Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 25, 2003; Designation List 341
LP-2117

Socony-Mobil Building, 150 East 42nd Street, aka 130-170 East 42nd Street, 375-391 Lexington Avenue, 640-658 Third Avenue, 131-155 East 41st Street, Manhattan. Built 1954-1956; Harrison & Abramowitz and John B. Peterkin, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 46.

On October 1, 2002, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Socony-Mobil Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been advertised in accordance with provisions of law. A representative of the building owner and fee holder spoke in opposition to designation. Five witnesses testified in favor of designation, including representatives of the Landmarks Conservancy, DoCoMoMo New York Tri-State, Modern Architecture Working Group, and the Historic Districts Council. In addition, the Commission received numerous letters in support of designation, from Manhattan Community Board Six, the Municipal Art Society, and the Roosevelt Island Historical Society. One letter opposed designation. At the time of designation, a representative of the fee holder spoke in support of designation.

Summary
A curtain wall of seven thousand embossed stainless steel panels gives the Socony-Mobil Building a unique presence on the midtown skyline. Constructed between 1954 and 1956, this impressive skyscraper fills an entire block, extending from 42nd to 41st Streets, and from Lexington to Third Avenues. There are two entrances: the primary entrance is located on 42nd Street, and a smaller, secondary entrance faces Lexington Avenue. Both are reached by passing beneath dramatic stainless steel arches that enclose generous exterior vestibules. At the center of the block, atop a three-story base, is a forty-two story tower, oriented from east to west, flanked by thirteen story wings. The driving force behind this speculative office project was Peter B. Ruffin, of the Galbreath Corporation, who convinced the owners of the site, the Goelet Estate, to agree to a long-term lease. A distinguished group of architects and engineers was assembled to guide the project, and major tenants were secured, including the Socony-Mobil Oil Company, which relocated from the financial district to occupy half the structure. Fully leased at the time of completion, the project's success bolstered the emergence of midtown and the area surrounding Grand Central Terminal as a major corporate address. The Socony-Mobil Building was designed in two phases: John B. Peterkin, a consultant to the Goelet estate, was responsible for the initial scheme, a set-back tower of brick and granite that conformed to the 1916 zoning ordinance. Harrison & Abramowitz, who were at the height of their prestige, joined the team in 1952 and over the next two years the elevations were completely redesigned using man-made materials. The structure that resulted is a vivid study in contrasts, juxtaposing deep blue structural glass with stainless steel, smooth and embossed surfaces, as well as curved and rectilinear forms. These juxtapositions give the Socony-Mobil Building its singular character; while the zoning-driven massing was typical of speculative office buildings erected during this period, the sparkling elevations gave the project a strong modern identity. Aside from modest alterations to the base and storefronts, this office tower remains one of the postwar era's – and neighborhood's most striking skyscrapers.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of the Grand Central District

Public transportation played an critical role in the development of midtown Manhattan and the site occupied by the Socony-Mobil Building. The New York & Harlem Railroad Company, laid tracks along Fourth (now Park) Avenue in 1837, linking 14th and 125th Streets. Grand Central Depot (demolished) opened on 42nd Street in 1870. The new terminal consisted of a vaulted iron shed, as well as a Second Empire style headhouse with public entrances facing 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue. This orientation made the blocks to the east considerably less desirable, and in subsequent decades stables, warehouses, and factories were built here.

Elevated railway service was introduced on Third Avenue (between 67th Street and South Ferry) in August 1878, and along Second Avenue (north of 23rd Street) in 1880.[1] At 42nd Street, a spur line was constructed to the west, linking the "els" directly to Grand Central Depot. The IRT subway, which ran from City Hall to 42nd Street, and, for a time, west to Times Square, made the spur line obsolete and in 1923 it was demolished. No longer darkened by trains and track, the blocks between Park and Third Avenues became substantially more attractive to commercial development. In subsequent years, the Grand Central district became prime real estate and a significant group of office buildings were built along 42nd Street, including the Bowery Savings Bank (1921-23, 1931-33), Chanin Building (1927-29) and Chrysler Building (1928-30, all designated New York City Landmarks). The blocks east of Lexington Avenue, however, remained relatively free of new development. Aside from the Daily News Building (1929-30, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior), the blocks adjoining the Second and Third Avenue els were occupied by modest, low-rise structures.

The Site

The Socony-Mobil Building was built on land leased from the Goelet Estate. Francis Goelet emigrated from Amsterdam to the colony of New York in 1676. Prominent among his descendants were Peter Goelet (1800-79) and Robert Goelet (1809-79) who accumulated large fortunes in banking and real estate. Both brothers were founders of Chemical Bank and at one time it was reported that the family owned more than fifty-five acres on Manhattan's east side. In 1848, they began acquiring lots on the block, near the corner of Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street. The land was leased to various tenants, most notably Pottier & Stymus, the furniture designers, who operated an "integrated factory" facing Lexington Avenue, from the end of the Civil War to 1918.[2] A subway entrance was created on the block after 1915, located in a one-story brick structure at 156-158 East 42nd Street. Other buildings during this period included several small hotels, two theaters, and a garage.[3]

Under Robert Goelet (1880-1966), the family increased its holdings on the block, purchasing six lots near the corner of Third Avenue and 41st Street during the 1940s.[4] This acquisition was made with the expectation that the end of elevated rail service in Manhattan was near. With the closing of the Second Avenue line in 1942, the Goelets correctly anticipated that the Third Avenue el would follow and as the Socony-Mobil Building approached completion in 1956, service ended and the iron structure was demolished. As the last pillars were removed at 42nd Street, the *New York Times* reported:

> Final removal of the shadowy el cleared the way for a seven and one half mile, widened, tree-lined, flourescent lighted, boulevard of glistening office buildings and fine apartments and shops that will be new in everything but name.[5]

Over the next three decades, many impressive commercial structures would, indeed, be erected along both sides of Third Avenue, especially near 59th Street, 53rd Street, and 42nd Street, where multiple subway lines are present.

