

CHRYSLER BUILDING, 405 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1928-1930; architect William Van Alen.

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

On March 14, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Chrysler Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The item was again heard on May 9, 1978 (Item No. 3) and July 11, 1978 (Item No. 1). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and communications supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Chrysler Building, a stunning statement in the Art Deco style by architect William Van Alen, embodies the romantic essence of the New York City skyscraper. Built in 1928-30 for Walter P. Chrysler of the Chrysler Corporation, it was "dedicated to world commerce and industry."¹ The tallest building in the world when completed in 1930, it stood proudly on the New York skyline as a personal symbol of Walter Chrysler and the strength of his corporation.

History of Construction

The Chrysler Building had its beginnings in an office building project for William H. Reynolds, a real-estate developer and promoter and former New York State senator. Reynolds had acquired a long-term lease in 1921 on a parcel of property at Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street owned by the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. In 1927 architect William Van Alen was hired to design an office tower to be called the Reynolds Building for the site. Publicized as embodying new principles in skyscraper design,² the projected building was to be 67 stories high rising 808 feet, and it was "to be surmounted by a glass dome, which when lighted from within, will give the effect of a great jewelled sphere."³ In October, 1928, however, the office building project and the lease on the site were taken over by Walter P. Chrysler, head of the Chrysler Corporation, who was seeking to expand his interests into the real estate field.

Walter Percy Chrysler (1875-1940), one of America's foremost automobile manufacturers, was a self-made man who worked his way up through the mechanical and manufacturing aspects of the railroad business before joining the Buick Motor Company as works manager in 1912. Because of his success in introducing new processes and efficiencies into the automobile plant, he rose quickly through the administrative ranks of General Motors (which had absorbed Buick) before personality conflicts with William C. Durant, head of General Motors, forced Chrysler to leave. In 1921 he reorganized Willys-Overland Company, and then took over as chairman of the reorganization and management committee of the Maxwell Motor Company, eventually assuming the presidency. This enabled Chrysler to introduce in 1924 the car bearing his name which presented such innovations as four-wheel hydraulic brakes and high compression motor. Over 50 million dollars worth of cars were sold the first year, and in 1925, the Maxwell Motor Company became the Chrysler Corporation. Dodge Brothers was acquired in 1928 giving the Chrysler Corporation additional manufacturing facilities, a famous line of cars, and putting it in a position to challenge the leadership of Ford and General Motors. By 1935, when Chrysler retired from the presidency of the Chrysler Corporation to become chairman of the board, the company was second in the automobile industry in volume of production.⁴

It was while Chrysler was aggressively expanding his corporation in 1928 that he took over the office building project from Reynolds. In his autobiography, Chrysler said that he had the building constructed so that his sons would have something to be responsible for.⁵ He could not have been unaware, however, that the building would become a personal symbol and further the image of the Chrysler Corporation--even though no corporate funds were used in its financing or construction. To that end Chrysler worked with architect William Van Alen to make the building a powerful and striking design.

William Van Alen (1882-1954) studied at Pratt Institute before beginning his architectural career in the office of Clarence True, a speculative builder. Several years later while continuing his studies at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in the atelier of Donn Barber, Van Alen entered the office of Clinton & Russell as a designer. In 1908 he won the Paris Prize of the Beaux-Arts Institute and entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Atelier Laloux. According to architect Francis S. Swales, "His work at the Ecole indicated that the training was providing him with the mental freedom necessary to think independently, instead of merely the usual school -cargo of elements of architecture and a technique of composition by rules."⁶ Returning to New York in 1912 he introduced the concept of "garden" apartments and also designed the Albemarle Building, a skyscraper without cornices. In the 1920s he became known for his innovative shop-front designs and for a series of restaurants for the Child's chain. With the Chrysler Building, Van Alen was able to apply modern principles of design to the skyscraper, but at the same time created such a striking image that critic Kenneth Murchison dubbed him "the Ziegfield of his profession."⁷ In the 1930s he pioneered in prefabricated housing designs although they were never widely produced. Van Alen served for four years in the 1940s as director of sculpture for the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, and he was a member of the American Institute of Architects and the National Academy of Design.

Work began on the Chrysler Building on October 15, 1928, when Chrysler acquired the lease, with clearance of the site. Construction proceeded rapidly; foundations to a depth of 69 feet were completed early in 1929, and the steel framework was completed by the end of September of that year. The design of the building, however, was altered from that for Reynolds. Chrysler, in his autobiography, credits himself for suggesting that it be taller than the 1000-foot Eiffel Tower.⁸ The design of the crowning dome was also changed, and the addition of a spire, which the architect called a "vertex," made the Chrysler at 1046 feet the tallest building in the world at the time. Kenneth Murchison fancifully depicts Chrysler urging Van Alen to win the race to construct the world's tallest building.⁹ Van Alen himself had personal reasons for achieving this goal, as a former partner, H. Craig Severance, was constructing the Bank of Manhattan, 40 Wall Street, at the same time with the aim of making it the world's tallest skyscraper. Thinking that the Chrysler Building would be only 925 feet high, Severance added a 50-foot flagpole to his building making it 927 feet. Meanwhile, Van Alen designed the 185-foot spire which would make the Chrysler Building the tallest. The spire was fabricated, then delivered to the building in five sections, and assembled secretly at the 65th floor. In November, 1929, it was finally raised into position by a 20-ton derrick through a fire tower in the center of the building, then riveted into place, the whole operation taking about 90 minutes. This engineering feat captured the popular imagination as well as that of professionals, and it helped to further the progressive image of the Chrysler Building. However, the Chrysler lost its height distinction two years later with the construction of the Empire State Building.

