

CHRYSLER BUILDING, ground floor interior consisting of the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby, main concourse, curved staircases, which extend up to mezzanine and down to basement levels at northern and southern ends of main concourse, elevator halls and elevator cabs, 42nd Street entrance lobby, 43rd Street entrance lobby; and the fixtures and components of these spaces, including but not limited to all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, signs, mail boxes, and metal grilles over ventilation ducts; 405 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1928-30; architect William Van Alen.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1297, Lot 23.

On May 9, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Chrysler Building ground floor interior consisting of the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby, main concourse, curved staircases which extend up to mezzanine and down to basement levels at northern and southern ends of main concourse, elevator halls and elevator cabs, 42nd Street entrance lobby, 43rd Street entrance lobby; and fixtures and components of these spaces including but not limited to all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, signs, mail boxes, and metal grilles over ventilation ducts (Item No. 4). The item was again heard on July 11, 1978 (Item No. 2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and communications supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The ground floor interior of the Chrysler Building which the Commission designates an Interior Landmark, has been called one of the great Art Deco spaces in New York City.¹ Built in 1928-30 according to the designs of architect William Van Alen, it provides an elegant and dramatic entrance to one of New York's great skyscrapers which had been dedicated by Walter P. Chrysler to "world commerce and industry."² A variety of design features create this effect and enhance its progressive image.

HISTORY OF CONSTRUCTION

The Chrysler Building had its beginnings in an office building project for William H. Reynolds, a real-estate developer and promoter and former New York State senator. Reynolds had acquired a long-term lease in 1921 on a parcel of property at Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street owned by the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. In 1927 architect William Van Alen was hired to design an office tower to be called the Reynolds Building for the site. Publicized as embodying new principles in skyscraper design,³ the projected building was to be 67 stories high rising 808 feet, and it was "to be surmounted by a glass dome, which when lighted from within, will give the effect of a great jewelled sphere."⁴ In October, 1928, however, the office building project and the lease on the site were taken over by Walter P. Chrysler, head of the Chrysler Corporation, who was seeking to expand his interests into the real estate field.

Walter Percy Chrysler (1875-1940), one of America's foremost automobile manufacturers, was a self-made man who worked his way up through the mechanical and manufacturing aspects of the railroad business before joining the Buick Motor Company as works manager in 1912.

Because of his success in introducing new processes and efficiencies into the automobile plant, he rose quickly through the administrative ranks of General Motors (which had absorbed Buick) before personality conflicts with William C. Durant, head of General Motors, forced Chrysler to leave. In 1921 he reorganized Willys-Overland Company, and then took over as chairman of the reorganization and management committee of the Maxwell Motor Company, eventually assuming the presidency. This enabled Chrysler to introduce in 1924 the car bearing his name which presented such innovations as four-wheel hydraulic breaks and a high compression motor. Over 50 million dollars worth of cars were sold the first year, and in 1925, the Maxwell Motor Company became the Chrysler Corporation. Dodge Brothers was acquired in 1928 giving the Chrysler Corporation additional manufacturing facilities, a famous line of cars, and putting it in a position to challenge the leadership of Ford and General Motors. By 1935, when Chrysler retired from the presidency of the Chrysler Corporation to become chairman of the board, the company was second in the automobile industry in volume of production.⁵

It was while Chrysler was aggressively expanding his corporation in 1928 that he took over the office building project from Reynolds. In his autobiography, Chrysler said that he had the building constructed so that his sons would have something to be responsible for.⁶ He could not have been unaware, however, that the building would become a personal symbol and further the image of the Chrysler Corporation--even though no corporate funds were used in its financing or construction. To that end Chrysler worked with architect William Van Alen to make the building, including the ground floor interior, a powerful and striking design.