John B. Peterkin (1886-1969)

As early as 1942, the Goelet Estate began to contemplate redevelopment of the site. John B. Peterkin, an architect specializing in apartment houses and civic structures, was hired as an consultant. Most of his designs were relatively free of ornament and he often worked in a stripped Classical or streamlined Moderne style. His Manhattan commissions included: 53 Park Place (1922, in association with Cross & Cross); 1016 Fifth Avenue (1927, part of the Metropolitan Museum Historic District); the Airlines Building (1939-40, demolished), across from Grand Central Terminal on 42nd Street, the East Side Airlines Terminal (1950-51, demolished), located on First Avenue, close to the Midtown Tunnel; and the New York Coliseum (1953-54, in association with Leon & Lionel Levy, demolished).

Peterkin developed the first scheme for the site in the early 1940s.[6] With its proximity to Grand Central Terminal he suggested a related use, consisting of an office tower built above an airlines depot. Oriented

from east to west, his plan recalled various buildings at Rockefeller Center. Above the third floor was a bold set-back, creating a platform from which a thirty-story tower, flanked by lower wings, would rise. At this level, a roof garden was envisioned. Despite a "closet full of plans," the project did not proceed. While major corporations and developers expressed reservations about developing such a large site, other parties could not meet the Estate's demand that they produce "blue-ribbon" tenants with long-term leases.[7]

The Developer

The driving force behind the Socony-Mobil Building was Peter B. Ruffin, vice-president of the Galbreath Corporation.[8] Born in Virginia, he moved to New York in 1927 and became one of the city's most successful brokers of commercial real estate. He was hired by real estate developer John W. Galbreath in 1948 to open and manage the firm's New York office at 541 Lexington Avenue, several blocks from the future building site. Ruffin recalled:

> There it was, a solid mass of bootblack stands, fruit stands, hat-repair joints, and third-rate restaurants . . . the land belonged to the Robert Walton Goelet estate, and I learned that the estate did not want to sell, did want the property improved, but didn't want to be exploited by real estate operators. At first I scouted around to find some large corporation that might be interested in putting up a building for itself. Turned out that none of them were interested in going into the real estate business. Didn't want to tie up funds in brick and mortar, didn't want the nuisance of ownership. After months of discussion with the estate, Galbreath and I decided to put the building up ourselves.[9]

To accomplish this, Ruffin needed a new design, major tenants, and financing. Harrison & Abramowitz, possibly the city's best-known architectural firm, was invited to collaborate with Peterkin in 1952. In association with the Turner Construction Company and structural engineers Edwards & Hjorth, they planned the building and determined the cost.[10] Ruffin's strategy succeeded, and in July 1953, executives of the Socony-Vaccum Oil Company signed a letter of intent to lease more than half the structure. With this agreement and several others in hand, the Equitable Life Assurance Society and National City Bank agreed to loan Galbreath and Ruffin $37.5 million toward construction.[11]

Harrison & Abramowitz[12]

The project gained substantial prestige through the addition of Harrison & Abramowitz. The firm had many important buildings to its credit and Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1981) had played a leading role in the creation of Rockefeller Center, first, with Corbett, Harrison and MacMurray, and later, as Harrison & Fouilhoux. Max Abramowitz (b. 1908) joined the firm in mid-1930s and following the death of J. Andre Fouilhoux (1879-1945), it was called Harrison & Abramowitz.

During the late 1940s, Harrison developed a reputation as a conciliator, able to appease opposing views and design impulses. His commissions for corporate and institutional clients display a rare gift for merging traditional and modern aesthetics. Due to his long association with the Rockefeller family, he directed the planning and construction of the United Nations Headquarters. An international design board was assembled, including Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Sven Markelius. As completed in 1952, the buildings in the complex reflect a range of aesthetic philosophies - juxtaposing sculptural and rectilinear forms, as well as natural and man-made materials.[13] This approach, though hardly doctrinaire, would shape the firm's subsequent work and help distinguish Harrison & Abramowitz from its contemporaries.

Harrison & Abramowitz first worked with the Galbreath Corporation in 1951, designing 525 Penn Place (now Three Mellon Bank Center), a fifty-one story office building in Pittsburgh. In subsequent years, they collaborated on numerous projects, including the forty-one story Continental Can Company Building (1959-61) at 633 Third Avenue, between 40th and 41st Streets.

A New Design

Galbreath and Ruffin's plan for the Socony-Mobil Building made first page news. The *New York Times* reported that the forty-two story skyscraper would be "the largest commercial building project erected in Manhattan since Rockefeller Center."[14] The comparison was apt, not only had Harrison worked on both, but Peterkin's initial design had been modeled on the earlier complex. An aerial rendering accompanied the article, highlighting the various setbacks and landscaped terraces.

The elevations, however, were completely redesigned during 1953 and 1954. It is likely that Harrison guided these changes, replacing the masonry with man-made materials. Although some high-profile headquarters, like Lever House and the Seagram Building (designated New York City Landmarks),

were built as free-standing towers, the majority of office buildings constructed during this period filled the zoning envelope with conventional setbacks clad with metal and glass. In most instances, they have a transitional character, midway between the tiered silhouettes of the 1930s and the slabs of the post-1960 zoning era. The Socony-Mobil Building exemplifies this trend; while the bulky massing was shaped by economics; the new skin was a product of fashion and marketing, conceived to give the building an appealing modern identity. A lengthy article in *Architectural Forum* explained the strategy:

> . . . the new cliff of offices will not be distinguished in the way the UN and Lever are, in slender striking massing. Instead, its robust personality will be keyed by the soundness of spaces for rent, and its impact will be made by the great exterior wall of stainless steel.[15]

Galbreath and Ruffin hoped that the new facade would help attract additional tenants. Their strategy succeeded, and by the time the building was completed, all floors were leased.

Ground was broken on March 30, 1954. The ceremony was attended by Galbreath and Ruffin who "operated the steam shovel that scooped the first bit of earth from the site," as well as representatives of the architects, contractors, and Goelet Estate. Erection of the steel skeleton began November 8, 1954 and was completed in June 1955. The building opened on October 3, 1956.[16]

The Base

Harrison first used tinted glass in the early 1930s, incorporating black structural panels throughout the concourse level of Rockefeller Center. Promoted as an inexpensive substitute for marble, pigmented structural glass was first produced by the Marietta Manufacturing Company in 1900. In the decades that follow, a wide selection of colors was available, including tropic and forest green, jade, robin blue, suntan, and yellow. These treatments were primarily used to modernize existing buildings or interiors, giving the lower floors and storefronts a stream-lined appearance.

