Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-1412

GENERAL ELECTRIC BUILDING (originally RCA Building), 570 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.

Built 1929-31; architects Cross & Cross.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1305, Lot 60.

On January 11, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the General Electric Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No 7). The hearing was continued to February 8, 1983 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters and statements have been received supporting the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The General Electric Building, constructed in 1929-31 to create a highly visible image for the fledgling RCA Corporation, has a significant place in the history of architecture in New York City. Designed by the firm of Cross & Cross in the Gothic mode of the Art Deco style which is both symbolic and expressive of the function of the building, this tower is a major example of Art Deco architecture. The massing and articulation of the building, shown through the use of ornament and color, is remarkable and laudable; not only does this treatment illustrate the breadth of the Art Deco, but it also gives the General Electric Building exemplary status. Moreover the building is the successful culmination of the Cross & Cross firm's efforts to develop a coherent and cohesive articulation for tall office buildings.

The Client

The General Electric Building was intended to be the headquarters of the Radio Victor Corporation of America (RCA), which by the late 1920s was in the forefront of the radio and communications industry.

When introduced, the "wireless" was used almost exclusively for marine telegraphy and was adopted in 1901 by the U.S. Navy as a substitute for homing pigeons. In 1912, the sinking of the Titanic, whose distress signals had been picked up by David Sarnoff working in the New York office of the British-owned American Marconi Company, helped prove the reliability of the wireless and encouraged exploration in broadcast sound by British and American interests.[1] When in 1919, General Electric was about to sell the Alexanderson alternator

to American Marconi, the U.S. Navy intervened, urging that this all-important component remain accessible in America. A group of companies with radio and electrical interests were mobilized to form the Radio Victor Corporation of America, as a subsidiary of General Electric, the most powerful of the electric companies, by acquiring the American Marconi Co.[2] The formation of Radio Victor gave it a virtual monopoly on the advertising, marketing, distribution, and selling of communication devices and services, but it was not allowed any manufacturing facilities. By 1929, Radio Victor had experienced tremendous growth, its subsidiaries included the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO, a leading producer, distributor, and exhibitor of motion pictures), and planning began for a new headquarters building to be designed by Cross & Cross and located at Lexington Avenue and 51st Street. Meanwhile, David Sarnoff, by then executive vice president of Radio Victor, wanted release from the constraints on manufacturing placed on the company and sought corporate independence.[3] In late 1929, Owen Young, chairman of General Electric, began negotiating a move for RCA to Rockefeller Center, then being planned.[4] David Sarnoff took up the presidency of RCA in January 1930, and for a large block of RCA stock--the new company dropped the Victor--General Electric and Westinghouse released their exclusive manufacturing rights and royalties on RCA licenses.[5] In partial settlement of its debt to General Electric, RCA agreed to give up the tall office building which at that very moment was proceeding from the planning stages and beginning to rise at 51st Street and Lexington Avenue. In January 1931, the Bartholomew Building Corporation, the entity established in 1929 to create the new building and named in deference to the block's already much admired major occupant, St. Bartholomew's Church, transferred title to General Electric.[6]

The Site

The General Electric Building is constructed on the northwest portion of the block bounded by 50th and 51st Streets, Park Avenue on the west, and Lexington Avenue on the east, at the southwest corner of the intersection of 51st Street and Lexington Avenue. In 1867 Frederick and Maximilian Schaefer began to assemble lots at the western end of the block, and in 1878 they constructed the F. & M. Schaefer Brewery complex. Lots 10 and 11 on the southeast corner of the block were deeded to Saint Patrick's Cathedral in 1880. But only in this century did the block become a desirable location, a transition enabled by two major factors. In 1903 the Grant of Rights in Streets from the City of New York to the New York and Harlem River Railroad and the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad Companies was recorded, a right of way that literally created Park Avenue as a grand boulevard and initiated a great development surge in this area.[7] Indeed, the block took on a very different tone when in 1914 the entire Schaefer tract was sold to Saint Bartholomew's Church, the third and present site of this prominent Episcopalian congregation.

Only in 1929 did the Bartholomew Building Corporation, acting for RCA, purchase what would become the General Electric Tower site. By the end of 1929 the Bartholomew Building Corporation had acquired a large parcel from Norko Realty Company and Julian Tishman & Sons, Inc., and two 51st Street lots from the Nichols Holding Co. A building permit was filed for Bartholomew on December 17, 1929.[8]

Construction for the 560-foot high building began on May 3, 1930. Only a month before, the existing brownstones had been demolished.[9] Erection of the building's skeletal steel frame and concrete floor arches continued throughout the summer.[10] But RCA's negotiations to move to Rockefeller Center, then in the planning stages, had begun even in late 1929.[11] On January 13, 1931, the formal transfer of the tower -- Bartholomew Building Corporation's lease to RCA and ten days later a conveyance from Bartholomew Building Corporation and RCA to General Electric Realty and Utilities Corporation -- was recorded.[12] The tower was completed according to the designs of Cross & Cross, the following December.[13]

The Architects and Their Work

The principals of Cross & Cross were John Walter Cross (1878-1951) and Eliot Cross (1884-1949), brothers and younger sons of Richard J. and Matilda Redmond Cross. Both were born and brought up in South Orange, New Jersey, and both attended Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts. John matriculated at Yale, graduating with the Class of 1900. Eliot did not follow in his older brother's footsteps to New Haven but chose Harvard from which he graduated in 1906. Meanwhile, John spent two years in architectural study at Columbia, then traveled to Paris and the Ecole des Beaux Arts from which he received the diploma in 1907. The two brothers formed their partnership upon John's return the same year.[14]

Sometimes in the case of partners, ascertaining which one was responsible for particular facets of the firm's work is difficult. No such difficulty appears to cloud authorship at Cross & Cross. While it was John who underwent architectural training at prestigious institutions on both sides of the Atlantic and earned the credentials to practice, Eliot became involved with real-estate development. John Walter Cross was the designer and Eliot Cross played the important role of securing important commissions.

A measure of, as well as an introduction to, John Walter Cross's academic foundations can be had by analyzing the Church of Notre Dame, a designated NYC Landmark located at Morningside Drive and 114th Street. Construction began in 1914 and though still unfinished, the church is apparently Cross & Cross's only ecclesiastical undertaking.[15] Had its drum and dome been built, its resemblance to Jules Hardouin Mansart's magnificent Church of the Invalides (1706) in Paris would have been more easily recognized and better documented.[16] It is significant that John Walter Cross chose Les Invalides as his model, for it is one of the most important buildings of the early 18th

century as well as one of the perennially admired monuments of French architecture, rather than a Romanesque or Gothic prototype. Either would have been a suitable model for a French congregation. However, his choice demonstrated John Walter Cross's strong preference for 18th-century Classicism.

Eliot Cross was successful enough attracting commissions that he should be credited with winning for the firm its most conspicuous opportunities, the office buildings.[17] He headed the syndicate which in 1920 bought up the neglected town houses that now form the Sutton Square area.[18] Likewise, he participated in the development of the old Presbyterian Hospital site, between Madison and Park Avenues and 70th and 71st Streets in 1921.[19] In 1922 he organized the real estate investment firm of Webb and Knapp and was chairman of the board until he retired in 1947.[20] Both firms, Cross & Cross and Webb and Knapp, had offices in the Knapp Building, 385 Madison Avenue, two buildings altered to the designs of Cross & Cross to appear as one (1923) on a site assembled by Webb and Knapp -- a building that won for Cross & Cross the Annual Award (1923) from the Fifth Avenue Association for Best New Building.

