

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 13, 1989, Designation List 217
LP-1530

METROPOLITAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY TOWER, 1 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1907-09; architect Napoleon LeBrun & Sons (Pierre L. Le Brun). Renovated 1960-64, Lloyd Morgan & Eugene V. Meroni.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 853, Lot 1 in part consisting of that portion of the lot bounded by a line extending easterly along the building line on East 24th Street to a point 84'-10 1/2" from the intersecting point with the Madison Avenue building line, then southerly 74'-8" along a line parallel with the Madison Avenue building line to a point within Lot 1, then westerly 84'-10 1/2" along a line parallel with the East 24th Street building line to a point on the Madison Avenue building line, then northerly 74'-8" along the Madison Avenue building line to the point of beginning.

On January 8, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower and the proposed designation of the related Landmarks Site (Item No. 5). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation; one letter was received in support of designation. No one spoke against the proposed designation. The owners took no position at the public hearing but subsequently expressed support for the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower, designed by Pierre L. LeBrun of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, is a major and memorable evocation of the world-famous campanile in Venice's Saint Mark's Square (Plate 1). Built in 1907-09, the Metropolitan Life tower was for a time, the tallest building in the world. It is also the final and crowning work of a firm, father and sons, whose combined production spanned almost seventy years of American architecture. The tower was extensively renovated (1960-64) by Lloyd Morgan & Eugene V. Meroni, Architects, successors to Leonard Schultze & Associates, who retained the tower's major features -- monumental clock faces, setback arcade, pyramidal spire, cupola, chime and lantern -- as well as its original entasis (Plate 2). The tower's site, opposite historic Madison Square Park at 24th Street, is one of the finest settings in the city. For the past eighty years the tower has been both a significant silhouette on the Manhattan skyline and a corporate symbol; the lantern at its top has been called "The light that never fails."

Madison Square Park - a brief history

Few buildings in New York enjoy the spacious and verdant setting Madison Square Park provides the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company home office complex and tower. The park itself had been included by the Street Commissioners in their 1811 Map of Manhattan nearly 180 years ago. Then the park was a reserve of almost 239 acres; it was not pared down to its

present seven acres until 1844.¹ Even as the park's size diminished, its historical significance increased; decades before the architecture of commerce came to dominate its borders, Madison Square possessed a rich civic, military, social and cultural history. With the onset of the War of 1812, President James Madison mobilized troops and the site, a temporary home to upstate volunteers, became "Camp Madison," a likely source for the square's name. Today only commemorative monuments remain, echos of American military victories. The Fifth Avenue Hotel, a Republican Party stronghold, opened in 1858 and the park opposite became a pantheon of the party's most revered public servants from New York; with bronze statues of Secretary William H. Seward, Senator Roscoe Conkling, and President Chester A. Arthur.² To the east, Madison Avenue, insulated by the park, became a fashionable residential enclave. On the corner of 24th Street was the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (1854). From its pulpit the Reverend Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst marshaled the moral indignation that ended Boss Tweed's domination of municipal government.

In the 1880s and 1890s the Madison Square area became a theatrical center. Steele McKay built the Madison Square Theatre in 1880 and the Lyceum Theatre in 1885. In 1890 McKim, Mead & White's famous Madison Square Garden (demolished in 1924) opened at the northeast corner of Madison and East 26th Street on the site where P.T. Barnum formerly had his Monster Classical & Geological Hippodrome, and Gilmore's Garden had sheltered boxing demonstrations and the annual National Horseshow.³

In the same year Joseph F. Knapp, the president of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, initiated the first of many property acquisitions the company would make on Madison Square when the houses on the Square's east side were purchased. With the exception of Dr. Parkhurst's church, the whole block front was demolished to build the company's new headquarters, an eleven-story office building faced with Tuckahoe marble, designed by Napoleon LeBrun & Sons. Considered in retrospect, it was the entertainment industry's encroachment that prompted residents to move further uptown, but it was the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's new and solid presence which re-stabilized Madison Square's eastern border. In 1896 the State of New York erected the marble courthouse for the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court (James Brown Lord, architect), a designated New York City Landmark, on the northeast corner of Madison and 25th Street. Knapp's vision of the square prepared the site for the next chapter in its history, the growth of corporate giants.

History of Metropolitan Life

Metropolitan Life began as the National Union Life & Limb Insurance Company in 1863, but was split into two separate companies, the National Life Insurance Company and the National Travellers Insurance Company, in 1866. In 1868 the company's charter and its name were changed to Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.⁴ At this time the life insurance industry in this country was already dominated by several well-established companies. The agency system was well-developed and the principal policy plans of today -- straight life, endowment, annuity and term insurance -- were already in use.⁵

Metropolitan Life's first president, Dr. John Richardson Dow, who served from 1866 until his death in 1870, was a retired physician of ample

means. Like Dow, the majority of the stockholders and directors were Brooklyn residents, well known to one another. Metropolitan Life was first located in offices at 243 Broadway. In 1870 the company moved to 319 Broadway. It was at this time that the Hildise Bund, a sizeable society of German-speaking wage earners organized about 1870, approached Metropolitan Life seeking coverage for its membership. The Bund collected weekly premiums from its members and transmitted them quarterly to Metropolitan Life. It was this German business which pulled Metropolitan Life through the Panic of 1873.

Joseph Fairchild Knapp, Metropolitan Life's second president from 1871 until his death in 1891, had formerly been a principal in the Major & Knapp Engraving, Manufacturing and Lithographing Company. Metropolitan Life's growth required more space and in 1876 the company leased the five-story Wilson B. Hunt building at the corner of Park Place and Church Street (now demolished). In 1879 Knapp initiated industrial insurance, an area previously ignored in the United States. Industrial insurance had been introduced by the Prudential Assurance Company of London; Knapp was so impressed with Prudential's success that he imported English agents to train Metropolitan Life's employees.⁶

Metropolitan Life and its Home Offices

As well as mastering the insurance business, Knapp appears to have understood the value of architectural imagery. Knapp must have been aware of the new Second Empire style Equitable Life Building (1868-70) on Broadway. Knapp commissioned the architectural firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Son to undertake the renovation of Metropolitan Life's new home on Park Place. LeBrun had demonstrated his skill in this fashionable commercial style already. In 1870 LeBrun won the Masonic Lodge competition with his solid Second Empire design. LeBrun brought the two simple Italianate elevations of the Wilson B. Hunt building up to date. By re-organizing the ground floor and adding a two-story pavilioned mansard, he established the strong symmetry characteristic of this style. This commission was the first of many that Metropolitan Life awarded to the LeBrun firm. In 1890 Metropolitan Life purchased the site at 1 Madison Avenue, then so far uptown that no office building had yet been constructed there. Knapp turned again to the LeBrun firm. This eleven-story office block contained a delicately carved program of Italian Renaissance motifs which enriched the reveals and spandrels of windows and doorways.⁷ This new building, on its corner site opposite Madison Square Park, did much to establish Metropolitan Life in the eyes and the mind of the public.