Tinted glass was used with increasing frequency after the Second World War. The United Nations Secretariat had the earliest curtain wall in New York City. Completed in 1952, green transparent glass was chosen for its modern appearance and its ability to help moderate temperatures.[17] It became a signature material for Harrison & Abramowitz, used in the Corning Glass Building (1956-59, altered), Spring Mills Building (1962), and Institute for International Education Building (1961-64).

The four-story base of the Socony-Mobil Building fills the entire site. It is clad with dark blue carrara structural glass that is opaque and framed by stainless steel moldings that project slightly forward. Sleek, dark, and somewhat reflective, this choice of color helps distinguish the building from its neighbors, many of which are clad with light-colored brick or terra cotta. At the ground story are various commercial spaces and storefronts. The display windows figured prominently in the design and are set into brushed stainless steel enframements.

At the center of the 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue facades are the primary entrances. Each is marked by a shallow eyebrow curve arch. It is likely that these dramatic elements were designed by Harrison and they recall his life-long interest in abstract painting and sculptural forms, a tendency which he explored in such iconic World's Fair pavilions as the Trylon & Perisphere (1939, demolished) and the Hall of Science (1964). The two entrances fit squarely into this pattern, juxtaposing a dramatic sweeping form against the rectilinear elevations of the lower floors. Clad in stainless steel, each arch is supported by broad granite piers. It projects slightly over the street, incorporates lighting fixtures, and at its highest point, interrupts the fenestration at the second story. This shape also focuses attention on the entrance and the cladding creates a subtle visual link to the floors above.

A Stainless Steel Skyscraper

Masonry gradually fell out of favor after the Second World War.[18] While tinted glass was popular, during the 1950s architects frequently experimented with bronze, aluminum, and stainless steel. These materials had distinct advantages: ease of installation and thinness – a characteristic that increased the interior dimensions of each floor.

Harrison & Abramowitz were among the first architects to clad buildings entirely in metal, most notably, the Alcoa Building (1950-53) in Pittsburgh. Conceived to showcase the manufacturer's chief product, the thirty story elevations are enclosed by prefabricated gray aluminum panels stamped with an inverted pyramid pattern.[19] In subsequent years, aluminum was widely used in Manhattan: on the National Distiller's Building (Emery Roth & Sons, 1954) at 99 Park Avenue; 666 Fifth Avenue (Carson & Lundin, 1957, significantly altered); and the Administration and Technology Building (De Young, Moscowitz & Rosenberg, 1959) of the Fashion Institute of Technology, on West 28th Street.

While aluminum was briefly considered for the elevations of the Socony-Mobil Building, stainless steel was chosen due to Galbreath's ties to the steel industry. *Architectural Forum* explained:

> He found that his friends in steel, alarmed by the amount of publicity that aluminum had been getting through a succession of aluminum skin buildings, very much wanted this major building to have a steel skin as a showcase for the industry.[20]

Considerably more expensive than other materials, the steel manufacturers agreed to match the price of aluminum and "write off the cost of any price differential as the cost of promoting steel."[21]

Above the fourth story, the elevations are covered with 20-gage type 302 stainless steel – a surface area of more than ten acres and weighing about 750,000 pounds.[22] Developed between 1903 and 1912 in England and Germany, stainless steel was typically used for non-structural purposes in situations where there is a high potential for corrosion. Among various architects to pioneer the use of this material was William Van Alen, designer of the neighboring Chrysler Building, completed in 1930. An instant "landmark" on the midtown skyline, the stainless steel spire shimmered as none had before.[23]

The Panels

Installation of the seven thousand panels began in May 1955 and was completed eight months later in December 1955.[24] It is likely that the panels were designed or inspired by Oskar Nitzchke (1900-91), the German-born architect who joined Harrison's office in 1938 and remained with the firm until 1953 or 1954.[25] He had a "talent for sensual technical inventiveness" and produced at least a dozen patterns for the curtain walls of the Alcoa Building. While it remains uncertain whether Nitzchke worked on the Socony-Mobil Building, it was reported that "more than 100 panel patterns and shapes were considered before the final selection was made."[26] The architects:

> . . . studied textures, shadows, rolled forms; they learned to use splayed patterns, avoiding horizontals with the soiling and streaking they would bring to New York. To make sure all were agreed, they made full-size models in plaster and called in stamping and metal die men from large outfits . . .[27]

Four raised relief panels were selected: a rosette-like motif for above and below the windows; a large and small rosette to flank the windows, and two variants displaying a design of interlocking pyramids. These last panels are less wide and appear at the eighth floor where the ceiling is higher, or at the corners of the side elevations.

From the outset, it was understood that the decision to press decorative patterns into the panels might generate controversy. It was, consequently, explained in functional terms: the reliefs stiffen the panels, diminish reflections, and create a surface in which "dirt and grime can be readily washed away by rain."[28] Lewis Mumford, architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, viewed it less favorably. He called the design a "disaster" and said that the elevations looked as if they were "coming down with measles."[29] Such differences of opinion were openly acknowledged in the press:

> . . . people have been arguing about the embossed pattern . . . some dislike it because it reminds them of the metal ceiling of an old store. Others like it because it reminds them of an old store. Some who disliked it to begin with are now pleased with the sparkle . . . Meanwhile, awaiting the judgement of history, the building's shiny, many faceted armor presents each day an ever-changing appearance which varies with changes in the weather and the time of day.[30]

These debates generated publicity for the stainless steel industry, but due to significantly lower costs, aluminum continued to dominate the market. To this day, the Socony-Mobil Building remains one of the largest stainless steel-clad office buildings in the world.

The Midtown Real Estate Market

The opening of the Socony-Mobil Building was celebrated on October 17, 1956. Benjamin F. Fairless, director of the United States Steel Corporation, which supplied the embossed panels, cut the ribbon and a stainless steel container was inserted into the cornerstone. In addition to various consumer products, it contained predictions made by the executives of several major tenants.[31]

The Socony-Mobil Oil Company was the chief tenant, whose 2,500 employees occupied all or part of twenty-four floors.[32] Founded by John D. Rockefeller in 1882, for more than sixty years the firm had been based in lower Manhattan at 26 Broadway (1920-28, a designated New York City Landmark). Originally called the Standard Oil Company of New York, it merged with the Vacuum Oil Company in 1931 and was known as the Socony Vacuum Company. Vacuum was dropped from the name in 1955 and Mobil Oil was added, a product trademark it held since 1920.