William Van Alen (1882-1954) studied at Pratt Institute before beginning his architectural career in the office of Clarence True, a speculative builder. Several years later while continuing his studies at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in the atelier of Donn Barber, Van Alen entered the office of Clinton & Russell as a designer. In 1908 he won the Paris Prize of the Beaux-Arts Institute and entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Atelier Laloux. According to architect Francis S. Swales, "His work at the Ecole indicated that the training was providing him with the mental freedom necessary to think independently, instead of merely the usual school-cargo of elements of architecture and a technique of composition by rules."⁷ Returning to New York in 1912 he introduced the concept of "garden" apartments and also designed the Albermarle Building, a skyscraper without cornices. In the 1920s he became known for his innovative shopfront designs and for a series of restaurants for the Child's chain. With the Chrysler Building, Van Alen was able to apply modern principles of design to the skyscraper, but at the same time created such a striking image that critic Kenneth Murchison dubbed him "the Ziegfield of his profession."⁸ In the 1930s he pioneered in prefabricated housing designs although they were never widely produced. Van Alen served for four years in the 1940s as director of sculpture for the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, and he was a member of the American Institute of Architects and the National Academy of Design.

Work began on the Chrysler Building on October 15, 1928, when Chrysler acquired the lease with clearance of the site. Construction proceeded rapidly; foundations to a depth of 69 feet were completed early in 1929, and the steel framework was completed by the end of September of that year. The design of the building, however, was altered from that for Reynolds. Chrysler, in his autobiography, credits himself for suggesting that it be taller than the 1000-foot Eiffel Tower.⁹ The design of the crowning dome was also changed, and the addition of a spire, which the architect called a "vertex," made the Chrysler at 1046 feet the tallest building in the world at the time. Kenneth Murchison fancifully depicts Chrysler urging Van Alen to win the race to construct the world's tallest building.¹⁰ Van Alen himself had personal reasons for achieving this goal, as a former partner, H. Craig Severance, was constructing the Bank of Manhattan, 40 Wall Street, at the same time with the aim of making it the world's tallest skyscraper. Thinking that the Chrysler Building would be only

925 feet high, Severance added a 50-foot flagpole to his building making it 927 feet. Meanwhile, Van Alen designed the 185-foot spire which would make the Chrysler Building the tallest. The spire was fabricated, then delivered to the building in five sections, and assembled secretly at the 65th floor. In November, 1929, it was finally raised into position by a 20-ton derrick through a fire tower in the center of the building, then riveted into place, the whole operation taking about 90 minutes. This engineering feat captured the popular imagination as well as that of professionals, and it helped to further the progressive image of the Chrysler Building. However, the Chrysler lost its height distinction two years later with the construction of the Empire State Building.

The first tenants moved into the Chrysler Building in April, 1930, even though construction was not completed. Formal opening ceremonies were held on May 27, 1930, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the 42nd Street Property Owners and Merchants Association. A bronze tablet was placed in the lobby of the building "in recognition of Mr. Chrysler's contribution to civic advancement." ¹¹ It may still be seen in the 42nd Street entrance lobby. The building was considered finished in August, 1930, but curiously, the completion date in the records of the Manhattan Buildings Department is February 19, 1932. ¹²

The Chrysler Building and Art Deco

Walter P. Chrysler wanted a progressive image and a personal symbol. Van Alen strove to create such an image using the tenets of modernism as he interpreted them. In so doing he designed a building which has come to be regarded as one of the outstanding examples of Art Deco architecture. The ground floor interior is one of the great Art Deco spaces in the country.

The term Art Deco, which is also referred to by several different names such as the Style Moderne and Modernistic, is adopted from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes--an important European influence on the American Art Deco style--held in Paris in 1925.

In the period following the first World War, architects in Europe and the United States had begun to simplify traditional design forms and to use new industrial materials in innovative ways in order to characterize the modern age. The Art Deco style seemed to lend itself particularly well to skyscraper design because the skyscraper, more than any other building type, epitomized progress, innovation, and a new modern age. Although the Art Deco style was short-lived, it coincided with a great building boom at the end of the 1920s in New York. The many skyscrapers which were erected in the Art Deco style gave New York and its skyline a characteristic and romantic image, popularized in theater and films, which persisted until the next great building boom of the early 1960s. The Art Deco ground floor interiors of these skyscrapers were equally effective, giving an air of drama to the act of entering a building. In the Chrysler Building and its ground floor interior, Van Alen used a variety of materials, techniques, and design forms which are characteristic of Art Deco.

