interiors*, October 1961; David Dunlap, "Most Hated Hotel Reclaims Its Floridian Flamboyance," *New York Times*, November 8, 2000, D1.
- ¹⁶ Lapidus, *An Architecture of Joy*, 217.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 217-18.
- ¹⁸ Cook & Klotz, *Conversations With Architects*, 174.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Susan Tunick, *Terra-Cotta Skyline* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 81.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960* (Monacelli Press, 1995), 306.
- ²¹ Andrew Hepburn, *Complete Guide to New York City* (1964), 164.
- ²² A 1958 press release claimed that the brown color was selected "to capture the feeling of forward thinking." It was the ninth color introduced by Alcoa. See "Edifice Complex," *FIT Network* (Spring 2005), 8.
- ²³ The tiles quickly deteriorated and were later removed.
- ²⁴ See Morris Lapidus Papers (1933-1988) in the collection of the Syracuse University Library.
- ²⁵ Guelft.
- ²⁶ "East Side Hotel Opens Tomorrow," *New York Times*, July 30, 1961, 58.
- ²⁷ "Advertising: Summit Hotel Drive Nears End," *New York Times*, July 24, 1961, 40. "International Air Marks Opening of Hotel," *New York Times*, August 1, 1961, 28.
- ²⁸ "International Air."
- ²⁹ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Our New Buildings: Hits and Misses," *New York Times*, April 29, 1962, 213.
- ³⁰ Lapidus, *Too Much is Never Enough*, 231; see Joseph and Shirley Wersherba Papers at the Center of American History at the University of Texas at Austin.
- ³¹ Dunlap.
- ³² "Summit Gives In, Modifies Décor," *New York Times*, October 20, 1961, 30.

³³ Dunlap.

³⁴ The owners include Goldman Sachs & Co., Highgate Holdings, and Oxford Capital Companies.

³⁵ Letter to Preston Tisch, September 15, 2000; forwarded by Deborah Desilets to Jennifer Raab, Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, September 16, 2000.

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 former Summit Hotel has a special character, 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 Summit Hotel, located at the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and East 51st Street, is admired for its unusual shape, color, and stainless steel sign; that it is an important mid-career work by the celebrated hotel designer Morris Lapidus; that it was the first hotel built in Manhattan since 1930 and the architect's first hotel in New York City; that Lapidus was especially proud of this building and reproduced an image of it on the cover of his autobiography, *The Architecture of Joy*, published in 1979; that it is built of reinforced concrete and has curving elevations that are faced in light green glazed brick and dark green mosaic tile; that it is embellished with globe-shaped lighting fixtures, mosaic door handles, neon signs, and a stainless steel ash tray that serves smokers descending into the subway; that at the time of construction it generated considerable controversy but is now considered an important example of the architect's work; and that despite alterations to the Lexington Avenue entrance, this modern hotel retains much of its original flamboyant character.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) 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 Summit Hotel, 569-573 Lexington Avenue (aka 132-166 East 51st Street), and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1305, Lot 50, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair; Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair
Stephen Byrns, Joan Gerner, Christopher Moore, Richard Olcott
Thomas Pike, Jan Pokorny, Elizabeth Ryan, Vicki Match Suna, Commissioners



Summit Hotel
569-573 Lexington Avenue (aka 132-166 East 51st Street)
View east
Photo: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel
West façade
Photo: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel
East 51st Street, façade and storefronts
Photos: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel
East 51st Street
Lighting fixtures and northwest corner
Photos: Carl Forster and Matthew A. Postal