Speculative office buildings had been built in midtown since the 1920s, but initially most were occupied by firms without earlier ties to the financial district. The first major commercial development to challenge this pattern was Rockefeller Center. The Rockefeller family used business connections to attract a roster of international tenants and major corporations, most notably Standard Oil of New Jersey, which moved from 26 Broadway to 30 Rockefeller Plaza (now the General Electric Building) in 1933.[33] Socony's decision to follow its sister company to midtown was viewed as an extremely positive development. Announced at a time when many corporations were considering moves to the suburbs, the project bolstered midtown's standing as a viable alternative to the financial district.

> As Socony had changed in 71 years, so has New York. The center of the population gradually shifted northward . . . Business gradually spread northward, too, until midtown Manhattan became the largest, most concentrated center of commerce in the world. The new building is in the heart of this fabulous center.[34]

With Socony as the anchor tenant, Ruffin had little difficulty securing tenants and the building was completely leased by February 27, 1955.[35] He boasted:

> This is the first time in history that one man has ever leased a whole building containing multiple tenants. I'm proud to be that man and proud of saving Galbreath and myself two million dollars in broker's commissions.[36]

The site allowed for some of the largest floorplates in Manhattan. Corporations were attracted to these flexible open spaces and the efficiency they promoted by consolidating operations on far fewer floors. Tenants enjoyed many modern conveniences, including air-conditioning, automatic self-service elevators, and direct access to Grand Central Terminal via an underground passage. The commercial spaces at the ground and concourse levels were leased to the F.W. Woolworth Company (on 42nd Street, east of the main entrance), American Express Company (on 42nd Street) and First National City Bank (Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street, three floors), and the office floors above, to the Air Reduction Company (two floors), International General Electric Company (east half of seven floors), American Tobacco Company (west half of seven floors), Turner Construction Company, Hill & Knowlton, Inc., and the St. Regis Paper Company (three floors). The uppermost floors were devoted to three floors of mechanical services and the Pinnacle Club of New York. Located on the forty-second floor and expressed by a series of large horizontal windows, it catered to a mostly corporate membership.[37]

Subsequent History

In 1966, the Socony-Mobil Company changed its name to the Mobil Oil Corporation and until relocating to Virginia in 1990, the building was called the Mobil Building.[38] The Hiro Real Estate Company, which is owned by the Honzawa family, acquired the building in 1987 for $240 million. Shortly after the sale, the Goelet Real Estate Company agreed to extend the ground lease to 2028. Established in Tokyo in 1931, Hiro has been active in Manhattan since the early 1980s, acquiring such properties as 100 Broadway (also known as the American Surety Building, a designated New York City Landmark). As part of a major renovation in the mid-1990s, some of the storefronts were altered and the tarnished stainless steel facade was cleaned. The *New York Times* praised the results, saying that it "really does look like new."[39]

Description

The forty-two story Socony-Mobil Building fills an entire block, extending from 41st to 42nd Streets, and from Lexington to Third Avenue. It measures approximately 420 by 200 feet and is 566 feet tall. The site slopes down from west to east. The base is clad with opaque blue glass panels framed with stainless steel moldings that are held with small screws. The watertable is granite. Where visible, it bevels inward. The primary entrance is located at 150 East 42nd Street and a smaller entrance is at 375 Lexington Avenue. Both entrances enclose exterior vestibules with fine grain terrazzo floors and stainless steel ceilings that incorporate vents and down lights. Store entrances are located at the northeast, northwest, and southeast corners of the building. These corner entrances face in two directions and consist of double glass doors flanked by glass panels. Non-historic stainless steel signs hang directly above each entrance. Non-historic security cameras have been installed atop the base at each corner.

Above the base, the tower and wings are clad in embossed stainless steel panels. These upper floors are arranged in an H-shaped configuration. The elevations are extremely well-maintained and most of the materials are original. The deepest setback is located on 42nd Street, between the thirteen story wings. Nearly all of the 3,200 windows incorporate single panes and pivot vertically. Large horizontal windows mark the

forty-second story. Above are three floors of machinery, identified by vertical louvers that alternate with stainless steel panels.

42nd Street: The main entrance is located at the middle of the block, crowned by a broad eyebrow-curve arch clad in stainless steel and supported by five granite piers. The spacious exterior vestibule has a white marble terazzo floor that leads to four revolving glass doors flanked by two pairs of double fixed glass doors. The entry doors are flanked by non-historic stainless doors that serve as emergency exits. West of the main entrance are six display windows and a corner store entrance. Installed between two of the windows are non-historic rectangular signs. Directly east of the main entrance is a non-historic store entrance framed by stainless steel moldings that have been altered. A sign for "STARBUCKS COFFEE" is located above the double doors. Farther east is a wide passage that leads to the subway; the entry is marked by a small sign that reads "Queensboro Subway." The section of the passage closest to the street is clad in stainless steel panels and has circular down lights. The east side of the passage is faced in granite and incorporates five square display windows and the west side has granite walls with a continuous stainless steel grille above. To the east of the subway passage are two storefronts: the first, now occupied by "FOOTLOCKER" is identified by a sign of free-standing white letters on a shallow-projecting marquee. Although this sign is not historic, it resembles the signs that were originally installed on the facade. Some of the letters extend in front of the second-story windows. To create an entrance to this storefront, the display window was altered in the 1990s. The corner store has three display windows and a corner entry at Third Avenue. In 2000, these display windows were rehabilitated. The center window incorporates a stainless steel sign with white lettering for the "PETITE SOPHISTICATE."

Third Avenue: Between the store entrances, from north to south, are a display window, stainless steel doors, a pair of display windows that incorporate stainless steel signs with white lettering for the "PETITE SOPHISTICATE," stainless steel doors, and a display window. The twin display windows, near the center of the ground story, were added in 2000. At this time, the entrance at the south corner was rehabilitated.

41st Street: The setback above the fourth story and between the wings is less deep than on 42nd Street. At mid-block are loading docks with roll-down metal doors flanked by doors leading to emergency exits. Above the loading docks are a series of eight single-pane windows. Most of the metal panels on the lower facade are painted dark blue to complement the opaque glass. Near Third Avenue are two display windows (both are divided horizontally) and a store entrance with glass and stainless steel double doors. The store is closed and the windows have been painted to match the tinted glass. The transom and ceiling section were replaced with louvers in 2000. To the west, near Lexington Avenue, are four display windows. The window on the east end is divided horizontally into two sections. The second window from the corner is divided vertically into three sections. A concrete step is located below the center section.