Three entrances provide access to the ground floor interior of the building--one each from 42nd and 43rd Streets and Lexington Avenue. The three entrance lobbies lead into the triangular main concourse with two massive octagonal piers. The shape of the concourse and the placement of the piers help to channel traffic efficiently to the four elevator halls. In his autobiography, Walter P. Chrysler claimed that he asked the architect to redesign the lobby so that "when people come into a big building they...sense a change, get a mental lift that will put them in a frame of mind to transact their business."¹³ The triangular concourse was the result.

Rich materials, a characteristic feature of the Art Deco style, enhance the spatial effects and enrich the experience of entry. The walls of the entrance lobbies and main concourse as well as the octagonal piers are faced with a type of red Moroccan marble known as Rouge

Flamme. The marble is distinguished by veriegated markings in tones of buff. Complementing the marble on the walls is the yellow Sienna travertine floor set in diagonal patterns--another subtle directional device to guide the user of the building. Shop windows opening onto the entrance lobbies and main concourse as well as directory boards are elegantly framed in "Nirosta" steel, a kind of rust-resistant, chromium nickel steel, manufactured for the first time in the United States specifically for the Chrysler Building according to a German formula from Krupp. Handsome crenellations of "Nirosta" steel--in characteristic Art Deco forms--surmount these enframements. The entrance doors, as well as the service doors, are also of "Nirosta" steel. Set between the service doors opposite the Lexington Avenue entrance is an information booth of red marble with "Nirosta" steel back rising from it.

One of the most striking and dramatic features of this interior is the lighting system. Vertically-placed panels of polished Mexican onyx are placed in a stepped pattern above the elevator halls and the three street entrances. Vertical reflector troughs of "Nirosta" steel set with lamps are placed in front of the onyx panels. As the light is reflected off these panels it is given an amber glow. Set in front of the lights marking the entrances are vertically-placed letters forming the names of the streets outside. The octagonal piers in the main concourse also provide a light source. V-shaped recesses lined with onyx contain the same type of vertical reflector troughs and lamps as those over the entrances and elevator halls.

On the ceiling spanning the main concourse and the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby is a large mural by artist Edward Trumbull. The use of such murals was a favorite device of Art Deco designers. In addition to heightening the dramatic effect and enriching the experience of interior spaces, they also were a means of achieving the Art Deco ideal of the unity of design.

Edward Trumbull (1884-1968) was one of the foremost American muralists of his generation. As a student at the Art Student's League in New York he studied with Robert Reid; in London from 1906 to 1912, he was a student of Frank Brangwyn. Returning to the United States, he was commissioned to do nine panels for the Heinz Administration Building in Pittsburgh. Among the important commissions of his career, in addition to the Chrysler Building, were murals for: the Pennsylvania State Building at the Panama-Pacific Exposition, the Graybar Building, the Oyster Bar and Restaurant at Grand Central Station, the waiting rooms in Union Station in Washington, D.C., the dining rooms in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Building, the cafeteria of the Kress store at 444 Fifth Avenue, and a branch office of the Union Dime Savings Bank at Madison Avenue and 39th Street. For Inland Steel, he painted "The Story of Steel" which was presented to the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. In 1932 Trumbull was appointed Color Director for the art program of Rockefeller Center to supervise more than 40 murals and 50 sculptural pieces.