John Rogers Hegeman, Metropolitan Life's third president from 1891 until his death in 1919, was an even more avid builder than his predecessor Joseph Knapp. He, too, recognized the value of an impressive home office. During his tenure, the company expanded its complex to the whole block, building the great tower, and initiating its incursion to the adjacent block to the north. In 1894 lots on the south side of East 24th Street, immediately behind the Presbyterian church and tangent to the new home office building, were purchased and subsequently so were lots along East 23rd Street. A twelve-story addition was constructed on 24th Street. By 1902 the company owned the Lyceum Theatre site and was purchasing the northeast corner of the block. In 1904-05 the new buildings, all from plans prepared by the LeBrun firm, completed the block; except for the

northwest corner where the church stood. Finally, on April 5, 1906, the church site was secured. Dr. Parkhurst had objected to selling, but when Metropolitan Life offered him the more spacious site just across East 24th Street as well, he and his Session accepted. The old church was razed and Metropolitan Life's 700 foot tower was begun, the tallest building in the world, and the LeBrun's' final, crowning achievement.

By 1909 all eight of these buildings (the tower included) -- all of Block 853 -- were complete (Plate 3). Their exterior elevations, adaptations of the building commissioned by Knapp (1890), presented broad, unified eleven- and twelve-story facades along Madison and Park Avenues and 23rd and 24th Streets. While these buildings were linked by a major corridor running east and west from avenue to avenue and minor north-south corridors to both streets, each building had its own elevator shafts. At least six courts -- generous light wells -- brought light and air to the interior spaces of this block-size warren. As work spaces expanded, the thick party walls may have become obstructions. By the mid-1920s a more centralized structure was needed to house the increasing divisions of a large corporation the size of Metropolitan Life.

Begun in 1952, Morgan & Meroni's reconstruction of the home office complex, or south building as it is now called, and the tower, took place in three stages: the northeastern portion -- an angled northwest to southeast diagonal dividing the block, from the tower to the corner of Park Avenue and 23rd Street, for the most part following the system of internal light courts; the southwestern portion; and the tower. Business continued in the old spaces before demolition and in the new as they became accessible. The new home office is a fourteen-story, skeletal steel structure with generous setbacks, faced with ashlar limestone. Though conservative in its conception, stylistically Lloyd Morgan's design draws upon aspects of the Moderne -- the symmetry of both the building's mass and its window bays and entrances -- as well as upon the tenets of the International Style. (This building is not included within this designation.)

The Architects

Two architectural firms are responsible for the appearance of the Metropolitan Life tower today: Napoleon LeBrun & Sons and Lloyd Morgan & Eugene V. Meroni, Architects. The LeBrun firm served as architects to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company from 1876 until 1909. Morgan & Meroni received the commission to reconstruct the whole of the original home office complex and to "modernize" the tower in the early 1950s.

Pierre Lassus LeBrun (1846-1924) has not received the attention that he is due, perhaps in part, because the name of the firm, Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, made him, and later his brother Michel, all but anonymous. Little is known of Pierre's formal architectural education. Apparently he was imbued with his father's classical preferences. Napoleon Eugene Charles LeBrun (1821-1901) was born to French emigrant parents in Philadelphia. At fifteen years of age he was placed in the office of classicist Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), where he remained for six years. LeBrun began his own practice in 1841 in Philadelphia but moved to New York in 1864 where the choice in 1870 of his Second Empire style Masonic Temple competition submission did much to establish his reputation.⁸ In the same

year his son Pierre joined him and the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Son. Like his father, Pierre LeBrun was not so much an innovator as he was an adherent to a stylistic consistency at a time of stylistic transition and flux. With but few exceptions this preference was demonstrated in the work of both generations. Father and sons were active members of the new American Institute of Architects.

The firm's work can be divided into two periods, an early one spanning the 1870s into the mid-80s and a later one from the later 1880s until the firm's dissolution in 1909. The earlier is robust. The later work was significantly different. Building elevations became more planar; walls were no longer load bearing. Design of ornament relied solely upon historic prototypes. The first Metropolitan Life building was an example of a new building type given stylistic character through the application of ornament, as is LeBrun's still-extant Home Insurance Company (1893-94) facade on Broadway above Murray Street. This conventional, tall office building is enhanced by the Renaissance style triumphal arch motif applied to its first three stories. The tall, pyramidal copper roof is fronted by a three-story dormer, intelligently crafted from some study storage collection of Renaissance motifs.

While little is known of Pierre LeBrun's architectural education, his three trips abroad in the service of the Willard Architectural Commission are documented. Levi Hale Willard, a wealthy businessman, died in 1883 leaving to the newly founded Metropolitan Museum of Art \$100,000 toward the creation of a collection of models and casts illustrative of the art and science of architecture, to be made under the direction of a commission chosen by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In his will Willard nominated Napoleon LeBrun as president of the Commission; Willard, a friend, had often discussed with LeBrun the need to cultivate a popular taste for architecture. Pierre LeBrun was appointed the Commission's purchasing agent. The younger LeBrun visited the significant sites and met with the suppliers of casts in Paris, Munich and Rome.

The historical accuracy characterizing the ornament of the LeBrun's' later work appears to have been inspired by the Willard Collection.⁹ Surely, Pierre LeBrun was the partner responsible for the firm's designs in the later phase. Filial duty and affection prompted Pierre and his brother Michel to maintain the firm's name as their father had proudly amended it, first in 1870 and again in 1892. Only someone of Pierre's generation could readily understand the requirements of tall building design; only someone with the historical knowledge gained in acquiring the Willard bequest could know how to appropriately integrate historic detail with a new building type. There is every reason to attribute the designs for these later buildings -- and certainly that of the Metropolitan Life Tower -- to Pierre L. LeBrun.

In a 1914 history of the company there is a chapter on architecture, and the architecture of the tower in particular. It is written with such authority that the reader may assume that the anonymous author is Pierre LeBrun himself.¹⁰ He indicates that the resolution of a skyscraper style depends upon the utilization and reshaping of the elements of past styles. Size, he points out, is the only departure from precedent. To justify the propriety of his tower design he presents two comparisons, a brief survey of the proportions of height to width of towers, his and earlier monuments,

and a second historic survey of the proportions of the height of towers to the mass of adjacent structures.¹¹

The architects responsible for the Metropolitan Life tower renovation in 1960-64 are Lloyd Morgan and Eugene V. Meroni, formerly of Leonard Schultze & Associates. The tower work -- the architects called it a "modernization" -- was but a part of the complete rebuilding of the home office which commenced in 1951.¹²

Lloyd Morgan (1892-1970) graduated from the Pratt Institute in 1911 and pursued subsequent study at the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was awarded the Paris Prize in 1921 and spent the next five years in Europe, studying for a time at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In 1926 Morgan joined the firm of Schultze & Weaver which specialized in the design of hotel and office buildings and was made a partner three years later. Outside the office he served as an acting professor of architecture at Yale and New York University and conducted his own classes -- the Atelier Morgan -- for students who could not afford to attend architectural school. Upon S.F. Weaver's death in 1940, the firm became Leonard Schultze & Associates.