Lexington Avenue: While the arched entrance at mid-block and the storefronts to the north are intact, the south storefronts have been significantly altered. Many of the opaque blue panels near 41st Street were replaced in the late 1990s with non-historic clear glass and the display window has been enlarged at the base to serve as a store entrance. In the middle of the block, the Lexington Avenue entrance to the building projects slightly forward and is articulated by an eye-brow curve arch clad in stainless steel. Two granite piers support the arch and the address "375" is identified on the central panels. The frosted glass in the window to the south of the entrance in non-historic. The south wall of the exterior vestibule has five stainless steel doors surmounted by metal grilles. The north wall has granite panels surmounted by alternating grilles and granite panels. The entrance consists of two sets of revolving doors that flank a fixed door. A non-historic tenant sign is affixed to the left of the doors. North of the vestibule is a plate-glass window, a display window, and a corner entrance. This non-historic entrance replaced a display window in 1999.

Researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

1. For information on the history of Manhattan's elevated trains, see "3rd Avenue Must Pay for Light and Air," *New York Times*, June 2, 1955, 31; "Third Ave Loses Last Pillar of El," *New York Times*, February 17, 1956, 25.

2. The company was established by William Pierre Stymus and Auguste Pottier in 1859. The Lexington Avenue location handled large contracts. See Kenneth Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 932.

3. The entrance to the subway is about one hundred feet west of Third Avenue. Proposed in 1888, the tunnel and "small arched" station used by the Number 7 (Flushing) train began construction in 1892. Abandoned by 1907, it was transferred to the IRT Company in 1913. On March 15, 1915 an easement was granted for a "suitable superstructure for ingress" on 42nd Street, near Third Avenue. By 1916, a series of passages had been planned and constructed, linking the platforms to the earlier subway station beneath Grand Central Terminal. Service was extended to Astoria in 1917 and Flushing in 1928. See Joseph Cunningham and Leonard O. Dehart, *The Manhattan Els and the IRT*, 1976, 46-47. A subsequent tunnel and easement agreement was signed by Goelet, Galbreath, the City of New York, and the New York City Transit Authority on March 24, 1955. At this time, the tenant was "willing at its own cost to construct ... [and] reconstruct station facilities. See New York City, Department of Conveyances, Block 1296, lots 25, 40, 41, 3, 6, June 1, 1953.

4. See Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Goelet Building (now Swiss Center Building) and Interior Designation Reports*, (LP-1810, 1811), prepared by Charles Savage, (New York: City of New York, 1992), 2, and "Robert Goelet, Financier, Dead," *New York Times*, February 7, 1966, 29.

5. "Third Ave Loses Last Pillar of El."

6. "New York's Biggest Building in 25 Years," *Architectural Forum* (January 1955), 91.

7. Ibid. Published a year before completion, this article offers an in-depth look at the building's creation.

8. It was also called the Galbreath-Ruffin Corporation.

9. *The New Yorker* (March 19, 1956), 24.

10. Turner Construction Company was founded in 1902. At the time of construction, it had offices in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. According to an advertisement, the company had erected three thousand buildings. See "A Special Report on Manhattan's Newest Landmark: The Socony Mobil Building," *New York Times*, advertisement, August 19, 1956, section 10, 19.

11. *The New Yorker* (March 19, 1956), 24; *Architectural Forum*, (January 1955), 91.

12. Wallace K. Harrison, "Office Buildings" in *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. Talbot Hamlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); Herbert Warren Wind, "Architect" in *The New Yorker* (November 20, 1954), 51-79; November 27, 1954, 51-85; December 4, 1954, 55-85; Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison*, Architect (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Time & Life Building, ground floor interior, Designation Report*, LP-2119, prepared by Matthew A. Postal (NY: City of New York, 2002).

13. Harrison & Abramowitz also worked on Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (1955-66), and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza in Albany (1958-74).

14. *New York Times*, July 23, 1953, 1, 19.

15. *Architectural Forum*, 87.

16. A.P. Brooks served as the project manager. *Progressive Architecture* (June 1957), 160.

17. Newhouse, 128.

18. John Peter, *Aluminum in Modern Architecture*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Reynolds Metals Company, 1956); Margot Gayle and John G. Waite, *Metals in America's Historic Buildings* (U.S. Department of Interior, 1980).

19. Harrison & Abramowitz also created an aluminum curtain wall with a "prismatic design" for the 36-story Republic National Bank (1954-55) in Dallas, Texas. See *Aluminum in Modern Architecture*.

20. *Architectural Forum* (January 1955), 91.

21. Ibid. Steel was said to cost "half again as much as brick." A contemporary office building that also made generous use of this material was the Inland Steel Building (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1956-57) in Chicago.

22. *New York Times*, advertisement, August 19, 1956, 5.

23. Margot Gayle and John G. Waite, 79; and Donald Friedman, *Historical Building Construction: Design, Materials and Technology* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 115, 125, 166.

24. "Steel Panel Installed," *New York Times*, May 5, 1955; "External Wall Construction: The Curtain Wall and its Technical Problems, Jurgen Joedicke, *Office Buildings* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 79. In this later discussion of metal panels, the photograph of the Socony-Mobil Building is upside down.

25. Gus Dudley, ed., *Oscar Nitzchke Architect* (New York: The Cooper Union, 1985).

26. "Use of New Materials Changes Socony-Vaccum Building Design," *New York Times*, February 6, 1955, section 8, 1.

27. *Architectural Forum* (January 1955), 88.

28. Ibid., 89 (caption); "Stainless Panels Reflect Progress," *New York Times*, May 8, 1955.

29. Lewis Mumford, "The Skyline: The Drab and Daring," *The New Yorker*, February 5, 1956, 82. Henry Hope Reed shared this view, writing "technical triumphs make for nothing but greater ugliness." See *The Golden City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959), 33, 57. John Tauranac wrote "To be kind, its design is uninspired." Nevertheless, he included it in his survey of notable Manhattan buildings: *Essential New York* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 201.

30. "A Glittering Tower for New York's Skyline," *Architectural Forum*, November 1956.

