

AMERICAN RADIATOR BUILDING (now American Standard Building) excluding the five-story extension, 40 West 40th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1923-24; architect Raymond M. Hood.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 841, Lot 71 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 8, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the American Radiator Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. The representative of the owner spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The American Radiator Building, a striking twenty-three story black and gold tower, is one of the finest and most significant skyscrapers in Manhattan. Designed by Raymond M. Hood and built in 1923-24, the American Radiator Building initiated a new trend in skyscraper design in New York City with its bold cubic massing of forms--often associated with the Art Deco style--and its freedom from the Beaux-Arts classical details that had previously encumbered New York City skyscrapers.

In the period following World War I, architects continued to use classical details and principles of proportion for their skyscraper designs, although these were often ill-adapted to high buildings. Hood's design broke with tradition and utilized new forms.

Raymond Mathewson Hood (1881-1934), who had received architectural training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, worked for the firm of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson--noted for its neo-Gothic architectural designs--in 1906. Hood's first great architectural success came in 1922 when John Mead Howells asked Hood to join him in submitting a design for the Chicago Tribune competition. Hood's winning design was a soaring tower terminating in setback peaks and flying buttresses of neo-Gothic design.

In the early 1920s Hood formed a partnership with J. André Fouilhoux, and the firm received the commission for the American Radiator Building. His 1928 building for the National Radiator Company in London, a subsidiary of the American company, is indicative of Hood's continuing success with the company. Among later notable skyscraper designs by Hood, which further established his reputation, were the Daily News Building, the McGraw-Hill Building, and several buildings in Rockefeller Center for which he was an associated architect.

Heywood Brown, the well-known journalist, wrote a tribute to Hood after his death: "Even if you look down the list through the ages Raymond Hood will stand out among the architects of all time as one who had the fortune and the genius to conduct radical experimentation with mass and color." Hood was posthumously honored with a gold medal from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1940.

The great skyscraper building boom of the 1920s encouraged architects to seek a new means to best express the height of the building. The New York City Zoning Law of 1916, which dictated a series of setbacks as the buildings rose above a certain height, also had its effect on skyscraper design. Moreover, big business saw the skyscraper as a potent tool, as a symbol to express the pride and power of great corporations.

In the American Radiator Building, Hood had ample opportunity to exploit the new possibilities of skyscraper design. He stated that in its form and mass the building was "an honest development of the zoning law." At the same time Hood was able to create a building that would become a striking corporate symbol.

Hood used two elements to make the building a unique architectural expression. One was the unusual design of the tower itself which was a conscious attempt to use new forms and break away from the classical mold. The tower rises up fifteen stories before it begins a series of setbacks, that not only accorded with the Zoning Law, but also contributed to its striking silhouette. Above the fifteenth story the sides are indented at the corners to create small recessed bays in which windows are located. The corners at the front of the building are beveled to give a shaft-like effect to the main portion of the tower. The upper part of the building can be easily viewed from three sides.

The most striking feature of the building is its unusual black and gold color scheme. In 1926, Talbot Hamlin, the noted architectural historian, described it as "the most daring experiment in color in modern buildings yet made in America." To prevent the many windows from looking like black holes and destroying the solid effect of the tower, Hood decided to face the walls with black brick. Gold accents at the tops of the setback pinnacles provide a handsome contrast to the black walls. Hood's interest in color, which is not generally associated with the classical tradition, was also expressed in many of his other buildings. The building was equally dramatic at night when it was floodlighted. It became, in effect, an advertisement for the American Radiator Company. The vivid effects of coloration made it look like a giant glowing coal, even though Hood denied his intention of creating this conscious symbolic effect.

Although the striking silhouette and color scheme catch the viewer's eye from a distance, the fine details of the lower three stories give an especially interesting character to the portion of the building that is immediately visible from the sidewalk. These details were carefully designed to enhance the windows of the ground floor showrooms. These large plate glass windows are enframed by slender, bronze, ribbed shafts reminiscent of the Gothic style but terminating in cubistic pinnacles. The windows are surmounted by a slender continuous modillioned bronze enframing.

The main entrance, placed between the showroom windows, is set within an arched opening and accented by striking bronze details of modified Gothic design. The pinnacles of the framing above the arch are grouped into the same type of cubistic masses that are so prominent a part of the tower setbacks. The deep reveals of the entrance and the panels above and flanking the arch are of gold-colored stone which provide a striking contrast to the polished black granite stone facing of the lower two stories. The second floor is surmounted by a modillioned cornice set on large intricate corbel blocks, which display a variety of figures reminiscent of medieval prototypes--recalling Hood's work of two years earlier on the Chicago Tribune tower.

The third story has a distinctive window bay treatment which sets off the tower rising above it. The bays are flanked by indented brick pilasters which are surmounted by gold pinnacles. The design of these pinnacles anticipates the peaks of the setbacks at the upper portions of the tower. Gold spandrel panels above the windows provide further contrast to the black brick. Intricately designed railings, incorporating S-curved snake designs, shield the bases of the third floor windows.

Although Hood sought to give the main shaft of the tower a massive appearance, it does not have a monolithic quality. Slightly projecting brickwork adds subtle variety to the wall surfaces. The various setbacks of the tower terminate in gold-colored cubistic masses--forms that are often associated with the Art Deco style of architecture. Corbels, cornices and spandrel panels, also of gold, accent various window portions of the setbacks. Crowning the tower is a striking arched and pinnacled form that adds the final golden touch to the silhouette of the building.

The building was regarded as a startling departure from the past. On January 20, 1924, the New York Times described the building: "A daring departure from the conventional in office building construction marks the new home of the American Radiator Building...Unlike any office building in the country, the new structure is faced entirely with black brick with golden colored * * * trimming, worked together to give a rich black and gold decorative effect. The building has already provoked wide discussion in professional circles because of its unique design....An interesting feature is that over 90 percent of the floor space is within 25 feet of the windows."

As a measure of its excellence, the Fifth Avenue Association awarded the American Radiator Building a Silver Medal in 1925. The architectural importance of the building is further attested by a bronze plaque, donated by the Community Trust of New York in 1962, which is placed by the entrance.

The American Radiator Building with its striking forms and colors not only initiated a new trend in skyscraper design in New York City, but also retains its architectural significance today as a unique expression of design that adds grace and elegance to Manhattan.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 American Radiator Building 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, among its important qualities, the American Radiator Building initiated a new trend in skyscraper design in New York City in the 1920s, that the unusual design of the tower and the black and gold color scheme make the building a unique architectural expression that gives its owner a striking corporate symbol, that the form of the building is an imaginative adaptation of the 1916 Zoning Law, that the lower floors are enhanced with rich decorative detail, that the building established the reputation of Raymond M. Hood as an innovative modern architect, that the building was immediately recognized as a daring departure from the past, and that it is one of the finest and most significant skyscrapers in Manhattan.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the American Radiator Building (excluding the five-story extension), 40 West 40th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 841, Lot 71 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.