Morgan is credited with designing some of the firm's best known buildings: the Waldorf-Astoria, the Barbizon Plaza and the Pierre Hotel in New York; the Miami Biltmore and the Roney Plaza in Miami Beach. Morgan also designed suburban housing projects, Parklambrea in Los Angeles, Parkmerced in San Francisco, and Parkfairfax near Washington, D.C., all for Metropolitan Life. Eugene V. Meroni graduated from the Mechanics' and Tradesmen's Institute and trained at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design.¹³ It seems Morgan was the partner responsible for the design of Metropolitan Life. At Schultze's death in 1951, the firm became Lloyd Morgan & Eugene V. Meroni, Architects.¹⁴

Building Design

John Rogers Hegeman, Metropolitan Life's third president, is generally credited with conceiving the idea of the tower; different versions of his inspirations are recorded and to each a possible date and different set of circumstances can be attached. (Behind them all stands the remembered silhouette of the tall steeple of the Presbyterian Church, sharply rising against the sky, a sharp vertical at 24th Street.) The first version is based upon a composite image attributed to Hegeman himself. Sometime after the Home Life Insurance Building (1893-94) was finished, Hegeman clipped an illustration of its facade and juxtaposed it to the left of an illustration of the new home office, a hint to his architects of what he had in mind.¹⁵

In the second version, a published description of the tower as it neared completion, it is indicated that a "tower or campanile" had been part of the original plan for this corner.¹⁶ Though it appears that a tower was not on Joseph Knapp's immediate building agenda, a tower became an important component of Hegeman's. The company's aggressive campaign to acquire the remainder of the block, after its initial base was secure, is well-documented. But at what stage of the home office's enlargement a tower was projected, or even what form it was to assume, is not.

In his dedicatory remarks in 1909, John Hegeman described the tower as

a symbol of integrity.¹⁷ Only four years earlier he had endured the inquiries conducted by New York State's Armstrong Committee concerning unethical practices in the insurance industry. Although Metropolitan Life was cleared, Hegeman was indicted, though subsequently exonerated.¹⁸ Might he not have seen his tower -- the tallest in the world -- as a symbol of vindication, both corporate and personal?

According to the final version, the great sixteenth-century campanile in Venice's Piazza San Marco, a landmark much beloved by Hegeman, was the prototype of the Metropolitan Life tower.¹⁹ The Venetian campanile made global headlines shortly after 9:50 A.M., July 2, 1902, when it collapsed, crushing Jacopo Sansovino's Loggetta. Despite opinions to the contrary,²⁰ the Venetians rebuilt it; work did not begin until the end of 1908 almost three years after the Metropolitan Life tower was begun. While it is true that the campanile form had been considered as an appropriate expression for the tall office building, it was LeBrun who realized it first.²¹ But the news from Venice -- the loss of one of that city's most familiar features -- produced a great swell of public sentiment. An evocation of the fallen tower, anchored to Manhattan's bedrock, would be understandable. Perhaps, then, it was in the summer of 1902 that the projected Metropolitan Life tower in the form of the great Venetian campanile was conceived in the minds of the company president and his architect.

The Metropolitan Life Tower - Original Design

The Metropolitan Life tower's fifty-story height, articulated as base, shaft and capital - though surmounted with the setback and pyramidal spire of its prototype, and the cupola and lantern - was distinguished by its classical proportions and defined by historical ornamental detail -- a reference to Sansovino's Loggetta distinguished the second and third stories (Plate 1). Pierre LeBrun likened the proportions of his tower to those of a Doric column; he had designed the shaft with an entasis²² -- one foot, six inches on the short axis and two feet on the long axis -- which the engineers, Purdy & Henderson, duly translated to the steel frame.²³ The tower's elevations were nearly identical and completely faced with white Tuckahoe marble.²⁴ A concentration of ornamental detail was reserved for the shaft's principal feature, the four great clock faces.²⁵

Purdy & Henderson designed the tower's footing and skeletal frame, which is anchored to bed rock at depths varying between twenty-eight and forty-six feet below the curb. Although it was not structurally innovative, the tower attracted attention because it was to be the tallest building in the world.²⁶ The fireproofing of the tower's structure was considered an advance in 1909. Rather than heavy brick, or lighter terra cotta, all of the steel members -- columns, girders, girths and windbracing -- were encased in concrete carefully packed within wooden forms to eliminate air spaces.²⁷ The tower was the crowning commission of Pierre LeBrun's professional career; he was able to apply his historic erudition to this most challenging of new building types.

The Metropolitan Life Tower - Renovation

Though planned in 1951-52, Morgan & Meroni's renovation of the Metropolitan Life tower did not begin until 1960 and was not complete until 1964. For a second time the design of the Metropolitan Life tower was brought into harmony with an adjacent home office building.²⁸

Morgan's task was twofold: duplicate the new building's limestone cladding on portions of the tower's surface, and translate its planar character to the tower's four elevations. In the effort to reconcile the tower to the new home office, Morgan removed much of Pierre LeBrun's architectural detail; he chose the areas where ornament had been most concentrated --the base, the shaft quoins, the arcade and spire cupola -- but retained the proportions and the entasis, recognizing them as the major defining architectural features of the tower (plate 4). It is clear that Morgan appreciated Metropolitan Life's splendid site opposite the Park as well. He massed and scaled the home office building to flatter the tower's 700 foot sweep upward from the curb to its lantern. Rather than repeating the blunt right angle of the tower's old juxtaposition to the original home office building, Morgan had the tower emerge up from behind the three graduated steps of the new building's tenth, eleventh and thirteenth story setbacks.

Description

In plan the tower retains its 75 by 85 foot configuration. The fifty-story Metropolitan Life tower remains articulated in the conventional manner: base, shaft, and capital and from within the arcaded capital rises a setback capped with a pyramidal spire, cupola and lantern. The tower's new two-story base conforms with that of the adjacent new home office building (Plates 5 and 6). A polished, light gray granite water table (five feet high) - an extension of the new building's wall base - runs the widths of both the tower's Madison Avenue and East 24th Street elevations and is flush with the tower's limestone cladding. Along Madison Avenue three tall, one-over-one, plate glass show windows light the tower's first story; their thin frames and vertical mullions are stainless steel (plate 5).

On 24th Street, two of these show windows flank a broad though unarticulated entrance architrave of the polished granite (plate 6). Currently this entrance is not in use. The two pairs of doors within the architrave are false; entrance to the tower is gained through the South Building. Like the doors, the tripartite transom above them is framed in stainless steel. The architrave is immediately flanked by two signs, metal with raised letters, the ground painted black: "Metropolitan Life Insurance Company" with the company's logo. The second-story windows in both elevations correspond in width to the show windows below, but they are a fraction of their height (plates 5 & 6). Each is vertically tripartite, the central, single pane is wider than those flanking it, a modified Chicago window. The dividing stainless steel mullions are broad but the window's stainless steel frames are thin. A simple, forty-five degree angle string course separates the tower's base from its shaft.

Two distinct elements characterize the tower's four shaft elevations, the three attenuated bays of triple window openings contained within the

simple corner reveals and the monumental clock faces.²⁹ The shaft's dominant verticality is modified by the repetition of projecting window sills every second story on only the uneven stories, starting at the third story (plates 2 & 6). The third-story windows do not extend all the way down to their sills; their lower rails are higher than those on any other story (plate 6).³⁰ The fourth-, fifth- and eleventh-story window spandrels are higher than those on other stories (plates 2 & 6).³¹ At the twenty-fifth, twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh stories, the triple window openings of the outermost bays are reduced to paired windows (plate 7). These, and all of those in the center bay, have been eliminated by the breadth of the clock faces. Each of the shaft's window openings has its own architrave, in section an elaboration of a Vitruvian scroll molding, retained from LeBrun's design. All the windows are of reflective, single-paned glass and framed in stainless steel, and although recessed, the reflective glass sustains Morgan's planar aesthetic.³²

LeBrun's ornamental detail is retained around the four monumental clock faces (plate 8). The decorative spandrels each contain a shell supported by a pair of reversed dolphins. The clock dials are encircled by marble wreaths of fruits and flowers, ornament which Pierre LeBrun modelled after early Italian Renaissance motifs -- the Della Robbias or Desiderio di Settignano. The dials themselves are reinforced concrete slabs, almost twenty-seven feet in diameter and faced with vitreous turquoise blue and white mosaic tile.³³ The blue tiles create a decorative corona at the center and a border just inside the minute marks. The hands are built on iron frames, sheathed with copper. The minute hand is seventeen feet from end to end and weighs 1000 pounds; the hour hand measures thirteen feet, four inches and weighs 700 pounds. The numbers, four feet high, are edged in copper. The peripheral minute markers, ten and a half inches in diameter, are edged in copper also. The hands, numerals and minute markers are glazed and are illuminated at night.