Analysis of the work of Cross & Cross can be problemmatical. Where some have seen stylistic transition in the mid-twenties from predominantly 18th-century models to Art Deco and Moderne,[21] it is evident now that in the designs of the firm, there was a separation of building types. There appear to be three: (1) the smaller-scaled commissions, private residences, clubs, residential neighborhood bank branches, and schools; (2) hotel and apartment buildings; and (3)tall office buildings. The first category is characterized by a preference for the 18th-century English style, generalized though correct, imaginative though never inappropriate, combinations of Georgian or Adam motifs, styles appropriate to the scale of a smaller building. Facades are often centralized by a projecting bay and handsomely aediculated first story window.[22] Hotel and apartment buildings, likewise, share a distinct treatment where the academic pattern of base-shaft-capital is observed. The spare use of the classical motifs, seen in the residential category, inform only the base and upper stories of these massive blocks. More attention to appropriate ornaments is paid to the ground and immediate stories above, as well as to the cornice and parapet than to the great breadth of wall surface with regular fenestration in between.[23] But it is the tall office buildings that concern us here. It is only in this category that a significant and quite remarkable stylistic development occurs.

This development should be seen in the context of the skyscraper phenomenon, the tall office buildings that rose in the early decades of this century. Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building (1913) has been called the prototype; its Gothic aspect is seen as an academic expression of its structure and height.[24] The impression the Woolworth made is readily measurable. Hood and Howell's Chicago Tribune Building (1924), more than Hood's American Radiator Building (1924), was

conceived in the academic Gothic style; American Radiator is in the "vertical style" Hood derived from Gothic.[25] But the imported Art Deco, coinciding with the building boom in New York of the late '20s, was deftly adapted to this vertical style; the Chrysler Building (1928-30), by William Van Alen, evoking the technological future with unconventional and metaphorical ornament, is the best example. From the academic classicism of the Passavant Building (1912) -- just a year before the Woolworth Building was finished -- to the Art Deco of the General Electric Building (1931), the work of "the tall building department" at Cross & Cross can be considered a representative survey of the assimilative nature of the architecture of tall buildings within this two-decade time frame.

Only one architectural convention remains common to all three of the Cross & Cross buildings categories, and that is the high quality of a building's ornamental program, regardless of style. Often a personification (or personifications) is applied or emerges as ornament, a kind of Cross & Cross signature. In their smaller-scaled work, the 18th-century models often limit the placement of ornament. One of the most common is a face on a prominent keystone. There are three in each of the first story window lintels of the Links Club's (1916-17) central bay as well as an ornamental cartouche bearing the likeness of a golfer within the center window's segmental pediment. A keystone with the face of Mercury distinguishes the entrance of the Hangar Club (1929-30), from its neighbors on East 63rd Street. Nor are these personages always mythological. The stone roundel high in the pediment of the Lewis Spencer Morris house (1923), a designated NYC Landmark on East 80th Street, contains a low relief bust in profile, most likely of Lewis Morris (1671-1746), Chief Justice of New York, Governor of New Jersey, first Lord of the manor of Morrisania, native-born American and early progenitor of this house's proud builder. Similarly, the roundel bearing the three-quarter bust in low relief in the facade of the former Fulton Trust Company (1931) at 1002-1004 Madison Avenue portrays Robert Fulton. Nor does this signature appear everywhere; sometimes there are no faces and only antique or heraldic motives. But again it is with the development of the tall office building that this form of personified ornament emerges with greater frequency and is given freer rein. Tall office building architecture was not as subject to the conventions of ornament for buildings of a more diminutive scale. But at Cross & Cross a conspicuous effort was made to adapt these conventions of ornament in both highly original and very elaborate expressions. While ornament is used symbolically, like the head of Mercury at the Hangar Club or the relief bust of a revered ancestor in the Morris house pediment, it is often used to advertise as well. This two-fold decorative symbolism and signature is nowhere more apparent than on the General Electric tower.

The firm's first tall office building commission was the Passavant Building (1912), 44 Park Avenue at 30th Street. This fifteen-story building is a sober and eloquent tribute to John Walter Cross's academic training. The ground and top stories are

articulated to a greater degree than the mid-section of the building. A monumental colonnade of square fluted columns, in the composite order, reaches three stories to carry the fourth story-cum-architrave, windows alternating with metope-like panels of classical motifs in low relief. A second colonnade -- round columns -- on the top two stories supports the heavy cornice and balustered parapet.

Following World War I, Cross & Cross, whose early commissions were predominately residential became better known for their commercial buildings. No doubt, this is a reflection of Eliot Cross's success in the real-estate field. Knapp and Webb had taken long leases on property owned by the New York and Harlem Railroad Company and Cross & Cross received these commercial building commissions as a consequence: The twin Knapp Buildings, which have been mentioned, on Madison at 47th Street extending east to Vanderbilt Avenue, and the Postum Building, (1924) 250 Park Avenue between 46th and 47th Streets. The twelve-story Knapp Buildings share an ashlar-faced limestone facade though the side elevations are a light gray brick. Only the cast metal aedicular motifs -- in the chaste manner of late 18th and early 19th-century English iron work -- of the ground story plate glass windows serve to distinguish the building and attract the passersby. Decorative swags link the bold projecting frame of the twelfth story windows just below the diminutive cornice. The first three of the Postum Building's twenty stories are an ashlar faced limestone podium for the buff brick central core block and sixteen-story block-like wings. Neither the Postum nor the Knapp Buildings carry the Passavant Building's heavy cornice. Yet shadows of the tall building classicism seen in the Passavant Building linger at the Postum Building: the limestone podium with its two-story entrances; the third story windows alternate with ornamental panels to suggest an architrave; and the deeply indented windows of the central core's eighteenth and nineteenth stories and those on the wing's fourteenth and fifteenth stories create a rhythm reminiscent of the Passavant Building's upper colonnade. But what are new are the pier and recessed, deeper color brick spandrel articulation of the Postum Building's central core and wings and the high quality of the continuous brick work along the pier reveals.

John Walter Cross's training may have made him more conscientious than those who had not been exposed to Beaux-Arts academic fastidiousness. When brick is a building's primary material, it need not be used as ashlar stone is used. Above the Postum's ashlar limestone podium the buff brick is laid both in continuous bond and used decoratively in the reveals. In the commercial buildings that followed, those of stone or cast stone carried a subdued ornamental program generally classical in style and placement, not unlike the Knapp Buildings. But in the commercial buildings of brick, none of which but General Electric have been associated with the firm's work previously, the firm's designers were permitted an unprecedented freedom in decorative patterning. And after 1925 these decorative patterns assumed the character of the Art Deco.

The eight-story fur storage warehouse the firm designed for Revillon Freres,(1923) on the edge of the fur district, 400 Eighth Avenue at 30th Street, now greatly altered, should be mentioned just because of its once handsome brickwork.[26] The first two stories are smoothly rusticated limestone, a podium like the Postum Building. The former principal entrance on 30th Street, now blocked up, has a finely detailed stone pedimental cresting, the Revillon Freres monogram supported by two lions rampant. Fenestration in the original building was limited to the wide show windows on the ground floor and paired conventional windows on the second, third, and eighth floors. The other four stories were windowless (housing fur storage vaults) permitting a broad surface of buff brick laid in an overall diaper pattern of projecting headers. The generously quoined corners and the spare cornice (vertical stretcher dentils) are all of the same buff brick. Only the small, classically stylized limestone leaf forms in the brick frieze recall the handsome overdoor carving below, as well as the more conventional placement of more conventional ornament on the firm's concurrent ashlar-faced buildings.

