

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 16, 1998, Designation List 294
LP-1999

21 West Street Building, 21 West Street, aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street, and 34-38 Washington Street, Manhattan. Built 1929-31; architects Starrett & Van Vleck.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 15, Lot 22.

On May 19, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 21 West Street Building (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised according to the provisions of Law. The owner of the building and his representative appeared to speak in favor of designation.

Summary

The thirty-one story, brick Art Deco office building at 21 West Street was constructed in 1929-31 to the designs of the prolific architectural firm of Starrett & Van Vleck. With its bold, set-back profile, and finely detailed brickwork suggestive of woven fabric, this building epitomizes the skyscrapers built in New York during the "Jazz Age," when architects and their clients were searching for ways to represent this period which was seen as more fast-paced, mechanized, and altogether different from what had come before. The architects used brick for its varied color and textural interest, derived the massing from the recent zoning laws, and used space in new ways, incorporating a recessed street-level shopping arcade and corner windows. The architectural firm of Starrett & Van Vleck which had designed numerous buildings, including offices, schools, and stores were experienced practitioners of this type of design.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of the Area

The southernmost tip of Manhattan is the oldest inhabited part of the island. It was so densely built up that early in the city's history, the areas adjacent to the shore began to be filled in to create more useable land. The entire block of West Street, from Battery Place to Morris Street is built upon landfill in the Hudson River; its creation occurred in the early years of the nineteenth century, in accordance with the terms of certain water grants made by the city.¹ The earliest occupants of this area purchased standard 25-foot lots and constructed individual houses on them. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the city's increasing population, changes in fashion, as well as changes in types of businesses and their needs meant that residences relocated further uptown, leaving lower Manhattan primarily for business use. Beginning in the early twentieth century, ownership on the block began to change from individuals to realty and warehouse companies. These new owners tended to buy numerous small lots and assemble larger parcels to accommodate new, larger industrial and office buildings.² In 1929, the land on which 21 West Street is located, then occupied by various low, early nineteenth-century buildings, changed hands several times among a series of real estate concerns until it was purchased by the 21 West Street Corporation³ which erected this office building for investment purposes.

The period from 1925 to 1931 was a period of tremendous building and growth in New York City. During 1925, fifteen new office skyscrapers were erected, and during 1926, thirty more towers were built. The years 1929-1930 were the peak years for the construction of office buildings in the Art Deco style⁴ despite the crash of the Stock Market, as those which had been previously planned and financed went forward. Large skyscrapers of those years included the Empire State Building (1929-31, 350 Fifth Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark), the Chrysler Building (1928-30, 405 Lexington Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark), and the Daily News Building (1929-30, 220 East 42nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark) in midtown, and the Manhattan Company Building (1929-30, 40 Wall Street, a designated New York City Landmark), the City Bank-Farmers Trust Company Building (1930-31, 20 Exchange Place, a designated New York City Landmark) and the Irving Trust Building (1929-32,

1 Wall Street) downtown. Infra-structure improvements in various parts of the city served as spurs to new development, such as the demolition of the Second Avenue Elevated which paved the way for Tudor City on the east side, and the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel in lower Manhattan which made travel between Manhattan and Brooklyn easier, while eliminating much east-west traffic in lower Manhattan, near the site of this West Street building.

Art Deco Style⁵

The Art Deco or Modernistic style of architecture which primarily appeared in this country from the mid-1920s through the 1930s, has been called an "avant-garde traditionalist"⁶ approach to creating a contemporary idiom for buildings of the period. As in other self-conscious modern periods, designers and critics of this time expressed the need for a new style which could be deemed appropriate for the period dubbed the "Jazz Age," and all its accompanying technological developments. Much of the architecture that we know as Art Deco however, was based on accepted, standard forms and construction techniques, which were given a modern cast through the use of a characteristic ornament, and a variety of materials, some new and some simply used in a new way. Most of the architects active in this style had received traditional Beaux-Arts training in which the plan and the design of elevations were the first and most important steps in the design of a building. To these initial steps were added design and ornamental ideas which evolved from numerous influences including: the Paris 1925 Exposition International des Arts Decoratifs, the well-publicized designs of the Vienna Secessionists and the Wiener Werkstat, the German Expressionists, as well as American architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, current theatrical set designs, and Mayan and other Native American forms.

The overall shape of tall buildings of this period came about as a result of the 1916 Building Zone Resolution of New York which decreed setbacks at various levels to allow light and air to reach the lower stories of buildings in an increasingly dense city. In 1922, architect and critic Harvey Wiley Corbett (1873-1954) and architectural renderer Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) explored the possibilities of the zoning law in a series of drawings which illustrated progressive stages of design based on the law's restrictions.