The mural in the Chrysler Building depicts "the vision, human energy and engineering ability which made possible the structure."¹⁴ The composition is divided into several parts, each with its own theme. A triangular panel placed over the information booth displays a large muscular Atlas figure. Radiating out from this are three bands which follow the triangular form of the main concourse. The first, showing a series of abstract patterns and lines, was supposed to symbolize primitive, natural forces. The second, depicting construction workers and techniques, has a specific analogy to the construction of the Chrysler Building. The third shows the development of modern transportation with an emphasis on airplanes. Extending outward over the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby is a large panel with a rendering of the building as seen from the exterior. The warm tones of the mural harmonize well with the rich colors of the marble and onyx below

The four elevator halls are lined with the same red marble as the entrance halls and main concourse. The doors of the twenty-eight passenger elevators are a strikingly handsome Art Deco design, displaying an abstract lotus pattern executed in metal and inlaid wood veneers. The elevator cabs are of four design types. All are abstract patterns, again executed in a variety of inlaid wood veneers. The woods include Japanese ash, English gray hardwood, Oriental walnut, dye ebonized wood, stairwood, Cuban plum pudding, myrtle burl, and curly maple. Ceiling fans in the elevator cabs are of metal, also executed in striking abstract designs. The use of such rich materials to create a luxurious and dramatic effect is characteristic of Art Deco.

The curved staircases at the north and south ends of the main concourse lead to the mezzanine at the second floor and to the basement. The use of highly polished black marble on the curved walls heightens the dramatic effect of these staircases. The railings, which follow the curve of the stairs, are of "Nirosta" steel, and the inner railings have zigzag motifs characteristic of Art Deco design set between the balusters. At ground floor level, the railings terminate in massive red marble newel posts. The steps are of gray and black terrazzo. Handsome molded glass light fixtures hang from the ceilings above the staircases. These ceilings are finished with aluminum leaf.

All features of the ground floor interior combine together to create one of the great Art Deco spaces in the city and country. The elements of the design and the rich materials are not only characteristic of the Art Deco style but are also some of the finest examples of their type. All appropriately enhance the progressive image of one of New York's finest office buildings.

The Chrysler Building and the Image of Progress

When completed the Chrysler Building was praised as "an expression of the intense activity and vibrant life of our day" and as "teem[ing] with the spirit of modernism, ...the epitome of modern business life, ...stand[ing] for progress in architecture and in modern building methods." ¹⁵ Walter P. Chrysler had sought to create the most desirable office building of the day:

The Chrysler Building is dedicated to world commerce and industry. It was created with a desire to meet the demand of business executives of today who, with their intense activities, must have the most favorable office surroundings and conditions.

The need for abundant light and air resulted in a building of fine proportions and great height. The importance of accessibility and transit facilities dictated the location. The desire for the utmost in conveniences determined the inclusion of unusual facilities of every necessity contributing to the contentment and satisfaction of the business man in his office home.

As an environment in which work may be accomplished efficiently and in comfort, it is believed the finished structure establishes a new ideal--one which will stand as a measure of comparison for office buildings of the future.

The Chrysler Building is therefore dedicated as a sound contribution to business progress. ¹⁶

The building had a number of innovative and desirable features. The soundproofed office partitions were of steel made in interchangeable sections so that the arrangement of any office suite could be changed quickly and conveniently. Under-floor duct systems carried wiring for telephone and electric outlets. The elevators were not only beautiful in design but also, specifically at Chrysler's instruction, capable of speeds of 1000 feet per minute although city codes in effect in 1930 only allowed 700 feet per minute. The building also had three of the longest continuous elevator shafts in the world. To enhance public access to the

building, an underground arcade led to the IRT subway system. The connection was strongly opposed by the IRT, but Chrysler prevailed and the passageway was built at his expense. In the dome was the private Cloud Club, which still exists, and, in the very topmost floor, a public observatory. On display was Walter P. Chrysler's box of handmade tools, the emblem of his enterprise and personal success. The observatory has been closed for many years.

Conclusion

Critics such as Lewis Mumford who favored the International Style denigrated the Chrysler Building for its "inane romanticism, ...meaningless voluptuousness, ...and void symbolism,"¹⁷ but it was these qualities which captured the popular imagination and helped make it one of the most famous buildings in New York. We can appreciate the comments of the editor of Architectural Forum who wrote:

It stands by itself, something apart and alone. It is simply the realization, the fulfillment in metal and masonry, of a one-man dream, a dream of such ambition and such magnitude as to defy the comprehension and the criticism of ordinary men or by ordinary standards.¹⁸

The Chrysler Building with its ground floor interior remains one of New York's finest office buildings--the elements of its design capturing the eye and imagination of the viewer. The total design of the ground floor interior helped to carry out Walter P. Chrysler's aim of dedicating the building to world commerce and industry. With its dramatic effects, elegant materials, and striking ornamental details, the ground floor interior of the Chrysler Building is an outstanding example of the Art Deco style--among the finest in the city and the country.