The twelve-story building Cross & Cross undertook in 1924-25 at 29 West 57th Street was designed to house the Chickering and American Piano Company. The building's most remarkable feature is its water tower housing, the four faces of which each carry a monumental medal, a five-armed cross with ten points and its supporting ribband, in two-story high relief.[27] There can be little doubt the building was designed to advertise Chickering-American's international prize-winning instruments in the serious music territory already occupied by Carnegie Hall and the Steinway Company's headquarters, both one block west. But these remarkable medal reliefs, boasting recognized accomplishment in piano manufacture, aren't the only reference to the client's business. The facade is a generalized Gothic, three-bay screen of ten-story piers and indented spandrels rising from a broad two-story segmentally-arched show window flanked by entrances and terminating as cloaked personifications, pipers above the twelfth floor setback and lyre players on the penthouse below the water tower housing and prominent medals. Cross & Cross weren't a "Gothic" firm. Why might they imply the style here? Certainly its linear verticality, appropriate to the skeletal steel frame, draws the eye up to the mysterious music-making personifications and beyond to the great medals. Perhaps Gothic was a preferred alternative to the Steinway Company's Palladian show window and urned parapet. The influence of Gilbert's Woolworth Tower, (1913), should not be underestimated.

The thirty-two story, gray brick tower, No. 580 Fifth Avenue, at the northwest corner of 47th Street, started in 1924 and finished in 1927, is fundamental in the development of Cross & Cross tall office building designs.[28] Not only was it the tallest to date, to come through their office -- and so is significant to their even taller buildings -- but in it the decorative surface elements of the earlier brick buildings have been diminished, simplified, and

relegated to specific areas. Like the Chickering-American Piano Company building, this one is also generalized Gothic. Though the two- and three-story (Fifth Avenue rises here, creating a ground floor level at the corner lower than the site's northern lot line) sidewalk elevation is based on stylistic prototypes -- tall Tudor arches, a corbelled frieze of terra-cotta broken by pointed arched tabernacles and attendant ornament (leafy bosses, roundels containing helmeted heads in low relief, and escutcheons bearing lions rampant) -- the pier and spandrel system is more directly and simply articulated here than on the Postum or Chickering-American elevations. The decorative brickwork that distinguishes the Postum Building pier reveals has been eliminated. Only the bricks of the thin piers, either triangular shaped bricks or conventional bricks laid at an 135° angle to the facade, project to cast a sharp, thin shadow. The spandrel design has been simplified also; each spandrel is an individual terra-cotta plaque into which a shallow impression of paired, trefoiled, arches has been molded. The terra-cotta is a leaden color in contrast to the lighter brick. There are setbacks at the tenth, twelfth, fourteenth, and nineteenth floors from the corner along 47th Street. In an unbroken sweep the tower rises against the northern property line, from the first setback on Fifth Avenue and from the third on 47th Street, to an extraordinary terra-cotta cornice. One-story high wiverns clutching shields, their webbed wings outspread, their pointed tails curlicued, are attached to the broad piers and alternate with Gothic canopies projecting over the paired windows. Though not personifications, these mythical beasts are consistent with the Gothic of the base and the architect's predilection for signature ornament.

The narrow, fifteen-story bank and office building (1927) at No. 1 East 42nd Street serves to remind us that, simultaneously, Cross & Cross were carrying out more conservative decorative programs on their stone (or cast stone) ashlar-faced buildings. This facade is divided into four sections: a rusticated podium with a triumphal arch motif and two roundels articulates the first four stories. Though not immediately recognizable, the scheme of large central window with flanking entrances is the same employed earlier in the Chickering-American Piano Company building and in many of Cross & Cross's other commercial facades. Then, five two-story pilasters carry a balcony the width of the facade; the remaining ten stories are ashlar, broken only by the regular fenestration; and finally the appropriately classical cornice. However, the Cross & Cross symbolic signature is also apparent. The fourth story frieze on this building, commissioned by the Oceanic Investing Company, is comprised of antique shields alternating with anchors; within the roundel spandrels are dolphins carved in low relief.

In November 1929, the Cross & Cross firm began work on the tallest building they were to design, a sixty-story granite and limestone tower for the National City Bank of New York (City Bank Farmers Trust Company) on the block bounded by William, Hanover, and Beaver Streets and Exchange Place. When it was finished in

May 1931, it was the fifth tallest building in the city. The problems of adapting an eight-sided tower -- in plan, emerald-cut with four long and four short, or chamfered, sides -- to an irregular site are solved by manipulating the shape of the third setback at the twenty-first floor and creating sympathetic facade verticals to ease the transition between the symmetries of the lower and tower elevations. Here Cross & Cross created an aesthetic in response to setback restrictions and a confined site; setbacks are manipulated to give the tower a strong base, a potential not fully realized at No. 580 Fifth Avenue. The City Bank tower is framed with steel and sheathed in ashlar stone -- the basement is Mohegan granite as are the carved entrances, while the tower is ashlar limestone and brick. The ornamental program is made up of generalized classical motifs -- sheaves of grain, scales, fasces, freestanding eagles and helmeted herms, symbols of abundance and protection. But other decorative elements also appear; stylized stalks of symmetrically curled foliation, like the adjacent overlapping chevron motif, are carved in low relief on the piers. This ornament is characteristic of the Art Decoratif. The building's broad elevations are articulated as pier and spandrel, except at the corners, in the direct manner employed at No. 580 Fifth Avenue. But here the contrasting spandrels are blue pearl granite. The setback parapet coping is not straight but alternates a long, pedimental form with a sharper pier head. Four major piers, whose verticals are aligned with the tower above, break through the parapet at the 18th floor setback and terminate as freestanding, stylized herms, two helmeted Greek and two helmeted Assyrian heros on each of the lower facades. Unlike No. 580 Fifth Avenue, the tower piers do not rise uninterrupted to the top. But then the City Bank tower is twice the height of No. 580 Fifth Avenue. Double bands of ashlar, contrasting with the darker brick of the tower's center bays, visually bind the piers together at the 29th, 39th, 48th and 55th floors. These horizontal lines, echoing the several setbacks at the tower's base give the tall, thin tower a necessary sense of stability. Three tall arches on each of the four broad elevations (each bracketing two stories) face the top of the tower and support a double-tiered, concentric crown buttressed by the tower's piers. Originally the tower was to have been terminated with an illuminated globe, fifteen feet in diameter and supported by four monumental eagles, but it was completed to a much revised design. Though this initial, symbolic conception was eliminated, the heroic herms remain as Cross & Cross's signature. The City Bank tower is not only Cross & Cross's tallest but it also is their first eight-sided tower and marks their first attempt to present ornament in the Art Deco mode on one of their tall office buildings.

Two bank, office, and storage buildings Cross & Cross designed for the Centrum Corporation, the Central Hanover Bank & Trust's real-estate arm, need to be included here. Both are brick and return our attention to the freer decorated surface treatment the firm gives its buildings built of brick. One, at 271 Church Street, is seventeen stories and the other, at 335 Greenwich Street, is thirteen stories. Because both were begun January 1930, and finished

the same date a year later, and indeed are not unlike, they can be treated together here. Both have ashlar stone ground stories and buff-colored brick above. The ornamental programs of each building, though different -- curvilinear on Greenwich Street and angular on Franklin -- are variations of the hybrid and stylized, rather Mayan mode of Art Deco, patterns rendered more coherent by the partially projecting and indented bricks. This ornament is apparent in the spandrels but is richest along the parapet facings. Though not as regularly spaced as at No. 580 Fifth Avenue or the City Bank tower, the surfaces of these buildings also are articulated as pier and spandrel.