These dramatic renderings, published in *Pencil Points* (1923) and in *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929), significantly influenced architects of the period. The drawings and the laws from which they came directed the architects' attention to the building as a whole rather than to a single facade of the structure, thus altering the whole design process. By visualizing buildings "from every possible angle" the architect was transformed from a designer of facades into a "sculptor in building masses."⁷ The zoning law provided architects with a sound, rational basis for the form and appearance of the skyscraper as well as a new source of creativity; historical styles did not seem to express this modern sensibility and consequently, a new "skyscraper style" emerged in the 1920s. Major characteristics of the new style, as generated in part by the zoning restrictions, were sculpted massing, bold setbacks, and ornament subordinated to the overall mass. The dramatic rendering style of Ferriss and others articulated this new modernist aesthetic. In addition, an emphasis on the verticality of the tall building derived from the wide influence of Eliel Saarinen's second-prize winning competition entry for the Chicago Tribune Building in 1923.

At the same time, the surfaces of these new buildings were treated with little depth, literally as a skin around the framework. This idea came from the work of architects of the Chicago School, which in turn can be traced back to the writings of German architect Gottfried Semper (1803-1879). In an essay he included as one of the four basic components of architecture the "enclosure of textiles, animal skins, wattle or any other filler hung from the frame or placed between the supporting poles."⁸ This led to the idea of walls being treated like woven fabric, a technique used on several buildings in New York on this period, including the Film Center Building by Ely Jacques Kahn (1928-29, 630 Ninth Avenue, a designated New York City Interior Landmark). New materials such as metal alloys were used, but brick and terra cotta were favorites because of their wide range of color and textural possibilities. Buildings were conceived as stage sets for daily living and were treated as such, with entrances taking on the form and function of the proscenium, and with walls which were made to look like curtains. Ornament, usually in low relief and concentrated primarily on the entrances, took the form of angular, geometric shapes such as zigzags and zigzags, or simplified and stylized floral patterns, parts of circles, or faceted crystalline shapes. Reaching its zenith in popularity between 1928 and 1931 in New York

City, this new architectural style was used mainly for skyscrapers. By the time of its critical re-assessment in the 1960s and 1970s this "modernistic" style had achieved the popular name of Art Deco after the 1925 Paris Exposition.

21 West Street Building

The office tower at 21 West Street was conceived and constructed during this fertile design and building phase of New York architecture.⁹ Since it was built as a speculative investment, the owners wanted an appealing building to attract tenants, while giving them as large a return on their investment as possible. This type of speculative building coincided with the dominant forces of business and commercial enterprise in the 1920s, and the stylish Art Deco architecture was seen as giving expression to this power.

According to a contemporary report, the building "contains every conceivable device yet invented to contribute to the comfort and convenience of its tenants."¹⁰ These features included numerous high-speed elevators as well as a uniquely decorated lobby which featured a mosaic map of old New York.

The design of this building, as conceived by Starrett & Van Vleck, made use of many of the current popular architectural theories and ideas. The ground floor arcade with storefronts had its precedent in the Barclay-Vesey Building by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin (1923-27, 140 West Street, a designated New York City Landmark) and reflected the interest of designers in non-traditional uses of space and traffic patterns. The arcade at the ground story brought pedestrians within the building itself, rather than just having them pass by, and was an attempt to consider the building in terms of its wider environment and planning ideas. Another innovative use of space can be seen in the corner windows of this building which are uninterrupted by piers, thus allowing more light and air into the offices, as well as better river views. The contemporary press noted that this was the first use of such windows on a commercial building in America.¹¹

The series of set-backs towards the top of this building show the architects' response to New York's 1916 Zoning Resolution and created dramatic massing as the building rose into the sky. The angled corners of some of the parapets exhibit a similarity to the top of Harvey Wiley Corbett's Master Building (1928-29, 310-312 Riverside Drive, a designated New York City Landmark). Corbett's influence can also be seen in the use of colors and designs in the brick cladding on this building, although this treatment also reflects the

ideas of the North German Expressionists who had an important influence on this style of architecture. Architects such as Fritz Hoyer in Hamburg and others in Holland looked back to the early Gothic tradition in the area of northern Germany for its expressive use of brick. In the 21 West Street Building, there are several different colors of brick, used specifically in different parts of the building, such as the light orange brick which frames the darker spandrels between most of the windows. The different colors of brick both create and emphasize the patterns of the walls. The continuous piers which give emphasis to the verticality of the building, are formed of light tan brick, set in an undulating pattern which catches the light and reflects it differently at different times of the day. The interest in expressing the wall of the building as a skin, or as fabric related to a theater curtain is clearly shown by the brick patterns of this building. Many of the spandrels carry horizontal lines and intersect with the vertical lines evident in the piers. At the third story spandrels, these intersections are even indicated by small squares, giving a clear effect of woven fabric. At the parapets of the twenty-first story, the brick is further formed to create the effect of fabric which is draped over the finials and hangs down along the piers.