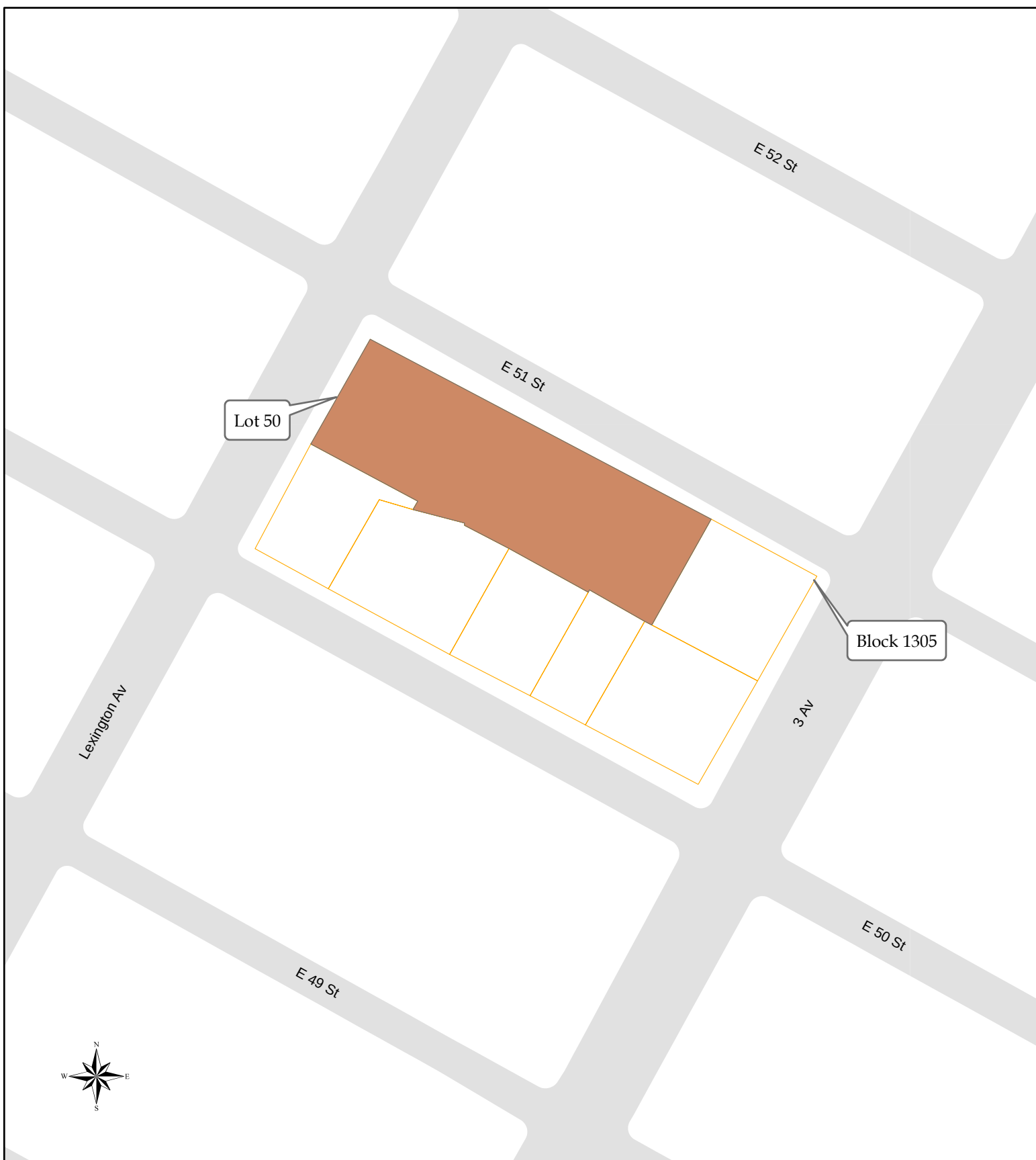
Summit Hotel
Lexington Avenue entrance and storefront
Photos: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel
East 51st Street façade
Photos: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel
Sign on Lexington Avenue and East 51st Street entrance
Photos: Carl Forster



Summit Hotel (now Doubletree Metropolitan Hotel), 569-573 Lexington Avenue (aka 132-166 East 51st Street), Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map, Block 1305, Lot 50

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 03C, December 2003



Summit Hotel (now Doubletree Metropolitan Hotel), 569-573 Lexington Avenue (aka 132-166 East 51st Street), Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map, Block 1305, Lot 50
 Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 2004-2005, Edition 25, Plate 78