The Design of the General Electric Building

In the General Electric Building all of the disparate features which characterize the tall office buildings of Cross & Cross are brought together in one splendid exercise in the Art Deco style. It was as if the designers in the "tall office building department" had been waiting both for the imprimatur of a style, the Art Deco, through which their rich imagery, the so-called proto-Deco, could coalesce and for the opportunity to translate this imagery into an appropriate built form. The symbolic signature of golfer and Mercury keystones, the roundels of Morris and Fulton, the musicians and medals, the wiverns and window hoods, anchors and dolphins, and helmeted herms, culminate here in an iconography tailored to RCA: bolts and flashes crackle from the building's surface and mysterious personifications emerge from within its verticality. Likewise the handsome brickwork, from the Revillon diaper to the parapets of the Central Hanover Bank buildings, here reach an apogee not to be repeated by Cross & Cross.

General Electric, like the City Bank Building, is a tall, eight-sided tower, articulated with piers and recessed spandrels, rising from a base which completely fills the relatively small site. The major material of the building's exterior is brick.[29] In fact, three different colors, orange, buff, and a tawny color similar in shade to the bricks used in the fabric of Saint Bartholomew's Church, are laid in American bond with narrow joints but randomly, to create the allusion of yet an overall fourth color, a rich bronze. However, it was specified, even stressed, throughout the drawings that rounded brick be used on all corners that are not right angles.[30] Second only to the brick, terra-cotta is used extensively. Where originally a tawny limestone had been specified for all the spandrels, copings, sills, trims, corbels, imposts, finials, chimney caps, and the lattice work grilles on the tower's firestairs (southwest splay), terra-cotta of a similar shade was substituted.[31] The spandrels for floors 45 - 48, originally to have been aluminum, were changed to terra-cotta with an aluminized finish. This aluminized finish was prescribed for the central lozenge, or bolt, shapes in the majority of the spandrels. For the gold leaf intrados of the original limestone tower tracery, now terra-cotta, a four-inch gold glazed intrados was specified. Warm, reddish hues were specified for the building's granite base course as well as

for the exterior marble of the ground story windows and door jambs, trims, lintels, soffits and decorative panels.[32] Finally, it should be noted, that, by today's standards, the 50-story General Electric Building has a surprising variety of window sizes and configurations,[33] in keeping with the complex articulation of the tower.

On the General Electric Building, Cross & Cross's designers contrived an aesthetic solution for setback arrangement. Where setbacks served to introduce the towers at No. 580 Fifth Avenue and City Bank, here they have been collected to "buttress" the General Electric Building's main shaft. There are two major buttresses, one above and aligned with the Lexington Avenue entrance, the other aligned with the five central ground floor bays below on 51st Street. Each of these buttresses is effected by massing three-story, stepped pyramids -- in increments of two or sometimes but a single story -- at each of the five major setbacks on the Lexington Avenue facade and the four on 51st Street.[34] This arrangement would not have worked as successfully as it does here had the designers not stressed the building's height by emphasizing the pier and recessed spandrel articulation. We have seen how this motif developed within the designers' repertory from the Postum Building pier reveals and the quasi-Gothic piers and recessed spandrels of the Chickering-American Piano Building to the alternating broad and thin piers of angulated brick at No. 580 Fifth Avenue. The recessed spandrel as solid panel first appeared on the Chickering-American Piano Building, then on No. 580 Fifth and again on the City Bank Building. And here on the General Electric Building, Cross & Cross completely eliminated the old separation of a building's base, shaft and cornice. The piers begin at the sidewalk, or alternately above the show windows, rising to buttress the tower's crown of flamboyant tracery.

The General Electric Building is a successful blending of articulation and ornament. Indeed, the ornament is metaphor for the building's relentless vertical dynamism and at the top, allegory of the building's initial client. The form of the building begins with and is sustained by this metaphor. Four large show windows and the building's main entrance are on Lexington Avenue. Along 51st Street are five large show windows, two narrow ones, and the freight entrance. The two narrow show windows flank a pair of the large ones and the four altogether are the width of the tower high above. These show windows are enframed with reeded jambs, repetitive, vertical elements of graduated height carved in low relief of marble, and pediments, each composed of three elements. Rising from a broad, triangular tympanum of angular fluting, through a broad stepped pediment of limestone is a vertical flash and visage, a spirit from the electrical world, niched. The building's piers rise both from between these windows and from above their pediments. However, the jamb verticals overlap the sidewalk piers and the niched spirits occupy the bases of the pedimental piers and therefore can be read as generative forces, streamlines and ignitions,

sending the eye upward. The piers, themselves, are rounded brick at their outer edges. Next to each edge a respond contained within the pier, runs the pier's full height, guidelines for the generative emphasis upwards. Where each pier and contained respond meet a setback coping, they are sheathed with vertical, reeded streamlines.

The terra-cotta spandrels, though recessed, are constituent to this upward thrust. Though not all of them are alike, the majority carry an identical pattern. A large chevron dominates the spandrel's upper region. It is molded as angular fluting, though finer than the show window tympana. A pair of chevrons, each half the size of the larger upper chevron, of even finer angular fluting, occupies the spandrel's lower region. These determined verticals and diagonals are somewhat relieved by the tracery that trails out from the extreme lower angles in the triangles between the upper chevron and the squared top to the spandrel. Superimposed over this pattern is a single, immobile, uncharged, electrical bolt, an attenuated lozenge on end, originally bearing an aluminized finish.[35] The collective impression of these chevron spandrels, arrowheads hatched with streamlines, is of upward thrust, like the piers.

The General Electric Building's northeast corner,at Lexington Avenue and 51st Street, received an emphasis unusual in Manhattan where buildings generally conform to the city's grid. This corner is curved above the angle buttress and clock to the twelfth floor, then, from the street far below, appears splayed to the top of the tower. Three of the building's spectral guardians are placed one above the other to reassure the eye that it is following the correct path upward, the face with the prow-like headress above the twelfth story parapet, the stylized face and long double flash on the splay between the 23rd and 25th stories, and the double visage between the 34th and 35th floors.[36] This corner view established yet a third focal point for this tall building on a tight site. But a closer look reveals that the curve and splay are not as exactly aligned with the tower as the entrance and 51st Street bays are; drawings of the building's east and north elevations corroborate this. The base of the tower actually starts at the third setback on the twenty-second floor, three stories below the second spectral guardian -- the face and very long flash -- and rise as a corner to the thirty-fifth floor -- and the limestone visage. Only here does the splay resume. But the sight line from the street below obscures these nine corner stories; this architectural trick is not as successful from further up Lexington Avenue or from any floor above the twelfth story in neighboring buildings.

The articulation of the building's curve is typical of the attention Cross & Cross's tall office building designers paid to detail. The limestone angle buttress serves as a porch pier, a clock standard, and an important component in the building's generative metaphor upward. Within the buttress a porch, handsomely

reveted with colored marbles, serves to protect what originally was planned as a bank entrance. Over the bank's revolving door entrance is a round window of leaded glass.[37] Though the jambs of the porch entrances on Lexington and 51st Street, are articulated like the show windows, their pediments are different. Above each entrance a freestanding, aluminum hand and flash is ensconced within a round-headed niche, flanked by red marble fluting of graduated heights.[38] A fat pinnacle protrudes above each niche. The fluting on one side of the niche corresponds with the layered, right angled reveals above, while the fluting on the other corresponds with the concentric brick voussoirs, extension of the layered reveals but brought over the round-headed niches. The buttress itself is constituted of round-headed setbacks, each wider than the former, in ascending order to the topmost one, in which a round clock face has been placed. Tangent to this disk, at hours two and ten, two realistically modelled aluminum forearms extend and hands hold a decorative, horizontal lantern shade above the clock face.[39] The same fat pinnacle as over the hand and flash niche is above the clock, only proportionately larger. A pier, rising up the middle of the curve connects the buttress to the face and prowlike headress on the twelfth story parapet and the splays above, while it separates the curve's paired windows. The curve's recessed spandrels are a different pattern; rather than the chevron-bolt motif, they carry a pattern of three progressively large diamond shapes, the largest and topmost differentiated with the aluminized finish.