Starrett & Van Vleck¹²

Goldwin Starrett (1874-1918)

Ernest Allen Van Vleck (1875-1956)

Goldwin Starrett was one of five brothers active in construction and architecture. Born in Lawrence, Kansas, he grew up in Chicago, and attended the engineering school of the University of Michigan, graduating in 1894. Starrett then followed the path of his two older brothers, entering the architectural offices of D.H. Burnham & Co., where he rose to become one of Burnham's principal assistants. In 1898 Goldwin Starrett joined his brother Theodore at the New York firm of George A. Fuller Construction Company, as superintendent and assistant manager. Goldwin, along with brothers Theodore, Ralph, and William A., formed the Thompson-Starrett Construction Company in 1901. During this time he was the architect for several buildings constructed by this firm, including the Algonquin Hotel (1902, a designated New York City Landmark), and the Hahne Department Store in Newark, N.J. Goldwin Starrett spent the next four years with the E. B. Ellis Granite Company in Vermont, supplying this fine white stone to such important

buildings as the Woolworth Building (1910-13, a designated New York City Landmark) and Union Station in Washington. D.C.

In 1907 Ernest Allen Van Vleck joined Starrett to form the firm of Goldwin Starrett & Van Vleck. A native of Bell Creek, Nebraska, Van Vleck received an architectural degree from Cornell University in 1897, followed by a traveling fellowship in Europe. Mr. Van Vleck continued the firm under the same name after Goldwin Starrett's death in 1918. In his obituary he was credited with the design of the firm's later buildings.¹³

About 1908, Orrin Rice was admitted to the architectural partnership, and from 1913 to 1918, William A. Starrett was also a partner in the firm. It then became known as Starrett & Van Vleck and specialized (although not exclusively) in commercial buildings and schools. Among the firm's major New York commissions were: the Lord & Taylor Department Store (1914), Saks Fifth Avenue (1922-24, a designated New York City Landmark), a major expansion of Bloomingdales Department Store (1930), the facade of the Curb (now American Stock) Exchange Building (1930), The Equitable Life Assurance Society Building (393 Seventh Avenue), the Berkeley Building, apartment houses at 820 and 817 Fifth Avenue (located within the Upper East Side Historic District), the Everett Building (1908, a designated New York City Landmark), and numerous school buildings in the New York suburban area.

In their earlier work, such as the Lord & Taylor and Saks stores and the large office buildings such as that for the Equitable Life Assurance Society, Starrett & Van Vleck used a more conservative, Renaissance Revival style, typical of the popular designs of that period. Beginning about 1929, the style of their work changed radically, exemplified by the Bloomingdale's addition, the Brooklyn Abraham & Strauss store, the Curb Exchange, and 21 West Street. The work of this period reflected the modernistic designs seen in contemporary Art Deco skyscrapers with an emphasis on finely executed brickwork and structurally-derived ornament. A link between these two seemingly distinct styles can be found in the National Association Building (8 West 40th Street, demolished).¹⁴ In 1920, critic John Boyd Taylor called this recently-completed mid-block structure "one of the most beautiful business buildings in New York, in its tower-like aspect, exquisite outlines, fineness of scale and beautifully blended color of light tan brick and limestone details that

fuse like a pattern of tapestry in the upper portions."¹⁵ He also made note of the way the brickwork caught the sunlight and made the color appear to change, a quality which is notable on the 21 West Street Building.

Later History

The 21 West Street Building continued to be used as a commercial building, owned by real estate investors, for many years. In 1997, new owners bought the building and at the time of designation were rehabilitating it for residential use.

Description

The building at 21 West Street is thirty-one stories high, with three visible facades: facing West Street, Morris Street, and Washington Street. The building is clad in shades of tan, orange, and purple brick, which is set in a variety of patterns and textures to reflect the light off the surface at different angles, giving a lively effect. Setbacks at several levels reflect the zoning laws in place when the building was constructed and lead up to a two-bay-wide, flat-roofed section at the top of the building. The parapets at the setback levels have additional textured brick designs, as do the spandrels of the three lowest stories. On the other floors, the ornament is created by the varieties of color and texture of the brick and the regular placement of the windows and piers. The piers continue down to street level, creating an open arcade on the ground story. This arcade shelters a series of storefronts and the building's main entrance.