Just as the triple bays and clock faces articulate the tower's shaft, the three-story arcades -- five arches per elevation -- characterize the tower's capital. The twenty-ninth and thirtieth story fenestration serves as a transition from the lower tripartite rhythm to the arcade's pentad above. Ten smaller windows light the twenty-ninth story. On the thirtieth, the ten windows have been arranged in five pairs.³⁴

Morgan's preference for the planar is most clearly expressed in the capital, the tower's thirty-first to thirty-fourth stories. The new arcades (plate 9), pared of all of their considerable marble ornament, become flat screens, the ashlar limestone applied as precise voussoirs. The secondary planes of the emerging setback are introduced within the arcade (plate 10). The new limestone balustrades have been greatly simplified and flattened. The corners of each baluster are chamfered (plate 11). Five windows, one above each arch, light the thirty-fourth story. The cornice projects now only enough to halt the eye momentarily. The balustrade above, at the thirty-fifth story, shorn of its ornamental balusters and finials, adheres to Morgan's planar aesthetic. The corners of these balusters are articulated with right angle channels (plate 12).

The freestanding portion of the tower's setback -- stories thirty-five to thirty-eight -- acts as a massive plinth for the pyramidal spire, cupola and lantern above. It is here that the tower's wider north and south and

narrower east and west elevations are made evident (Plates 1 and 2). This is seen clearly in the disparity of the fenestration within the setback's framing reveal. On the north and south elevations the reveal frames six windows -- three pairs of two -- on each story. Just above the setback's cornice -- the thirty-ninth story -- there are four small windows on the north and south elevations and three on the east and west. Similarly in the spire. The spire's marble surfaces are articulated with a raised lattice pattern punctuated with four stories of round hooded dormers (Plate 2).³⁵ Ten half-round hooded dormers break the latticed stone surface of the north and south elevations, one-above-two above three-above-four. There are seven dormers on the east and west, one-above-one above two-above-three. A broad reveal frames each pyramidal surface; the corner ribs rise to support the quarter-circle bevels of the forty-fifth story viewing platform (Plate 13). On the north and south elevations five long brackets, originally more ornate, support the platform; two eyelet windows between them light the forty-fourth floor. On the east and west four long brackets support the platform and there is but one window between them.

Morgan redesigned LeBrun's ornately carved, viewing platform balustrade. The north and south elevations have four panels of the new cylindrical balusters (plate 14), the east and west have three. The cupola's base, wider on its northern and southern elevations, is the highest and last demonstration of the tower's rectangular plan. The cupola itself is a regular octagon in plan (plate 15). The eight columns, originally Corinthian, of its two-story peristyle (at the forty-sixth and forty-seventh stories) are no longer round but angled to conform with the cupola's octagonal plan and Morgan's planar aesthetic (plate 16). The four bronze bells of the tower's chime (cast at the Meneely Foundry near Troy, New York) are mounted on the forty-sixth story. The largest, the 7000 pound bell, is mounted on the western projection of the cupola's base; the next to largest, a 3000 pound bell, is mounted on the eastern projection (plate 17). The smaller 2000 and 1500 pound bells, are mounted on the north and south within the peristyle. The forty-seventh story windows, seen through the peristyle, light a circular staircase within the cupola's core. The cupola's entablature, the highest point at which stone is used, is also the sill for the eight half-round hooded dormers in the cupola's gold-colored anodized aluminum dome, the tower's forty-eighth story. The tower's steel frame continues to the top, though sheathed in the gold anodized aluminum. The topmost platform with its gold anodized aluminum railing is at the forty-ninth story (plate 18). The tower's terminal feature is the octagonal electric lantern -- "the light that never fails" -- on the fiftieth story (plate 19). It is eight feet in diameter and 700 feet above the sidewalk. After ten in the evening - when the bells cease their chiming until dawn, the lantern blinks each quarter hour.³⁶

After dark and until midnight the tower's upper portions are bathed with light, often tinted. The lamps are inobtrusively hidden within the arcade and behind parapets. The quality of this illumination has been remarkably fine, so that the Metropolitan Life tower makes as distinguished a contribution to New York's skyline at night as it does by day.

APPENDIX

The same master clock -- a mercurial compensated astronomical clock -- which powers the hands on the tower's monumental clock faces as well as the hundreds of clocks throughout the home office, drives the tower's chime bell hammers. Originally each of the four bells was supported on a steel pipe filled with cement grout and sunk into stone-faced, solid concrete,¹ but now the bells rest atop battered sided steel supports (Plate 17). The smallest, the 1500 pound bell -- G natural, is struck by a hammer of fifty four pounds. The 2000 pound bell -- F natural -- is struck by a hammer of sixty-one pounds. The 3000 pound bell -- E flat -- is struck by a seventy-one pound hammer. The largest, the 7000 pound bell -- B flat -- is struck by ninety-four pound hammer. There is a fifth hammer of 131 pounds to strike the hours on the 7000 bell.

Of the best known bell foundries in the United States, the Meneely Foundry of Watervliet near Troy, N. Y., is the oldest.² An earlier LeBrun-designed church building, the Cathedral Of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, has a chime peal from the Meneely works. The bronze of the Meneely bells is composed exclusively of seventy-eight part, purest ingot copper which gives their bells their fine and brilliant tone.

The bells of the Metropolitan Life tower chime are struck in quarters -- four blows at the quarter hour, eight at the half hour, twelve at the three quarter hour, and sixteen at the hour followed by the hour stroke -- from seven o'clock in the morning until ten at night. The tune has a fine but often misunderstood provenance.³

Report prepared by
Charles C. Savage, Research Dept.
Editor: Marjorie Pearson,
Director of Research

Notes

1. This reserve was called The Parade and stretched from 23rd to 34th Streets and from Third Seventh Avenues. In 1814 it was reduced to eighty-three acres. Improvement as a public park was carried out by Major James Harper and the park opened May 10th, 1844.
2. Seward's seated figure at the southwest corner of the Park was sculpted by Randolph Rogers, 1875. Conkling's likeness was the work of J.Q.A. Ward. G.E. Bissell sculpted the statue of President Arthur.
3. Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer asserted that Madison Square Garden's tower was a New Yorker's dearest architectural possession. Leland Roth, McKim, Mead & White, (New York, 1978), 163. O. Henry mentioned the Diana "shimmering" above the trees of Madison Square in his short story "Voice of the City." O. Henry, Voice of the City, (New York, 1920), 7.
4. From the beginning it was semi-mutual -- stockholders were limited to only seven percent on capital stock and though they could vote, so could policyholders provided their premiums were not less than \$100.00

and they had been in effect for at least one year.