31. "Prophecy is Put in Cornerstone," *New York Times*, October 18, 1956."New Skyscraper Opened by Socony," *New York Times*, October 4, 1956.

32. For a discussion of these interiors, see "Office Building Amenities," *Progressive Architecture* (June 1957), 227-233.

33. "Standard Oil Co. to Move Uptown" *New York Times*, June 27, 1933, 32. Standard Oil of New Jersey later moved to 75 Rockefeller Plaza (aka 15 West 51st Street), which became known as the Esso Building (now Time Warner Building, Carson & Lundin, 1946-47, a designated New York City Landmark).

34. *New York Times*, advertisement, 6.

35. "Offices in Socony-Vacuum Building are Rented a Year Before Completion," *New York Times*, February 27, 1955; "The Talk of The Town: Champ," *The New Yorker* (March 19, 1956), 23.

36. *The New Yorker* (March 19, 1956), 23.

37. "About New York," *New York Times*, July 13, 1956; "Clubs," *Interiors* (November 1956), 74-79. In April 1957, a preview of the traveling exhibition "Structural Steel in Today's Architecture" was presented at the club, featuring the Socony-Mobil Building. "Steel Exhibit Shown," *New York Times*, April 24, 1957.

38. "Law Firm to Occupy Mobil Space," *New York Times*, June 6, 1990; "Rebirth of West 42d Street is Spreading Eastward," *New York Times*, June 2, 1996.

39. "A Building of Steel on East 42nd Street," *New York Times*, October 8, 1995. Other recent discussions include "Owners Object to Designation of Skyscraper as a Landmark, *New York Times*, October 2, 2002, and "Socony Mobil Building: 1950's Icon or Tin Can," *The New York Observer*, October 21, 2002.

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 Socony-Mobil Building has a special character, and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

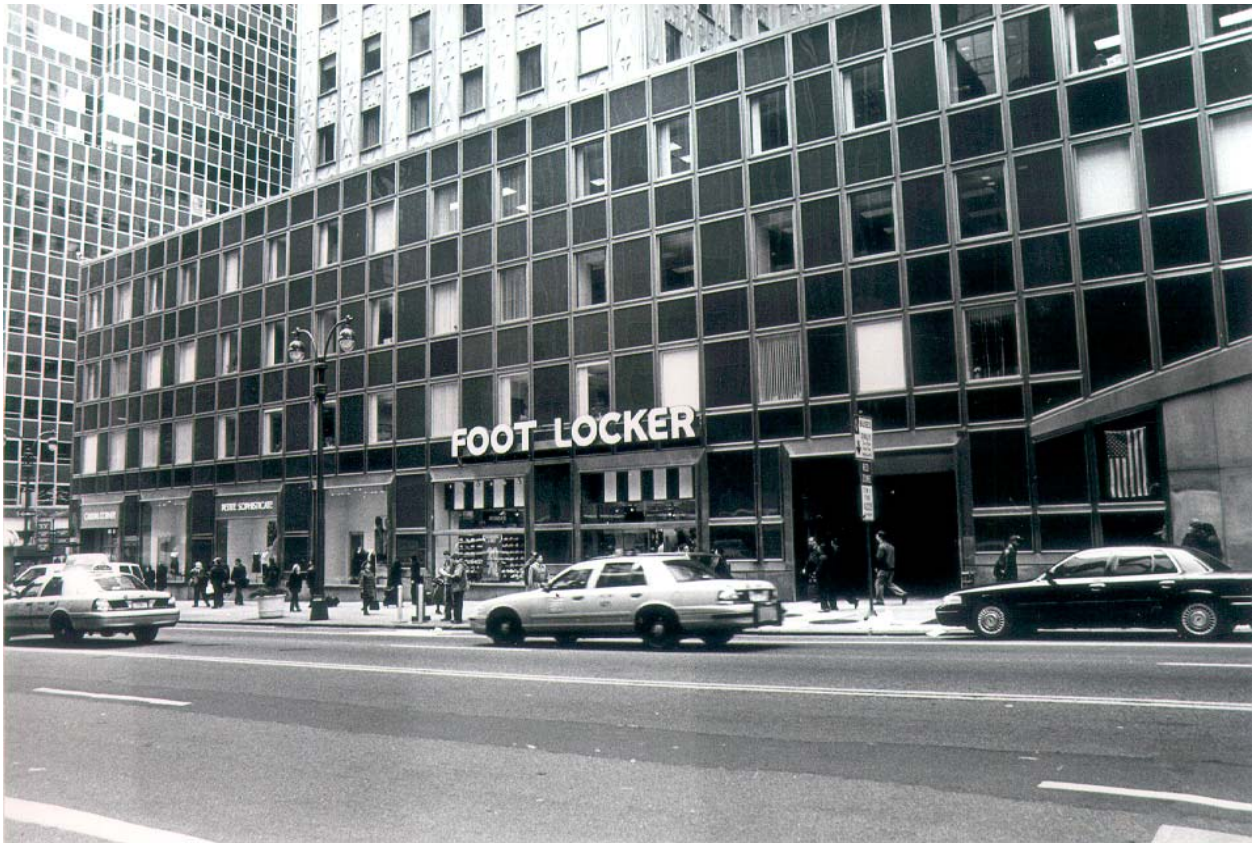
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Socony-Mobil Building is a 42-story office building combining International and Moderne Style elements; that it was designed by the prominent architects Harrison & Abramowitz, and John B. Peterkin, for the Galbreath Corporation on land owned by the Goelet Estate and was built between 1954 and 1956; that the elevations are clad in opaque blue glass and embossed stainless steel panels; that these panels were supplied by American manufacturers at a reduced cost to promote broader use in architectural projects; that it was named for its chief tenant, the Socony-Mobil Oil Company which originally occupied half the structure; that the opening of the building coincided with the emergence of midtown Manhattan as a major corporate address; and that it remains one of the most unusual and largest stainless steel-clad office buildings in the world.

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 Socony-Mobil Building, 150 East 42nd Street (aka 130-170 East 42nd Street, 375-391 Lexington Avenue, 640-658 Third Avenue, 131-155 East 41st Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designated Manhattan Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 46, as its Landmark Site.