The alignment of the building's main entrance, 570 Lexington Avenue, with the tower did not have to be as contrived as the entrance on the northeast corner. Like the show windows, the entrance is flanked by piers with the same ignitive decorative program and a pier rises from above the pediment, but the entrance is not as wide as the show windows and as a consequence this central pier is narrower than the others. Indeed, it is the width of the entrance that determines the location and width of the massed setback buttresses. The central pier becomes a line of windows. But so that we don't lose the central pier here, a pair of terra-cotta, spectral guardians wait at the fifteenth floor to reassure us. Then the line of windows becomes the central pier once more, rising up the tower like a trumeau but right up through the arch inscribed at the top of the tower's broad face. It is from this pier, and the three like it on the north, west, and south faces, that the fabulous effigies, with their radiating headresses, emerge. The entrance, itself, is comprised of a revolving door flanked by single doors. These and the jambs are monel metal, as are the other street level doors and jambs.[40] The overdoor pedimental ornament is an elaboration of that over the show windows.[41]

The central vertical pier on the 51st Street facade, unlike its counterpart on Lexington Avenue, rises interrupted only by a single terra-cotta guardian visage and flash at the first setback buttress massing stretched between the thirteenth and sixteenth floors; then it continues up three setbacks and on up to the effigy

above. The freight entrance received its share of ornament, too. Over its entrance there is an aluminum panel and within its entrance a retractable aluminum gate.[42]

The General Electric Building's tower top is a magnificent culmination of the building's relentless articulation upwards. On the tower's four broad faces round arches, springing from the four splays, terminate all the piers but the central ones. These, like rambunctious trumeaux, burst through the arches to support the four monumental electrical deities, allegories of the power of radio. The rays that emanate from their heads are cast aluminum and designed for neon lighting installation with access for replacement and maintenance.[43] These deities differ from their lower compatriots, the spectral guardians, only in their size and headdress. In fact, the correspondence of the other motifs, top and bottom, is remarkable. Again, the only difference is in their sizes. The street level angle buttress with its round-headed setbacks is repeated up here in an enlarged variation of eight buttress copings atop the tower's splay piers. Each still carries its fat pinnacle. The central piers extend up behind the deities and, with the splay extensions, become the terra-cotta pinnacles between which the terra-cotta tracery, an intersecting web of curves and counter-curves, similar to that of the entrance transom, is spun. Alternating with the bristling pier pinnacles and surmounting the tracery webb are the familiar hand and flash motifs.

The General Electric Building with its emphasized verticality, its piers, buttresses, tracery, pinnacles and repeated ornament, suggests the Gothic style. For Gothic, however, the ornamental motifs are certainly unconventional. Is the building Gothic or Art Deco? Opinions about which of these styles is applicable to General Electric have been divided. At the time of its opening a New York Times writer, alluding to its ornament and citing its chamfered tower, described it as an edifice "of Gothic architecture."[44] "T-Square," writing for The New Yorker, saw the building as "Gothic in line and modern in detail."[45] The Cushman & Wakefield rental prospectus termed the building "modified Gothic."[46] Recent writers have preferred Art Deco. Arnold Lehman praised the building's highly original, decorative treatment. He was the first to draw attention specifically to the building's details.[47] Christopher Gray, encapsulating the work of Cross & Cross in the Macmillian Encyclopedia, recognized the building "as explicitly Art Deco."[48] The answer is a simple one. The General Electric Building is both. This two-fold stylistic classification requires explanation. There are many contributing factors relative to General Electric's exterior articulation, ornament and color.

Cross & Cross's predilection for signature ornament has been pointed out, as has the freedom from traditional styles accorded the designers in the "tall office building department" -- especially with the tall office buildings built of brick. The cumulative experimentation with the pier and recessed spandrel system, decorative brick surfaces, and the chamfered tower shaft has been

impressively resolved here in the General Electric Building. But Hood's response to zoning requirements was much different. Hood conceptualized the potential total mass of a building based on its site and pared away at this shape until it accorded with the restrictions and his aesthetic sensibility. Cross & Cross built up, adding the required setbacks as buttresses to their tower. The firm was certainly aware of the Chrysler Building. But both Van Alen in the Chrysler Building and Cross & Cross in the General Electric Building appear closer to Louis Sullivan in their adherence to ornament than to Hood and his later, starker structures. Though the ornament doesn't depend on Sullivan's organic models, it is used both to articulate and as metaphor.[49]

But not all these factors are architectural. The real-estate boom in the late '20s and the development of Park Avenue should not be overlooked. Neither should Eliot Cross's real-estate acumen, nor his concern that Cross & Cross remain competitive in the tall office building market. The firm's symbolic signature system of ornament reached its apogee with the General Electric tower. And, in this case, the client's greatest wish was for a new visibility, an image of its own, one that should reflect RCA's hard-won independence from General Electric and the other corporate owners.[50] Needless to say, Cross & Cross had made every effort to give them their new and independent image.

One of the most important factors determining the design was the General Electric Building's juxtaposition to its neighbors. When the site was acquired in 1929 by RCA's Bartholomew Building Company the block was already a "medieval" one, the Byzantine-Romanesque of St. Bartholomew's dominating the western portion and the academic Gothic of the Cathedral (St. Patrick's) High School, now demolished, to the south. There were two views of the projected tower disseminated in 1930-31, both of which are of interest. The first is captioned "A Sketch of the New R.C.A. Victor Building to be erected at Lexington Avenue and 51st Street..." In fact, it is a rendering of the tower from the southwest, soaring high above St. Bartholomew's before its long-delayed dome was constructed.[51]

The second view, also a drawing, is from the opposite compass direction, the northeast, and shows the round corner and the setback massings buttressing the tower. Next door, on the left is the facade of the Cathedral High School. Its square, central tower rises above the school building's seventh floor. The tower bartizans reach only to the new neighbor's fifteenth floor. The high school exterior is articulated by piers and recessed spandrels but with pointed arches and ornament characteristic of Gothic.[52] These two neighbors explain the matching of the brick and the correspondence of ornamental motifs along the building's height.

There can be no doubt that the incumbent buildings on the block informed Cross & Cross's design. J. Clydesdale Cushman, whose firm managed the new building, praised the sensitivity of

the architects in the face of the all too prevalent disregard for adjoining properties: "In the instance of the R.C.A. Building, however, an advance step has been taken in that consideration was given by its architects to the previously established styles and color schemes of the existing abutting buildings with the happy result that a new note of harmonious treatment of the ensemble has been struck which I am convinced is a great step in the right direction towards the setting of a new style in New York."[53] This is just how the building was perceived. The New York Times reporter wrote, "The exterior is in harmony with the new St. Bartholomew's Church and with the Cathedral School to the south."[54] Universally admired was the curve at Lexington Avenue and 51st Street. It was singled out in the New York Times and admired by "T-Square" in The New Yorker.[55]

The General Electric Building is both Art Deco and Gothic, indeed, a combination of the two. One of the characteristics of Art Deco is its basic reliance upon traditional motifs, adapted to modern forms. In this case Art Deco has been adapted to the "vertical style."[56] The Real Estate Record and Guide writer mentioned the architects' efforts to make the building symbolic of radio.[57] Radio had become a recently accessible novelty, even as television was in its initial development. These are John Walter Cross's words: "Romantic though radio may be, it is at the same time intangible and elusive--a thing which can be captured visually only through symbolism. It is energy in almost the pure state, which challenges us to depict in design the very fundamentals of our universe."[58] The wonder of it all was dramatized: "At night an aura of colored light will shoot out from the crown of forked lightning which each figure will wear as a symbol of the speed of radio."[59] With forms from the past, in part out of respect to its neighbors, and with metaphor, even allegory, Cross & Cross attempted to compete with the future. Fifty years later, the allegory continues to create a striking corporate symbol for the General Electric Company.