5. For a brief but comprehensive history of the insurance industry see LPC, Former New York Life Insurance Building Report, report prepared by Nancy Goeschel (New York, 1987).
6. Metropolitan Life has continued to broaden its policy offerings. Ordinary Insurance (1892), for the head of the household, was a national step up from the smaller policies of industrial insurance; lower rates were possible because larger amounts could be sold. Intermediate insurance (1896) offered policies of \$500.00. Group insurance (1917) was patterned after Equitable's, insuring 3000 Montgomery-Ward employees in 1912.
7. Only ten stories can be seen in the views of the original building. The architect's description indicates there were eleven. Perhaps the eleventh story was screened behind the balustraded parapet. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, (New York, 1914), 44.
8. His appears to have been a stylistic victory, defeating as it did picturesque designs submitted by Renwick & Sands, Griffith Thomas and Leopold Eidlitz. However, it should be understood that LeBrun had become a Mason in 1849, joining Philadelphia's Union Lodge No. 121 the following year. He remained a member of this Lodge until his death.
9. The spare Gothic details across the facade of St. Mary the Virgin and its flanking auxiliary buildings suggest the collection's French Gothic casts. The terra-cotta ornament of the 18th Street Firehouse might have been taken from one of the cast Italian Renaissance friezes. The triumphal arch motif of the Home Life Insurance facade may have been inspired by the Arch of Constantine. The multiplicity of Italian Renaissance motifs like the shell tympana and candelabra, seen on the Home Life and Metropolitan Life buildings, speak of a familiarity with the ornament of Gian Galeazzo Visconti's Tomb (1494-1562) in the Certosa, Pavia, cast details of which were part of the collection. Schuyler praised the manner in which these historic motifs were integrated into the design of a tall office building. Schuyler, 378.
10. Metropolitan Life, 46-7.
11. In the first he juxtaposed the proportions of his tower to its prototype in Venice, to obelisks, Giotto's tower (had the allegedly planned pyramidal roof been realized), the campaniles at Cremona and Pistoia, the belfry at Bruges and the more contemporary Madison Square Garden tower to the Giralda in Seville. Except for the obelisks and Giotto's tower, the proportions of the rest were similar. So were the towers in the survey of height to mass. Victoria Tower to the Houses of Parliament; the Venetian campanile to the Doges' Palace; Madison Square Garden's tower to the Garden; and his tower to the Home Office building. To allay any uncertainty he compared the proportions of the Venetian campanile to its adjacent Loggetta, and his tower to the new church McKim, Mead & White designed for Dr. Parkhurst. Though the proportions were not exactly the same, they were close enough.

12. The architects filed an alteration permit with the Department of Buildings for the renovation of the tower in 1960.
13. Meroni's dates are not indicated in the standard references.
14. The commission for the reconstruction of the Metropolitan Life home office came to Leonard Schultze & Associates in 1950 but was carried out by the successors, 1951 - 1964 -- same designer, different name. Indeed, only Lloyd Morgan's name and signature appear frequently on the plans and in 1958 letters from the architect are under letterhead where only Lloyd Morgan's name is present.
15. This composite exists in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company archives. It was published in the company's brochure, "Tower 75," 1984, n.p.
16. "The Metropolitan Tower," AABN, 96, 1763, (Oct. 9, 1909), 125.
17. Louis I. Dublin, A Family of Thirty Million, (New York, 1943), 75.
18. New York Life, Equitable Life and others were condemned for their excessive executive salaries, nepotism, political and marketing costs and extended investments. Hegeman's 1907 indictment on seven counts of forgery and three of perjury -- not reporting certain items in annual reports to the State until after the New Year -- was dismissed three years later on the ground that no intent to defraud had been proven.
19. Dublin, 236.
20. "The Fallen Campanile," The Builder, 53, 3102, (July 19, 1902), 47.
21. George B. Post's published proposals for Equitable Life (1898) and Prudential Life (1899) - neither realized - predate the Metropolitan Life Tower. In the Equitable design, based on Venice's campanile, Post placed the clock face in the setback; in the Prudential design the clock face is approximately where LeBrun placed Metropolitan Life's, but the prototype Post chose was not the campanile, but Barry & Pugin's clock tower at the Houses of Parliament, London. Weisman, "The Commercial Architecture of George B. Post," JSAH, 31, 3, (Oct. 1972), 176-203.
22. "Entasis - the intentional slight convex curving of the vertical profile of tapered column; used to overcome the optical illusion of concavity that characterizes straight side columns." Cyril M. Harris, Historic Architecture Sourcebook, New York, 1977).
23. Doric columns: Metropolitan Life, pl. 914, 46. Entasis: John Hall, "Description of the Structural Steel Framework for the Tower of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building, New York," AABN, 96, 1763, (Oct. 6, 1909), 132.
24. The tower's builder was the Hedden Construction Co. The Tuckahoe marble was cut and finished by the Waverley Marble Co.

25. Each clock face is supported on a broad steel ring penetrating the tower's columns and girders. The four faces continue to be illuminated from within.
26. The Met. Life tower exceeded the Singer Building tower (1908) in height but was topped by the Woolworth Building tower four years after it was completed.

The Met. Life tower's steel frame was designed with a threefold purpose: to give support; to carry the weight of its marble cladding; and to resist severe wind pressure. The vertical steel columns were spaced to permit adequate fenestration; they divide the four enclosing walls into three bays each. The only columns that rise from the foundations to the pyramidal spire are the eight interior columns. The intermediate exterior columns were re-spaced at the twenty-ninth story, and terminated at the thirty-first story, where the arcaded setback begins. The masonry wall above the arcade was carried on a girderspanning the entire elevation. The corner columns rise to the thirty-fifth story, the top of the arcade. On the lower stories, where wind pressure is greatest, a twin system of bracing was used both inside and outside the steel frame. But from the twelfth story up only the outer bracing continues to the top of the columns. Sections and connections were reduced gradually in harmony with the reduced wind stresses. The wind braces cease entirely at the thirty-ninth story where the pyramidal spire begins. The feet of the spire's steelrafters are carried on a steel beam coupled with a girder. A braced steel frame above the forty-fifth story supports the cupola and lantern. Provision for wind pressures of thirty pounds per square foot were made over the tower's entire surface area.

27. Air spaces were minimized between the metal and the brick bonding and between the brick and the marble cladding. The brickwork and the marble were firmly tied to the steel by special anchors, straps, eyebars and dowels. At every story at least one course of the marble extends completely through the wall's thickness. Purdy & Henderson's engineers avoided suspending the marble, including the ornamental elements, instead supporting it on top of steel.
28. Purdy & Henderson were again the structural engineers and Starrett Brothers & Eken the contractors.
29. The tower's bays comprise twenty-six stories of the shaft's north and west elevations, but on the south and east elevations, where the new office building abuts the tower, the lowest bay begins at the eleventh story; on the eastern elevation the lowest bay begins at the twelfth. It was at these levels that the tower cleared the original, now demolished, home office complex.
30. The third story window architraves are new, facsimiles recreated by Morgan from those above. Originally the third story was lit through the tops of the arches which fronted the second and third stories.
31. The tower's original shaft began at the fifth story above a heavy molding. Discoloration marks where once the eleventh story balconies projected, pentimenti of LeBrun's lost detail. Discoloration below

the window sills marks where once there had been ornamental sill brackets.