Socony-Mobil Building, 42nd Street façade, looking southeast
150 East 42nd Street
Photo: Carl Forster

Socony-Mobil Building
42nd Street entrance

Socony-Mobil Building
42nd Street façade, west storefronts
Photos: Carl Forster



Socony-Mobil Building
42nd Street façade, east storefronts

Socony-Mobil Building
41st Street façade, looking west from Third Avenue
Photos: Carl Forster

Socony-Mobil Building
east section of 41st Street façade
Photo: Carl Forster

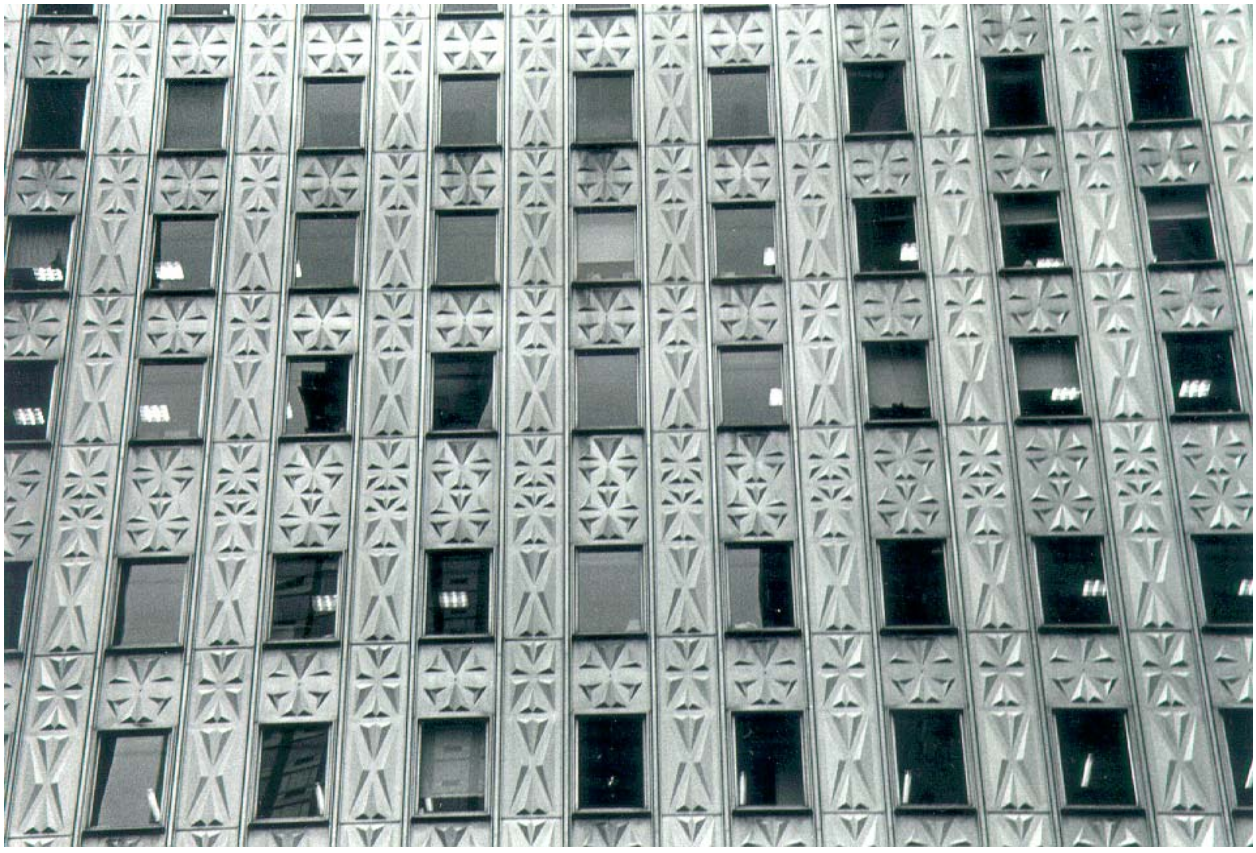
Socony-Mobil Building
corner of Third Avenue and 41st Street façade
Photo: Carl Forster

Socony-Mobil Building
41st Street façade, loading docks, looking west

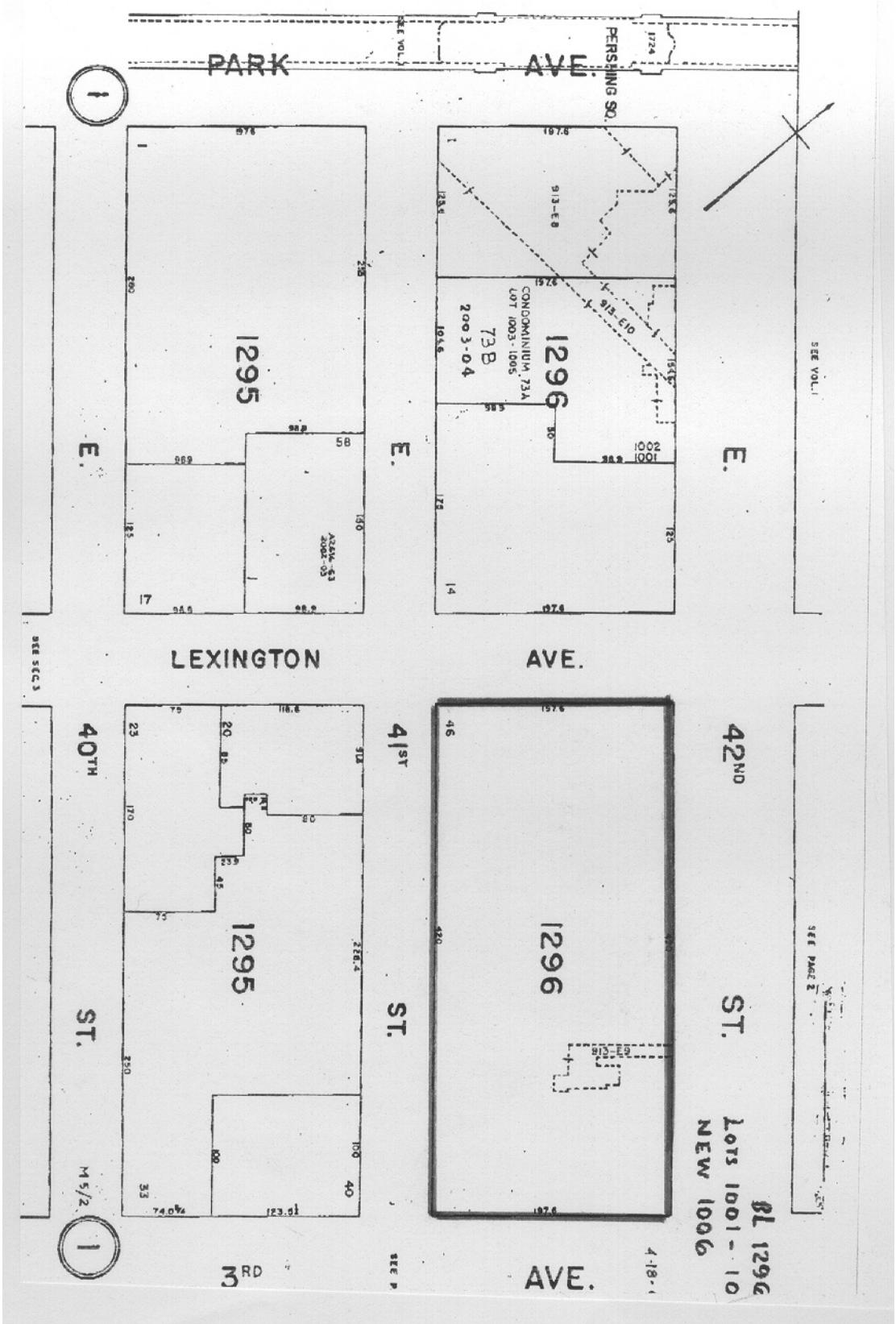
Socony-Mobil Building
41st Street façade, loading docks, looking west
Photos: Carl Forster