Conclusion

Today we can appreciate the highly popular and often published profile of the General Electric tower and its significance as one of the monuments of the Art Deco style. Seen now as another variation within the style, the General Electric tower contributes to the historical aspect and the dynamism of the New York City skyline. The allegorical deities, an architectural conceit of the great Baroque architects, just below the tower's pinnacled crown of gold glazed tracery, have had no equal in this century. They are the apogee of the Cross & Cross firm's delight in signature symbolism. In their choice of massing, articulation, ornament and color Cross & Cross created a laudable and exemplary design.

Footnotes

1. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Rockefeller Center Designation Report(IP-1446), report prepared by Janet Adams, April 23, 1985, p. 29.

2. John Winthrop Hammond, Men and Volts (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1941), p. 377. The other companies were American Telephone, the Bell group, Western Electric, Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing, and United Fruit.

3. Alan Balfour, Rockefeller Center: Architecture as Theater (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1978), pp. 19-24. His explanation of this corporate deal is the most comprehensible.

4. Balfour, pp. 20-21.

5. In 1933 a federal court decreed that the RCA common stock held by General Electric be distributed to the General Electric stockholders as a dividend. Hammond, p. 424.

6. New York County, Office of the Register, Abstract of Conveyances, Section 5, Block 1305.

7. See: Landmarks Preservation Commission, Grand Central Terminal Interior Designation Report(IP-1099), report prepared by Nancy Goeschel, September 23, 1980.

8. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Docket Book 43, N.B. 671-1929.

9. The following citations to correspondence and contracts are drawn from Correspondence Files, Building Management Office, General Electric Building. Our thanks to the General Electric Company for making these files available. Demolition contract, Feb. 28, 1930, Jacob Volk Demolition Corp. Volk completed the work April 15, 1930. During demolition the Cathedral High School's northern wall was rendered vulnerable by the new exposure and the attorneys for the Diocese requested the wall be protected with brick. Instead of brick, a cinder concrete mixture was used. Correspondence, Gillespie & O'Connor.

10. As part of the structural steel contract with McClintic-Marshall Co., dated March 25, 1930, there is a schedule of delivery dates for components as needed. The building's rise appears to have adhered closely to these projections. The contracted starting date, seven weeks after the receipt of framing plans to the 12th floor--"G-2," March 27, 1930--corresponds with the commencement date, May 13, 1930, listed in the Docket Book, N.B. 671-1929. Concrete arch work was contracted from Brennan & Sloan, Inc., and included the cantilevered concrete brackets to support exterior walls. Two violations, one from the Manhattan Buildings Department, the second from the Fire Department, Sept. 19, 1930, in reference to the around the clock, day, night, and weekend availability of a

hoist elevator and a man capable of running it, serve notice that structural work continued.

11. Balfour, pp. 20-22.

12. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber 3773, p. 495.

13. Dec. 12, 1931, according to the New Building Docket Book.

14. Obituary, John Walter Cross, New York Times, June 26, 1951.

15. The church was begun for the Fathers of Mercy in 1901 by Daus & Otto but work halted a year later. A Mrs. Redmond is mentioned as patroness to this congregation of French American Catholics who established the church; John Raben, Jr., "Church of Notre Dame," (unpublished typescript, May 1971), p. 1. Perhaps she was an aunt by marriage to the Messrs. Cross and Cross. They were commissioned in 1914 and the work continued to their design until abandoned in 1928.

16. The drum and dome are illustrated in: "New Catholic Church," Real Estate Record and Guide, Feb. 28, 1914, p. 399.

17. Both Crosses were "clubmen." As much as it is possible to determine personality from a subject's social clubs, Eliot appears the more gregarious. Though both belonged to the Links and Racquet Clubs, Eliot had the Knickerbocker and the Brook to which he could retire into the society of gentlemen of similar background and circumstance. Eliot also belonged to the First and Fifth Avenue Associations, groups largely concerned with real estate. John was a member of the Century Association, a club founded by painters, sculptors, and architects.

18. Mary Ann Tighe, "Riverview Terrace," House and Garden, 156 (September 1984), 239.

19. Obituary, Eliot Cross, New York Times, January 24, 1949.

20. P. Sewall Webb was president, Robert C. Knapp was secretary. Obituary, Eliot Cross, Architectural Record, 105 (March 1949), 18.

21. Christopher Gray, "Cross & Cross," Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), pp. 477-478.

22. See Appendix A: "Private Residences, Clubs, Branch Banks and Schools by Cross & Cross."

23. See Appendix B: "Hotels and Apartment Buildings by Cross & Cross."

24. The choice of Gothic for the Woolworth Building, according to A.W. Robins, was Woolworth's own, a choice Gilbert did not dispute. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Woolworth Building

Designation Report (IP-1273), report prepared by Anthony W. Robins, April 12, 1983.

25. Though Hood preferred "vertical style," either term could be used interchangeably for tall buildings of this type. Raymond M. Hood and eds., "Exterior Architecture of Tall Buildings," Architectural Forum, 41 (Sept. 1924), 97-100.

26. American Architect, 126 (Oct. 22, 1924), plate 136. A subsequent owner, in an effort to create more office space, inserted five rows of horizontal strip windows into the diaper work (c.1955) on floors three through seven. Alternating with the strip windows, four identical bands of corrugated aluminum siding have been applied over what wall surface remained. This added fenestration and siding effectively change the building's aspect to what at first glance looks like a fussy variation of the International style.

27. Jonas Chickering's iron frame instrument won the highest award in the International Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, London, 1851. Both Chickering and Steinway received gold medals at the Exposition Universale of 1867 in Paris. Helen R. Hollis, Pianos in the Smithsonian Institution (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973). pp. 34-36. Though one might think Chickering-American would be proud to display their earlier recognation, this is the French one held high in Steinway territory. Around the central profile is inscribed, "Napoleon, Empereur des Francais." The recent gilding of the ornamental details--the choir relief spandrels between segmental arch and mezzanine cornice and the cloaked personifications above--is heavy handed.

28. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Midtown West Survey (New York, 1979), cites the building, called the Empire-Empico Building, as the work of Warren & Wetmore, 1928. Warren & Wetmore may have designed an extension along West 47th Street. For this address, New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Docket Book 25, N.B. 604-1923, records Cross & Cross as architects, though for a twelve-story building. The existing building has 32 stories. No completion date is recorded in the docket book. The Sanborn Atlas notation for this lot indicates the completion date as 1927 (Manhattan, Vol. 4, plate 45); here it is called the Longines-Wittnauer Building. In three years the building's height almost tripled. There is no question that the building was designed by any other firm. Its style is consistent with what Cross & Cross had built and would build.

29. No contracts or source specifications have been located. The building records are otherwise so intact in the General Electric Company files, I suggest they have been misfiled.

30. George Colon & Co., 103 East 103rd Street, May 12, 1930, supplied all labor and materials except the face brick and the terra cotta. American bond, masonry specifications, p. 5.

31. The tawny limestone was "Standard Indiana Rustic Buff Oolithic" limestone, from Lawrence and Monroe Counties, Indiana, specified March 27, 1930, to terra cotta from the Federal Seaboard Terracotta Corp., contract slate May 14, 1930. It would appear from the building's plans that the only stone in the tower is the double face ornament between the 34th and 35th floors, northeast corner. On "G-18-A," March 27, 1930, these are molded brick. "Revision A," April 4, 1930, changes them to limestone.