32. In the tower's shaft, the window opening widths and the widths of the corner reveals are greater on the tower's wider, north and south elevations than they are on the narrower east and west elevations. In the tower's capital the arches are broader and again the corner reveals remain wider on the north and south elevations. Each of the shaft windows on the Madison Avenue (west) elevation is three feet, six inches wide; on the 24th Street (north) elevation each is four feet wide. The arches in the arcade are not uniform in width. On the Madison Avenue elevation the arches are: eleven feet, nine inches; twelve feet; twelve feet; twelve feet; and eleven feet, nine inches. On the 24th Street (north) elevation the arches are: twelve feet, ten and a half inches, thirteen feet, eight inches; twelve feet, twenty inches; thirteen feet, eight inches; twelve feet, ten and a half inches.
33. The two inch square vitreous tiles, a material developed in England, resist the weather and their expansion and contraction are minimal. The design at the dial's center is of smaller cut pieces of the same material. "The Metropolitan Tower," Architects' and Builders' Magazine 10 (41), 10, (July 1909), p.432.
34. Morgan recognized that these windows alone, without the ornamentally didactic brackets and broad balcony faces, could demonstrate the transition from shaft to capital.
35. This ashlar is bonded and anchored to a brick wall built between the steel rafters.
36. At the quarter hour the lantern's white light goes off and it blinks once red, then the white returns. At the half hour there are two red blinks; three at the three-quarter hour; and four red blinks at the hour. The white flashes the hour. Then the white light comes on again.

Information pertaining to the installation, character and history of the tower's chime is contained in the Appendix. Neither the chime's pitch nor the order of its striking is within the jurisdiction of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Appendix Notes

1. No doubt the bells' exposed forty-sixth story location was a factor in determining their stationary position. The alternate rig, the rotary yoke, is preferred at the Meneely Foundry and by most bellringers; a bell swinging against its clapper imparts a more pleasing wave to the tone which does not exist when a stationary bell is struck. Church Bells, Peals and Church Bell Chimes, (Watervliet, N.Y., 1912), 6.
2. There are two other well-known bell foundries, the McShane Foundry in Baltimore and the Van Dusen Foundry in Cincinnati.

3. The chime was first described in terms much too oversimplified, "Notes of the Cambridge Chimes, composed by Handel," Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, (New York, 1914), 48.

In 1794 the English composer William Crotch (1775-1847), former organist at Great Saint Mary's Church, Cambridge (1786-88), wrote four variations on the 5th and 6th bars of the soprano air (No. 40) "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" from Handel's Messiah for the new Cambridge University clock installed in Great Saint Mary's belfry. In 1845 the variations were copied for the Royal Stock Exchange clock in London. They were copied again in 1859-60 for the Houses of Parliament clock, Westminster Palace. The variations are called alternately the Cambridge quarters or the Westminster quarters. The verses associated with these variations in a subsequent Metropolitan Life publication are from no work of Handel's. At present their source is unknown. "The Clock, its Beacon, and its Chimes," The Home Office, 25, 5, (Oct. 1943), 54.

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 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower 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 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower, built in 1906-09 and extensively renovated in 1960-64, has a significant place in the architectural and cultural history of New York City; that it was designed by Pierre L. LeBrun of the well-known firm Napoleon Lebrun & Sons and is both the crowning monument of his successful career and the final work of a firm whose combined production spanned almost seventy years of American architecture; that the tower is a major and memorable evocation of the world-famous campanile in Venice's St. Mark's Square; that for four years after its completion it was the tallest building in the world; that the renovation carried out by Lloyd Morgan & Eugene V. Meroni retained the tower's major features -- the monumental clock faces, their illuminated hands and dials, the setback arcade, pyramidal spire, cupola, chime and glazed lantern -- as well as LeBrun's original entasis; that the tower is a major corporate symbol -- the lantern at its top has been called "the light that never fails"; and that because of its fine illumination the tower's silhouette makes as distinguished contribution to New York's skyline at night as it does by day.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of 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 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower, 1 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 853, Lot 1 in part consisting of that portion of the lot bounded by a line extending easterly along the building line on East 24th Street to a point 84'-10 1/2" from the intersecting point with the Madison Avenue building line, then southerly 74'-8" along a line parallel with the Madison Avenue building line to a point within Lot 1, then westerly 84'-10 1/2" along a line parallel with the East 24th Street building line to a point on the Madison Avenue building line, then northerly 74'-8" along the Madison Avenue building line to the point of the beginning, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark site.

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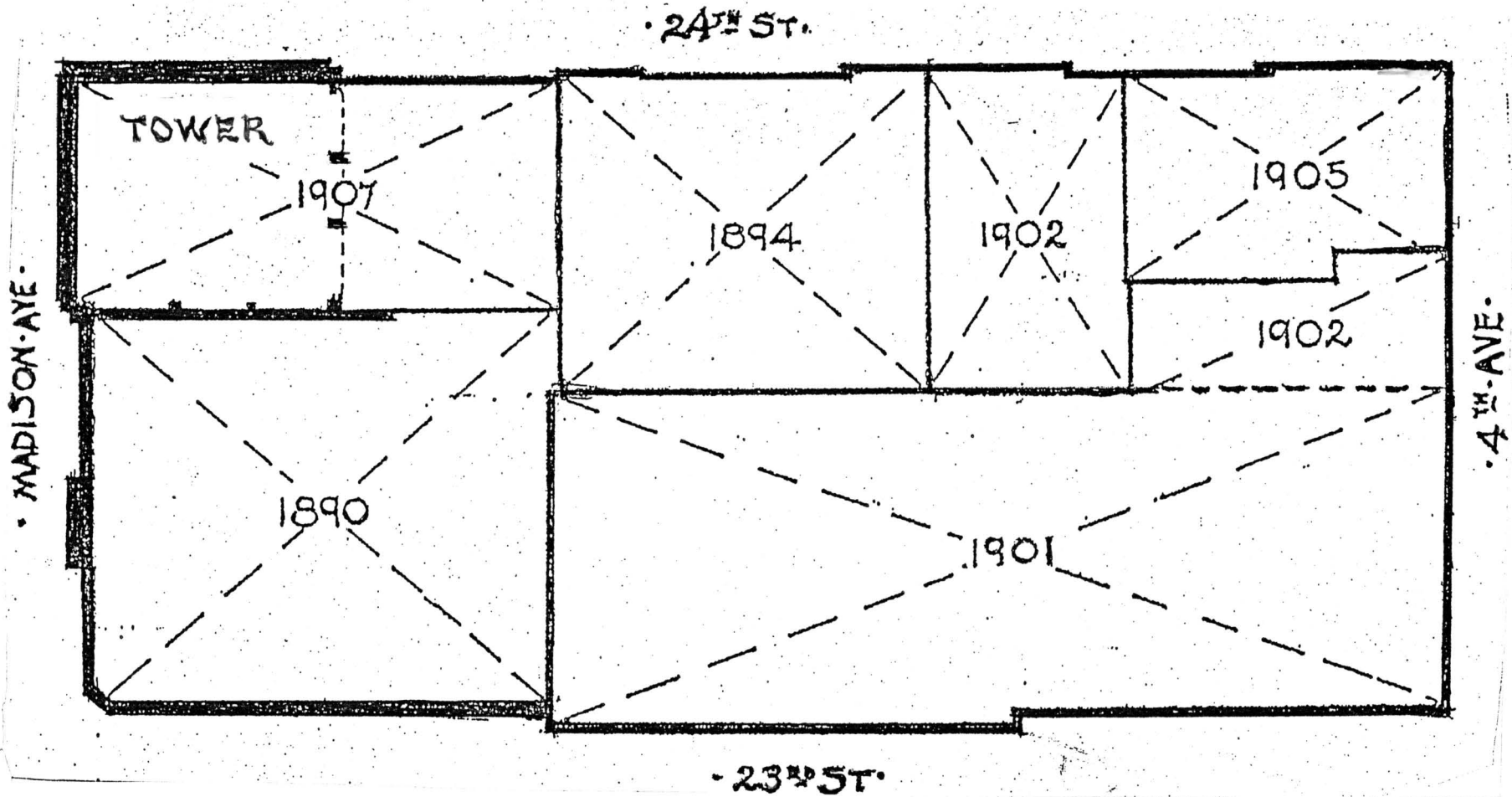
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(Metropolitan Life Archives)
Plate 1. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower, c. 1935.
1 Madison Avenue, built 1907-09.