The first tenants moved into the Chrysler Building in April, 1930, even though construction was not completed. Formal opening ceremonies were held on May 27, 1930, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the 42nd Street Property Owners and Merchants Association. A bronze tablet was placed in the lobby of the building "in recognition of Mr. Chrysler's contribution to civic advancement."¹⁰ The building was considered finished in August, 1930, but curiously, the completion date recorded in the records of the Manhattan Building Department is February 19, 1932.¹¹

The Chrysler Building and Art Deco

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

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

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

The Chrysler Building rises 77 stories in a series of setbacks which accord with the regulations of the 1916 New York zoning ordinance. As a freestanding tower occupying about half a block, the building is visible from four sides. Like many Art Deco architects, Van Alen believed strongly in designing steel structures so that they would not be imitative of masonry construction.¹² Also unlike many earlier skyscrapers, the design of the Chrysler did not follow the formula of a column with ornamental base, bare shaft, and ornamental capital; rather the design was to be of interest throughout the entire height.¹³ Both the great height of the building and the mandated setbacks aided Van Alen in making this design decision.

The first four stories of the building cover the entire site and are faced with polished black Shastone granite at the first story and white Georgian marble above. The most striking features of this portion of the building are the two entrances, on Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street. Each entrance rises for a height of three stories in proscenium fashion and is enframed by Shastone granite. Set back within the deep reveals of the entrances are sets of revolving doors beneath intricately patterned metal and glass screens. The treatment is such as to heighten the dramatic effect of entering the building--a concern of Art Deco design. There is a one-story entrance on 43rd Street. Also at first story level are large show windows for shops, framed in metal. Windows for offices may be seen at the second, third, and fourth stories. Ornamental spandrels are set at the bases of the second story windows. The exposed metal frames of the entries and windows are of "Nirosta" steel, a kind of rust-resistant, chromium nickel steel, manufactured for the first time in the United States specifically for the Chrysler Building according to a German formula from Krupp. This use of a new material is in keeping with Art Deco principles.

Above the fourth story, the building is penetrated on the east and west sides by light courts extending to the face of the tower, while on the north and south the structure gradually rises in a series of setbacks. The facing of the walls through the first setback at the sixteenth story is of white brick with contrasting white marble strips creating a basketweave pattern. The use of a variety of colors and textures is characteristic of Art Deco. Windows are set in a regular grid pattern. An unusual feature of all windows in the building is that they have no reveals; frames are set flush with the walls. This was seen as another means of indicating modernity and progress.

In the next setback, ending at the twenty-fourth floor, there is a vertical emphasis with piers of white brick alternating with vertical window strips. Aluminum spandrels between the windows aid this effect. Spandrels at the twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second floors are adorned with polished abstract relief ornament. At the corners of the twenty-fourth floor are placed conventionalized pineapples, about nine feet high, of "Nirosta" steel, which had been fabricated on the site.

The next three stories, through the twenty-seventh, form the third setback. Horizontal banding and zigzag motifs in gray and black brick contrast with the verticality of the setback below. The fourth setback, to the thirty-first story, marks the emergence of the tower shaft from the lower masses. At the thirty-first floor the corners of the building are extended outward and crowned by huge ornamental Chrysler radiator caps in "Nirosta" steel, spanning about 15 feet. The extension was necessary to overcome the optical effect that would otherwise make the tower appear wider at the top than at the base. Also at this floor is a frieze in gray and white brick of stylized racing automobiles with polished steel hub caps. These ornamental features are overt symbols of the Chrysler Corporation and characteristic of the types of effects created by Art Deco architects.

The treatment of the shaft of the tower is a dual one emphasizing both verticality and horizontality. Windows are grouped into three vertical strips in the center of each tower face. Each group has a brick enframingent and marble pier extending continuously upward across the windows. Spandrels between the windows are also given vertical emphasis with alternating vertical stripes in gray and white brick. By contrast the corners of the tower are horizontally banded with black brick. Another slight setback at the fifty-ninth story is crowned by gargoyles, also of "Nirosta" steel, in the form of eagle's heads. Above this begin the series of "Nirosta" steel arches set with triangular windows which form the dome of the building. Like the "Nirosta" ornament, the steel covering of the arches was fabricated on the site. The highly polished dome with its crowning spire--Van Alen's design feat to win the world's tallest building title--are the most striking as well as most original parts of the building. They, more than any other element, make the Chrysler Building a particularly notable feature on the Manhattan skyline and reflect the concern of the Art Deco architect with making his building readable and recognizable from a distance.