Morris Street Facade

Base - Although this building has always used the address of 21 West Street, the main entrance is near the middle of this ten-bay-wide facade. It is recessed under an arcade which runs along the entire ground story. The underside of the arcade is ornamented with multi-colored mosaics, while bronze panels and bronze light fixtures are placed on the walls and piers. The large display windows of the stores are framed by ornamented, metal moldings. The arcade is supported on squared brick piers which form the base of the piers which continue up the height of the building. The arcade openings are corbelled arches, formed by stepped, bronze panels. In the fifth bay from Washington Street, where the main entrance is located, the arched opening has been changed to make it square and it is framed by polished marble.

In the spandrel area above the arcade, a central chevron design with flanking horizontal lines is created out of bricks of contrasting colors. Except

for the end bays with their corner windows, at the second story, three narrow windows fill each bay. The spandrels between the second and third stories are ornamented by bricks of contrasting colors forming horizontal lines, and each of the eight central bays of the third story have two windows, separated by plain, narrow piers. On the three lowest stories, the main piers are clad with dark brick framing a center section of lighter, undulating brick. The dark brick stops at the spandrel level of the third story, where it also projects slightly, with a different brick pattern. In two of these sections, the brick has been repaired with brick and repointing mortar which does not match the original in color.

Center Section - The pier and window arrangement continues straight up through the building, with two sets of double windows meeting at each corner, uninterrupted by piers. Above the third story, the ten bays are separated by large, continuous piers faced in pale tan brick set in an undulating pattern. Within the eight other bays narrow, flat continuous brick piers separate the two windows located there. A few windows have been boarded up, and those on the eighteenth and twenty-seventh stories have been replaced. Most are original, metal sash, double-hung, four-over-four windows with only horizontal mullions. At the corners, the two windows which meet have fixed sash, separated into four horizontal sections. At the time of designation several additional windows on upper stories were being replaced. The spandrels between most floors are faced in dark brick, framed at the top and bottom by a light-colored brick.

Top - Above the tenth story, the facade steps back one bay on the Washington Street corner. There is another one-bay set-back above the sixteenth story at this corner also. Above the twenty-first story, set-backs occur on both the Washington and the West Street corners. Further set-backs on all corners are also located above the twenty-sixth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth stories. The twenty-first and twenty-sixth stories are given added emphasis by parapets with a distinctive brick pattern, and (at the twenty-first story) finials which finish each main pier. On these parapets, the bricks are laid in patterns and colors to indicate a series of vertical lines, either inset or projecting. Nearby, the brick is laid to simulate fabric draped around the finials and hanging down to the floors below. The spandrels of these upper stories have distinctive horizontal brick patterns as well. In addition, at the twenty-first and twenty-sixth stories, each corner has been truncated, creating a

diagonal with a single bay. The building finishes with a single, flat-topped story, further recessed from the floor below.

West Street Facade

This facade displays all of the same design features as have been described on the Morris Street facade. The ground story, recessed beneath the arcade, has storefronts without a building entrance. The setbacks on this facade occur only above the twenty-first, twenty-sixth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth stories, with a continuation of the same ornament as previously described.

Washington Street Facade

This facade is almost the same as the other two sides of the building. The ground story houses storefronts under the arcade. The first setback

occurs on this facade above the tenth story. Another is located above the sixteenth story. After this they are the same as on the other facades.

A small part of the southern elevation is visible from this side of the building. Approximately two and one-half bays of this elevation show on the

lower stories, but this decreases as the building sets back. These bays continue the same fenestration and ornamentation patterns found on the other facades.