Plate 2. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower, 1 Madison Avenue, built 1907-09. Renovated 1960-64. (Carl Forster)



(The American Architect, v.96², 1763,
Oct. 6, 1909, p.126.)

Plate 3. Dates of the commencement of the original building, and the successive additions. The tower is at the upper left.



(Metropolitan Life Archives)

Plate 4. The Metropolitan Life Tower, c. 1962.



Plate 5. Base of the tower -- first, second and third stories, Madison Avenue elevation.

(Carl Forster)



Plate 6. Tower's base, East 24th Street elevation --
4 East 24th Street entrance, first - seventh
stories. (Carl Forster)



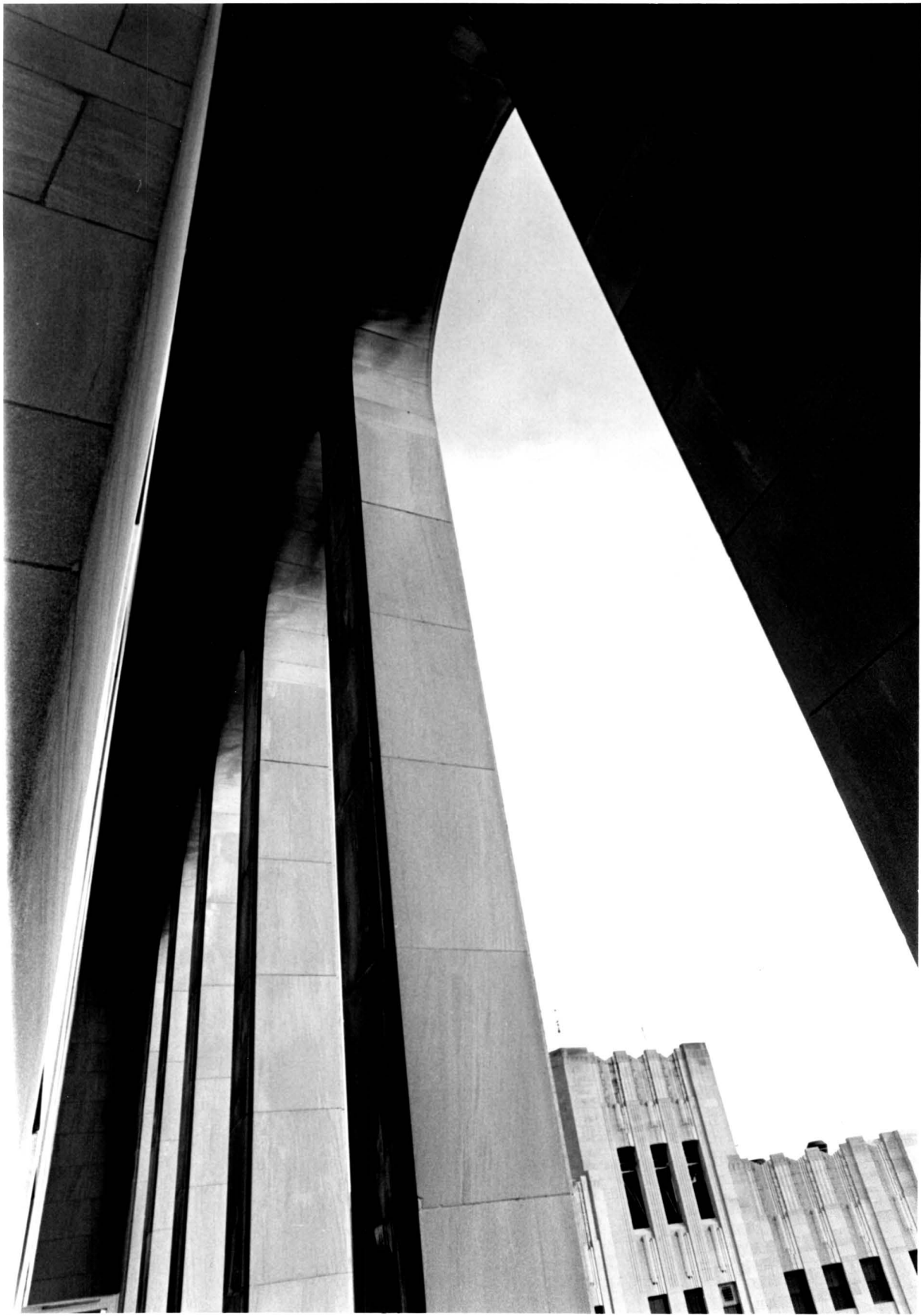
Plate 7. Tower clock faces, 25th - 27th stories, south and west elevations.

(Carl Forster)