Socony-Mobil Building
150 East 42nd Street
Corner of Lexington Avenue and 41st Street
Photo: Carl Forster

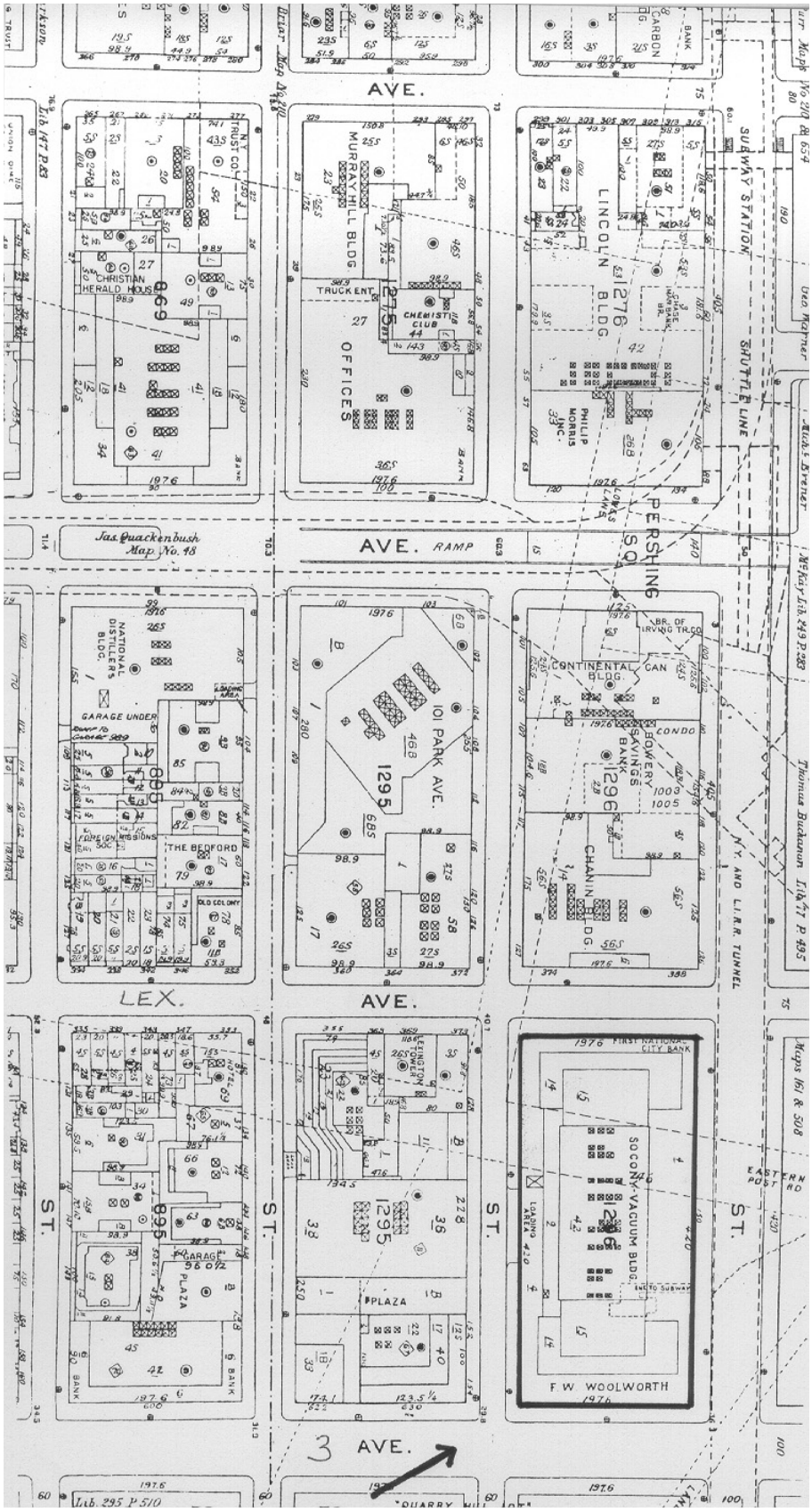
Socony-Mobil Building
Lexington Avenue facade



Socony-Mobil Building
42nd Street, stainless steel panels
Photos: Carl Forster



Socony-Mobil Building
150 East 42nd Street, aka 130-170 East 42nd Street, 375-391 Lexington Avenue, 640-658 Third Avenue, 131-155 East 41st Street, Manhattan. Block 1296, Lot 46
Source: Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map



Socony-Mobil Building
150 East 42nd Street, aka 130-170 East 42nd Street, 375-391 Lexington Avenue, 640-658 Third Avenue, 131-155 East 41st Street, Manhattan. Block 1296, Lot 46
Source: Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book* (2001), plate 67