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NOTES

1. "West St. Building Has No Basement," *The New York Times* (Dec. 7, 1930), Sec. II, 18:2.
2. For example, the massive Whitehall Buildings, on the southern end of the block, were built in two stages, beginning in 1902-03, with a nineteen-story section facing Battery Place designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh. J. Hollis Wells of the architectural firm of Clinton & Russell designed a thirty-one story addition, built in 1909-11. According to Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl Condit in *Rise of the New York Skyscraper* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 329, seventeen older structures were demolished to make way for this section of the building.
3. In 1929, this land was identified as lots 22-27. These lots were subsequently merged to become lot 22. See New York County Office of the Register, *Liber Deeds and Conveyances*, Liber 3717, page 317-318, May, 1929 and Liber 3723, page 306, 309, August, 1929 for transactions.
4. In the "Selected List" of Art Deco buildings, in Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style, Art Deco New York* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), there are 27 buildings listed for 1929 and 31 buildings listed for 1930.
5. Much of the information in this section is adapted from: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Barclay-Vesey Building LP-1745* (New York: City of New York, 1991), report prepared by David Breiner; LPC, *The Long Distance Building of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company LP-1747* (New York: City of New York, 1991), report prepared by David Breiner; LPC, *Western Union Building LP-1749* (New York: City of New York, 1991), report prepared by Betsy Bradley; Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "The Art Deco Style," *Skyscraper Style, Art Deco New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); David Gebhard, *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (NY: Preservation Press, 1996), and the Landmarks Preservation Commission research files.
6. Bletter, 41.
7. Corbett, "Architecture," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1929), 275, quoted in LPC, *Barclay-Vesey Building*, 4.
8. Bletter, 61.
9. New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building permit 625-1929, completed February, 1931.
10. "21 West Street Office Building, New York City," *Architecture and Building* 63 (April 1931) 90-91.

11. Warren D. Bruner, "Office Layouts for Tenants," *The Architectural Forum* 52 (June 1930), 905-908. This might have been a fine distinction however, since the Master Building (1928-29, a designated New York City Landmark) by Harvey Wiley Corbett was called out in another article as the first residential skyscraper to use this type of window, and the six-story Thorley Building at 604 Fifth Avenue by William Van Alen was cited as the first building in New York to have its corner columns omitted. In addition, the nearly contemporary Beaux-Arts Apartments (1929-30, 307 and 310 East 44th Street, a designated New York City Landmark) designed by Raymond Hood used corner windows as part of a design based on horizontal emphasis.
12. The information in this section comes primarily from the research files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Starrett & Van Vleck; and LPC, *The Everett Building Designation Report* (LP-1540) (NY: City of New York, 1988).
13. "E. A. Van Vleck, An Architect," *The New York Times* (Aug. 8, 1956).
14. Under the entry for "Goldwin Starrett" in the *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Starrett is given credit for the design of this building. It notes, "On the completion of this building William R. Mead (q.v.) of McKim, Mead & White, remarked: 'He has beaten us all in office building design.'"
15. John Boyd Taylor, "The New York Zoning Resolution and Its Influence Upon Design," *The Architectural Record* 48 (September 1920), 213.

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 21 West Street Building has a special character, and 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 21 West Street Building, constructed in 1929-30, is a particularly fine example of the numerous Art Deco skyscrapers built during this period in New York City; that it has an elegant design by the prolific architectural firm of Starrett & Van Vleck whose numerous other commissions included stores, schools and additional office buildings in this popular modernistic style; that the design of this building is representative of contemporary Art Deco designs, in which architects were trying to create a new stylistic expression which they felt would best represent the Jazz Age; that the use of brick cladding on this building in different colors and textures was influenced by North German Expressionist architects, while the numerous and varied setbacks near the top of the building were the architects' response to New York's 1916 Zoning Resolution; that the architects were innovative in their manipulation of space in such areas as the recessed ground-floor arcade, and their use of corner windows without piers; that the use of intersecting horizontal and vertical patterns of brick, reminiscent of fabric designs, is a typical Art Deco motif, rendered here in a complex and interesting manner which gives much liveliness to the facade; that this building's presence in lower Manhattan serves as a reminder of the vitality present in the design world in the years just before the Great Depression.

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 21 West Street Building, 21 West Street (aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street, and 34-38 Washington Street), and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 15, Lot 22 as its Landmark Site.



21 West Street Building, 21 West Street, aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street,
and 34-38 Washington Street, Manhattan

West Street facade

Photo: Carl Forster



21 West Street Building, 21 West Street, aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street,
and 34-38 Washington Street, Manhattan

Morris Street facade

Photo: Carl Forster



21 West Street Building, 21 West Street, aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street,
and 34-38 Washington Street, Manhattan
Washington Street facade

Photo: Carl Forster



21 West Street, Manhattan
Facade details
Photo: Carl Forster



21 West Street, Manhattan
Details of roofline
Photo: Carl Forster



21 West Street Building, 21 West Street, aka 21-23 West Street, 11-21 Morris Street,
and 34-38 Washington Street, Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 15, Lot 22

Source: *Sanborn Manhattan Landbook*, 1997-98, Plate 2