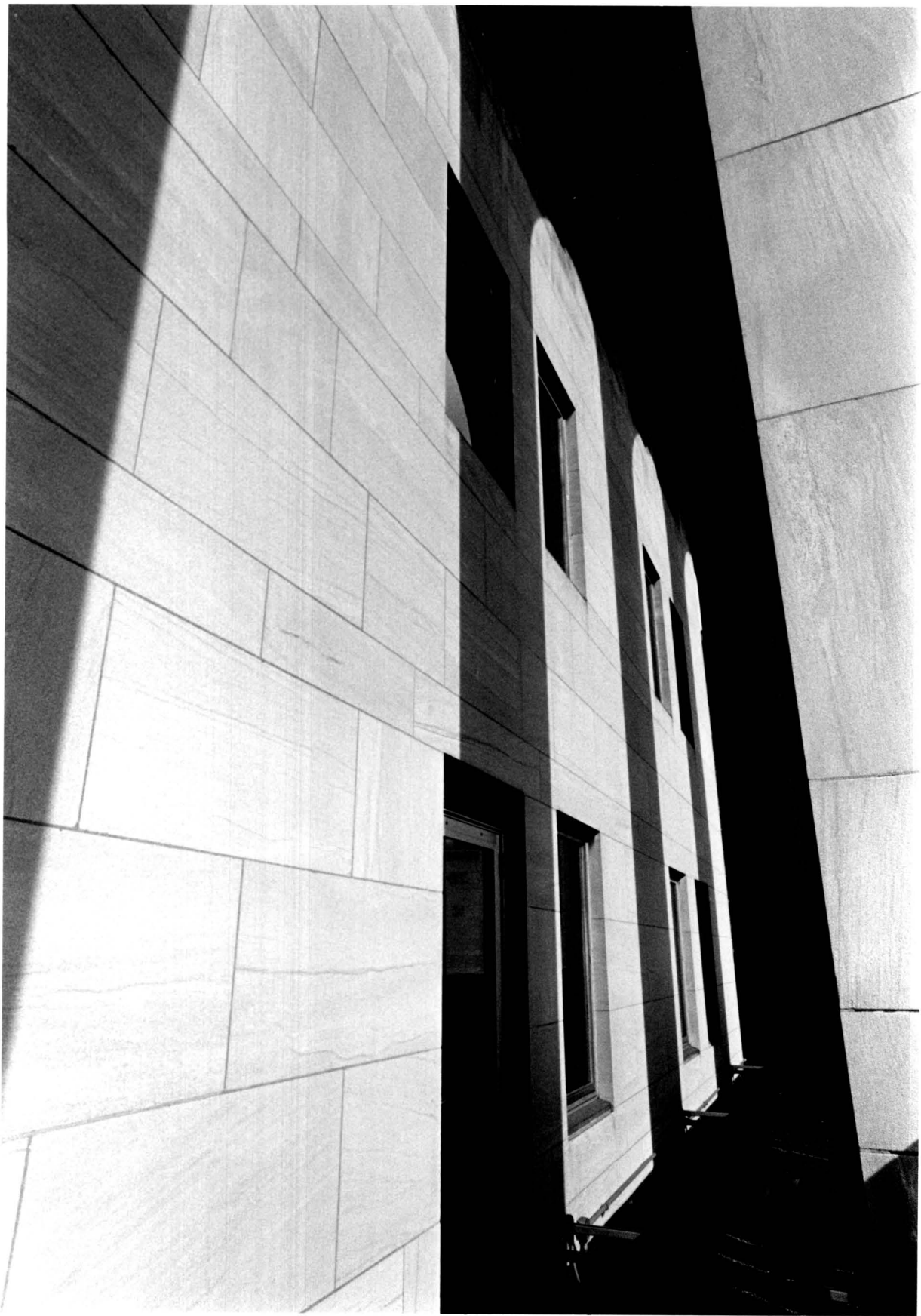
Plate 8. Clock face, south elevation.

(Carl Forster)



(Carl Forster)

Plate 9. Within the tower's arcade, eastern elevation. Thirty-first story.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 10. Setback elevation within the tower's arcade, eastern elevation. Thirty-first, -second and -third stories.



(Carl Forster)
Plate 11. Chamfered balusters, arcade balustrade, thirty-first
story, Metropolitan Life tower.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 12. Channelled balusters, thirty-fifth story, Metropolitan Life tower.



Plate 13. Metropolitan Life tower cupola.

(Carl Forster)



(Carl Forster)

Plate 14. Cylindrical balusters, forty-fifth story, Metropolitan Life tower.



Plate 15. Tower cupola, from the southeast.

(Carl Forster)

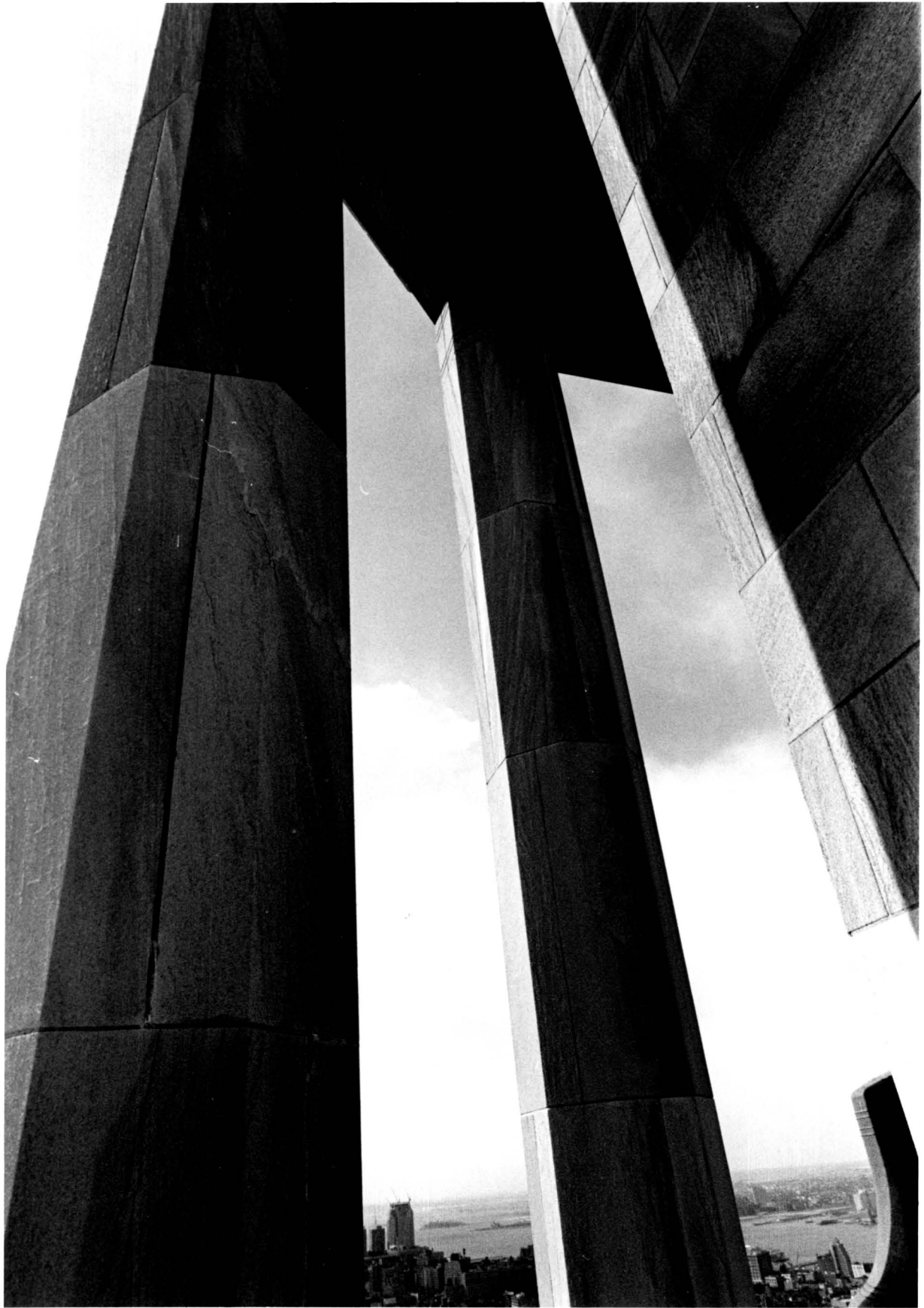


Plate 16. Cupola columns.

(Carl Forster)



Plate 17. 3000 pound bell of the four bell chime, eastern elevation, the forty-sixth story. (Carl Forster)



(Carl Forster)

Plate 18. Forty-ninth story viewing platform, toward the southwest -- the anodized aluminum railing.



Plate 19. The tower's beacon, the fiftieth story. (Carl Forster)