FOOTNOTES

1. Don Vlack, Art Deco Architecture in New York, 1920-1940, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), p.114.
2. "The Chrysler Building," Architecture and Building, 62 (August 1930), 222.
3. "Final Sketch of the Reynolds Building, New York," American Architect, 134 (August 20, 1928), 269.
4. Ibid.
5. "Walter Percy Chrysler," Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement 2, p.104; New York Times, August 19, 1940, p.1.
6. Walter P. Chrysler, Life of an American Workman, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1950), p.197.
7. Francis S. Swales, "Draftsmanship and Architecture as Exemplified by the Work of William Van Alen," Pencil Points, 10 (August 1929), 519.
8. Kenneth M. Murchison, "The Chrysler Building As I See It," American Architect, 138 (September 1930), 24.
9. Chrysler, p. 197.
10. Murchison, pp.29-30.
11. New York Times, May 28, 1930, p.13.

12. New York City Buildings Department: Manhattan, Docket Books, New Building 92-1928, and Folder for Block 1297, Lot 23, New Building permit 92-1928.
13. Chrysler, p.198.
14. Architecture and Building, 62 (August 1930), 224.
15. Eugene Clute, "The Chrysler Building," Architectural Forum, 53 (October 1930), 406; Murchison, p.78.
16. Quoted in: The Chrysler Building, (New York: Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company and Edward S. Gordon, Inc., 1978), frontispiece.
17. Lewis Mumford, "Notes on Modern Architecture," The New Republic, 66 (March 18, 1931), 120.
18. "Criticism of the Chrysler Building," Architectural Forum, 53 (October 1930), 410.