32. "Egyptian Red" was specified, Feb. 21, 1930. It may have been the color the architects desired, but "Texas Pink" was what was available through Edward J. Davey, Inc. of 801 East 134th Street and Marble Falls, Texas. Also through Davey came the curbstone, Deer Island, Maine, granite, and the paving concrete for the Lexington Avenue and 51st Street sidewalks, Granolithic. Marble: "Verona Red," specified March 27, 1930, Blueprints; "Stalactite Red," revised specification, June 17, 1930; "Premier Crocidolite Red," Contract, August 4, 1930. Contractors were George Brown & Co., Newark, New Jersey. The "Premier Crocidolite Red" was supplied by teh Tompkins-Kiel Marble Co., and so specified.

33. There are 46 office floors, but machinery and water tanks occupy the top four floors. All exterior glass was Pittsburgh Plate Glass, the ground story show windows, sash doors, and entrance transoms, the curved windows from from two through twelve, and the wire glass windows on the south and west sides. The windows themselves are Hollow Metal, #12 B & S gauge blue annealed steel, contracted from Campbell Metal Window Corp., May 9, 1930. From the second floor to the 25th, the windows are six feet, five inches high. The tower windows, floors 26 to 47, are two inches shorter. Windows on the 48th floor are seven feet high. The windows on the Lexington Avenue-51st Street corner from the second to the twelfth floor are curved. All of these are three-over-three double-hung sash. There are several bays with narrower fenestration on the west elevation below the eighteenth floor, the south below the 24th, and the central two bays on the Lexington Avenue elevation below the fifteenth are two-over-two. Plans "G-10" and "G-18," March 27, 1930. The windows of the tower splays (all but the southwest splay where the firestair is located behind its terra-cotta lattice) are narrower also, though these were three-over-three. But the splay windows from the 36th floor to the 47th floor were originally two-over-two. Plans "G-18-A," March 27, 1930.

The construction phase included the stairs, railings, and lamps for the Interborough Rapid Transit Company's 51st Street subway station. Correspondence File, "Subway Connection."

34. The major setbacks on the Lexington Avenue facade occur at the 13th, 16th, 19th, 22nd, and 25th floors and on each of these but the last along 51st Street.

35. The aluminized finish was specified. Recent cleaning tests conducted from the building's 26th floor setback on spandrels on

the two floors above, west side, revealed the aluminized bolt as originally conceived, a silvery-gray against the bronze-colored terra cotta.

36. Twelfth story parapet "buttress enrichment," Drawings G-20, Model S-1. The double flash, Model S-2. The double visage, G-18, Model S-5.

37. At present this bank space is occupied by a cosmetic retailer.

38. The hand and flash is specified, July 25, 1930, in the contract for architectural and ornamental metal work with William H. Jackson Company, Brooklyn, September 10, 1930. Mr. Robert Nelson, a principal at Jackson, was very helpful. After World War II, this very very old mantelpiece and fireplace furnishings firm discontinued its architectural metal work fabrication. William Jackson had old drawings but only relating to mantelpieces, some for mantels designed for the residence Cross & Cross undertook for a Mrs. Sears. The hand and flash also appears in the plans, S-3, Model 9, drawn by Ray W.O. and R.S.M.

39. Both the clock and this bracket were specified; see footnote 36. There seem to have been but two changes wrought by the transfer of the building from RCA to General Electric. The first was the clock face. As originally specified, the letters would be enameled, only the numerals 3, 6, 9, and 12 were to be used. The center embellishment was comprised of a relief map of the world, the etched portions representing the continents to be higher than that of the various oceans. It is likely that it is this same global symbol that is carried on the spandrels of the 13th floor, Drawings, M-16. The present clock face has all twelve hours and it is the round, scrolled, G.E. logo that occupies its center. The second was the main entrance transom detailing.

40. Specifications, July 25, 1930, architectural and ornamental metal work. Above the doors there is a transom containing a decorative aluminum grille--seven muntins, the central and contiguous upper regions of which, left and right, contain a tracery-like pattern of intersecting curve and counter-curve elements which rise from the triangle containing the street number.

41. At no time during the preparation of this report has this feature been visible; the building's continuing renovation required the sidewalk bridges that have obscured it. There is reason to believe that it is a modification of what was originally designed, G-18-A, S-2, March 27, 1930, and subsequently specified, July 25, 1930. The existing transom grille is different from the one in S-2. The original included a central vertical element, the foot of the narrow pier above, which was articulated with a long angular flash and head with stylized rayed headdress, notated as aluminum and enamel. This element cut through three regions: the first was a vertically

fluted tympanum of red ("Verona") marble in form not unlike the show window tympana; the second was a pattern of tracery, curving stylized foliage, like the round-headed reliefs in the buttress but etched in aluminum; the the third, aluminum lettering ("RCA Victor Building") on black Belgian marble. These drawings were signed: Ray W.O. and R.S. Myers. "Black Belgian" marble was used with the "Premier Crocidolite Red." Both the triangular features of the lintels and soffits in Vermont Gravina marble and the circular window trim above the entrance at the corner in Vermont Westland Cream, dark vein, were realized as specified.

42. Architectural and ornamental metal work: specified July 25, 1930, contracted August 10, 1930. A drawing exists for this entrance also. The overdoor panel contains a globe, surrounded by rays, girdled sinister, and superimposed over a long diagonal electrical flash. One variation of this is seen in the spandrels on the 13th floor, another on the 45th. The flag pole wall plate shoes and tie rods, on the Lexington Avenue facade, were also specified in the metal work contract. Specified March 25, 1930, contracted September 9, 1930.

43. Drawings G-18-A, Section xxxv, Bulletin #1, Item-E, August 18, 1930. The electrical work was within the electrical contract. In January 1940, the illumination of the building was increased. Four searchlights lit the chamfered corners of the tower. Blue fluorescent lamps were installed "like window boxes" in the windows of the 45th to the 49th floors. Red light glowed from within the tracery screen up top. Real Estate Record and Guide, January 20, 1940, p. 8.

44. New York Times, Jan. 18, 1931.

45. "T-Square," "The Skyline," The New Yorker, 7 (June 13, 1931), 46.

46. Cushman & Wakefield Prospectus, Files, Manager's Office, General Electric Building.

47. Arnold Lehman, "New York Skyscrapers: The Jazz Modern and Neo-American Beautilitarian Style," Metropolitan Museum Bulletin, 27(1970-71), 368.

48. Gray, p. 478.

49. In this regard, Sullivan's emphasis upon ornament was kept alive by the Beaux Arts clubs, the organizations within the architectural profession made up predominantly of talented draftsmen and which continued in most major American cities into the 1940s.

50. In the end, RCA's wish for an independent image was granted in spades when it was offered the Rockefeller Center centerpiece.

51. American Architect, 137 (May 1930), 59. The drawing of the tower has been superimposed on a photograph of St. Bartholomew's

and neighboring buildings. The juxtaposition of tower and church suggests that Cross & Cross thought of the tower in terms of the church as a crossing lantern. Indeed, the rendering evokes James Wyatt's Fonthill Abbey (finished 1813).

52. The drawing was done for the Cushman & Wakefield prospectus before November 1930, when the building was tranferred to General Electric ownership. Though it adorned the prospectus, the drawing is remarkably true.

53. Real Estate Record and Guide, April 4, 1931, p. 7. Christopher Gray shared this quotation.

54. New York Times, January 18, 1931.

55. However, "T-Square" admired little about the tower, finding it "theatric," p. 46.

56. Raymond Willard Olson's initials appear consistently on the drawings of the building's more unique motifs, the transoms, the hand and flash, the spectral guardians, and the topmost deities. Most likely he invented them. Olson came from Providence, where it is known he took courses at the Rhode Island School of Design. I thank Lucy Colangelo of the RISD Registrar's Office for this information. Mr. Edwin Olsen of Cain, Farrell & Bell, Archts, told this writer that Mr. Olson came to New York with his father to work for Cross & Cross. He is first listed in the AIA Membership Directory in 1942, and subsequently in 1950-51.