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 Chrysler Building ground floor interior consisting of the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby, main concourse, curved staircases which extend up to mezzanine and down to basement levels at northern and southern ends of main concourse, elevator halls and elevator cabs, 42nd Street entrance lobby, 43rd Street entrance lobby; and the fixtures and components of these spaces including but not limited to all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, signs, mail boxes, and metal grilles over ventilation ducts 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 Ground Floor Interior of the Chrysler Building is an outstanding example of Art Deco design; that the red Moroccan marble, "Nirosta" steel, and the lighting are important elements in the design; that an outstanding feature of the Ground Floor Interior is the ceiling mural by artist Edward Trumbull depicting various aspects of man's progress in transportation and construction technology as well as the Chrysler Building itself; that the elevator cabs and doors are of an exceptional and elegant design incorporating many unusual and variegated woods; that the entrance lobbies and main concourse were designed by architect William Van Alen to efficiently channel pedestrians into the building, thus furthering the image of the Chrysler Building as a progressive model for modern business life; that the total design helped carry out Walter P. Chrysler's aim of dedicating the building to world commerce and industry; and that the Ground Floor Interior of the Chrysler Building is an exceptional and outstanding office building space in New York City and the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Chrysler Building, ground floor interior consisting of the Lexington Avenue entrance lobby, main concourse, curved staircases which extend up to mezzanine and down to basement levels at northern and southern ends of main concourse, elevator halls and elevator cabs, 42nd Street entrance lobby, 43rd Street entrance lobby; and the fixtures and components of these spaces including but not limited to all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, signs, mail boxes, and metal grilles over ventilation ducts; 405 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1297, Lot 23, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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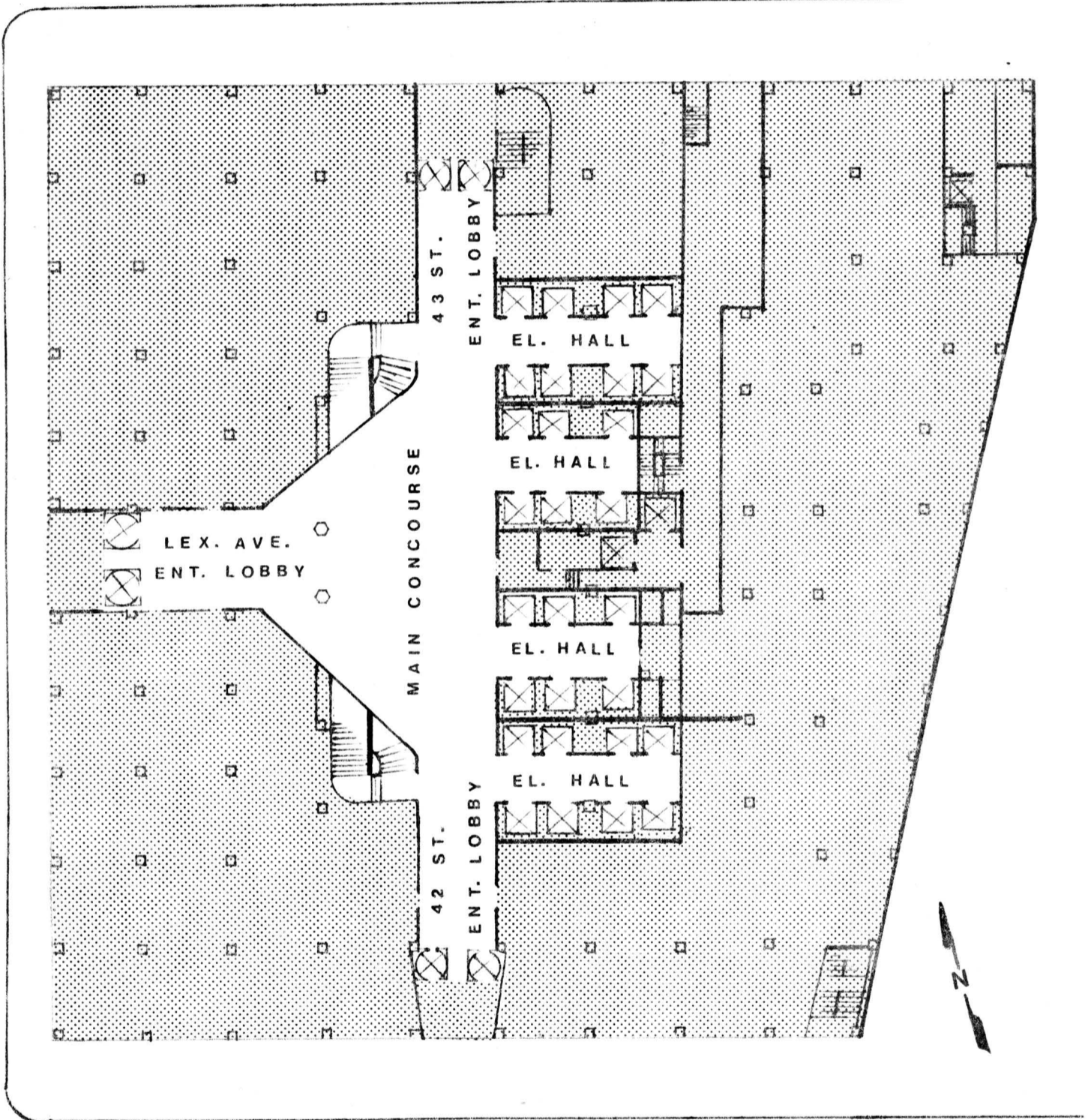
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 GROUND FLOOR INTERIOR
 405 LEXINGTON AVENUE

E A S T 4 3 r d S T

L E X I N G T O N A V E N U E

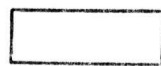


E A S T 4 2 n d S T

Ground Floor Plan

not drawn to
 scale

Key to Areas



Designated



Not Designated