57. See footnote 53.

58. Real Estate Record and Guide, May 30, 1931, p. 8.

59. Uncredited quotation from a label in "New York Skyscrapers Between the Wars," an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, June 12-September 23, 1984.

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APPENDIX A - PRIVATE RESIDENCES, CLUBS, BRANCH BANKS, AND SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY BY CROSS & CROSS

This is a representative but by no means complete list. These buildings have the Georgian and Adam style facades, generalized though correct, imaginative though never inappropriate, that characterize the private residence, club, branch bank, and school work, what might be termed a canon which the firm maintained for over 30 years. It was this academic and conservative style for which they were best known by contemporaries, and it is this style critics of the General Electric Building are wont to refer when comparing it to the firm's other work.

Links Club	36 East 62nd Street	1917
Iewis Spencer Morris Residence	118 East 80th Street	1922
Hewitt School	45 East 75th Street	1925
Hangar Club	34 East 63rd Street	1930
Fulton Trust Company	1002 Madison Avenue	1931
George Whitney Residence	120 East 80th Street	1932
Central Hanover Bank	35 East 72nd Street	1932
American Foundation for the Blind	13 West 16th Street	1935
Merchants Dining Club	26 Thomas Street	1941

APPENDIX B - HOTEIS AND APARTMENT BUIIDINGS IN NEW YORK CITY BY CROSS & CROSS

This is a representative but not a complete list. The Cross & Cross designers observed the academic solution for a tall building's articulation, base, shaft, and cornice, quite consistently. The first three buildings on the list, and partially the fourth, are expressed in stone. The bulk of the building is brick until the cornice when the designer returned to the stone of the base. Often a transition from stone to the brick zone is achieved by framing several of the windows in the first story of the brick zone in stone, generally with classical aediculation. No. 960 Fifth Avenue is a variation; it is ashlar faced from sidewalk to cornice. Here a palazzo facade motif, a major three-story order on a rusticated two-story base, complements the street. Likewise the cornice is more elaborate with herm figures and garlands. No doubt, the architects felt the building's location opposite the park and the Metropolitan Musem warranted this attention.

No. 405 Park Avenue	1915
Broadway and 246th Street	1916
No. 150 East 73rd Street	1923
No. 100 West 55th Street (demolished)	1926
No. 155 East 72nd Street	1928
No. 25 East End Avenue	1928
No. 960 Fifth Avenue	1930
Barclay Hotel, 129 East 48th Street	1927
William Sloan Memorial YMCA, 355 West 33rd Street	1930

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the General Electric Building has a special character, special historic 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 General Electric Building, constructed in 1929-31 to create a highly visible image for the fledgling RCA Corporation, is a major example of Art Deco architecture; that it was designed by the firm of Cross & Cross in the Gothic mode of that style which is both symbolic and expressive of the function of the building; that the massing and articulation of the building are laudable and exemplary and the skillful handling of brick and terra cotta, characteristic of the firm's work, is a major element of the design; that the ornamental detail, most notably the allegorical deities, is an integral part of the architects' effort to make the building symbolic of radio as well as the apogee of the firm's delight in signature symbolism; that the General Electric Building is the successful culmination of the Cross & Cross firm's efforts to develop a coherent and cohesive articulation for tall office buildings; and that the result remains a striking corporate symbol for the General Electric Company.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 General Electric Building (originally RCA Building), 570 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1305, Lot 60, Borough of Manhattan as its related Landmark Site.

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General Electric Building
(originally RCA Building)
570 Lexington Avenue
Manhattan

Built: 1929-31

Photo: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation

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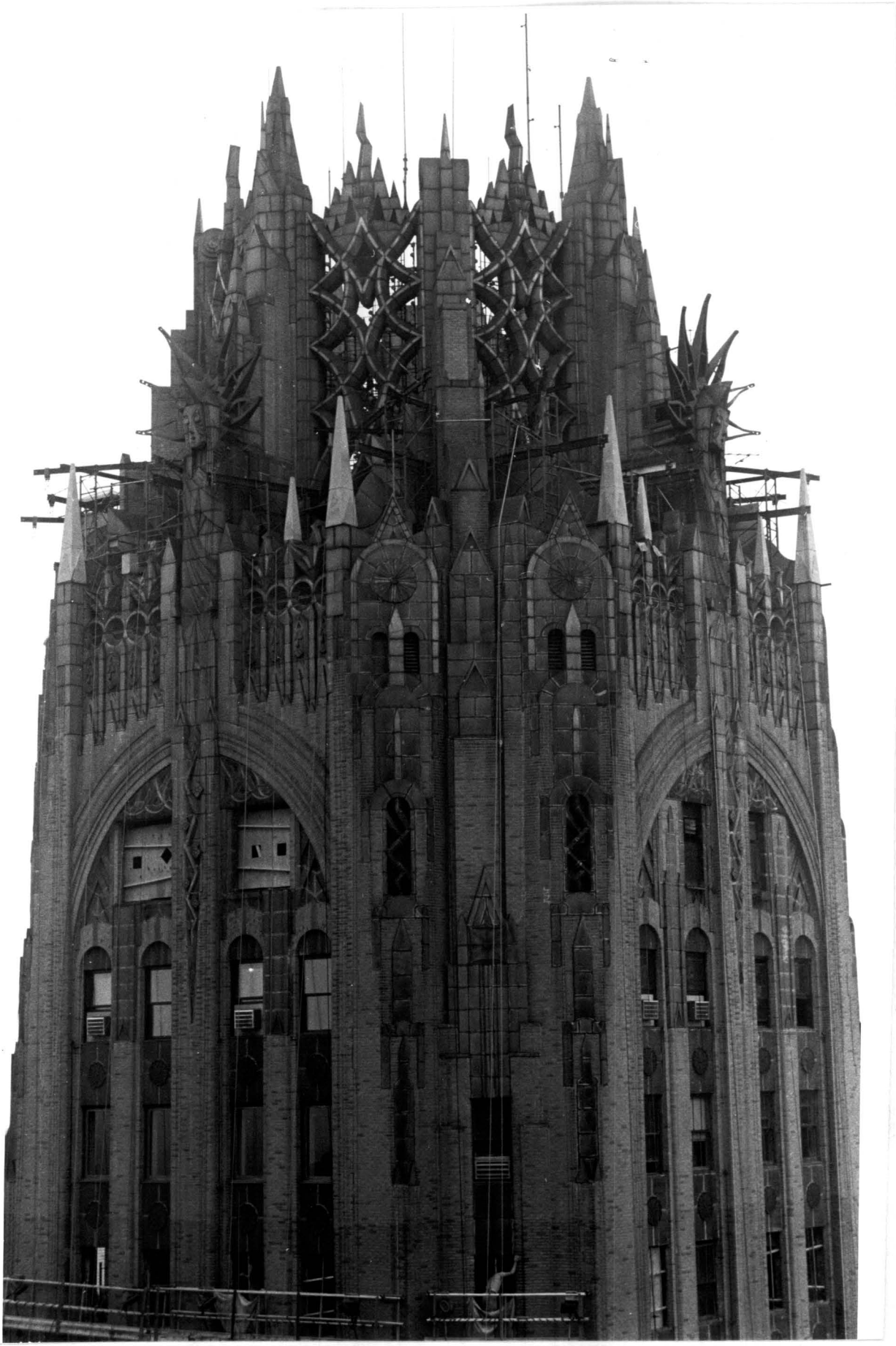
Photo: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation

General Electric Building
window detail

Photo: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation
Commission



General Electric Building
detail

Photo: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation
Commission

General Electric Building
ground floor detail

Photo: Carl Forster
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