The Chrysler Building and the Image of Progress

When completed the Chrysler Building was praised as "an expression of the intense activity and vibrant life of our day" and as "teem[ing] with the spirit of modernism,...the epitome of modern business life,..stand[ing] for progress in architecture and in modern building methods."¹⁴ Walter P. Chrysler had sought to create the most desirable office building of the day:

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

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

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

The Chrysler Building is therefore dedicated as a sound contribution to business progress.¹⁵

The building had a number of innovative and desirable features. The soundproofed office partitions were of steel made in interchangeable sections so that arrangement of any office suite could be changed quickly and conveniently. Under-floor duct systems carried wiring for telephone and electric outlets. The elevators, specifically at Chrysler's instruction, were capable of speeds of 1000 feet per minute although city codes in effect in 1930 only allowed 700 feet per minute. The building also had three of the lonest continuous elevator shafts in the world. To enhance public access to the building, an underground arcade led to the IRT subway system. The connection was strongly opposed by the IRT, but Chrysler prevailed and the passageway was built at his expense. In the dome was the private Cloud Club, which still exists, and, in the very topmost floor, a public observatory. On display was Walter P. Chrysler's box of handmade tools, the emblem of his enterprise and personal success. The observatory has been closed for many years.

Conclusion

Critics such as Lewis Mumford who favored the International Style denigrated the Chrysler Building for its "inane romanticism,...meaningless voluptuousness, .../and/ void symbolism,"¹⁶ but it was these qualities which captured the popular imagination and helped make it one of the most famous buildings in New York. We can appreciate the comments of the editor of Architectural Forum who wrote:

It stands by itself, something apart and alone. It is simply the realization, the fulfillment in metal and masonry, of a one-man dream, a dream of such ambition and such magnitude as to defy the comprehension and the criticism of ordinary men or by ordinary standards.¹⁷

The Chrysler Building still stands proudly in the New York skyline, its gleaming spire and soaring tower capturing the eye and imagination of the viewer. While it may no longer symbolize the Chrysler Corporation, it still embodies the romantic essence of the Art Deco skyscraper in New York City, with its dramatic effects, elegant materials, and vivid ornamental details. Built as a monument to progress in commerce and industry, it remains as one of New York's finest office buildings and great examples of the Art Deco style.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Chrysler Building," Architecture and Building, 62 (August 1930), 222.
2. "Final Sketch of the Reynolds Building, New York," American Architect, 134 (August 20, 1928), 269.
3. Ibid.
4. "Walter Percy Chrysler," Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement 2, p.104; New York Times, August 19, 1940, p. 1.
5. Walter P. Chrysler, Life of an American Workman, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1950), p. 197.
6. Francis S. Swales, "Draftsmanship and Architecture as Exemplified by the work of William Van Alen," Pencil Points, 10 (August 1929), 519.
7. Kenneth M. Murchison, "The Chrysler Building As I See It," American Architect, 138 (September 1930), 24.
8. Chrysler, p. 197.
9. Murchison, pp. 29-30.
10. New York Times, May 28, 1930, p. 13.
11. New York City Buildings Department: Manhattan, Docket Books, New Building 92-1928, and Folder for Block 1297, Lot 23, New Building permit 92-1928.
12. New York Herald-Tribune, May 25, 1954 (Van Alen obituary).
13. Amer. Archt., 134 (August 20, 1928), 269.
14. Eugene Clute, "The Chrysler Building," Architectural Forum, 53 (October 1930), 406; Murchison, p. 78.
15. Quoted in: The Chrysler Building, (New York; Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company and Edward S. Gordon, Inc., 1978), frontispiece.
16. Lewis Mumford, "Notes on Modern Architecture," The New Republic, 66 (March 18, 1931), 120.
17. "Criticism of the Chrysler Building," Architectural Forum, 53 (October 1930), 410.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Chrysler Building 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 Chrysler Building is an outstanding example of Art Deco architecture; that it was designed by architect William Van Alen to symbolize the Chrysler Corporation; that when completed in 1930 it was the tallest building in the world; that the placement of the 185-foot spire giving the Chrysler Building that distinction was a daring engineering achievement; that the architect made use of new techniques and materials, most notably "Nirosta" steel for exterior ornament, framing of the openings, the dome, and the spire; that it was intended to be the epitome of modern business life and it was dedicated by Walter P. Chrysler to world commerce and industry; that it stood for progress in architecture and in modern building methods; that the soaring tower with its spire embodies the romantic essence of the New York City skyscraper; and that the Chrysler Building continues to dominate the New York City skyline.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Chrysler Building, 405 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1297, Lot 23, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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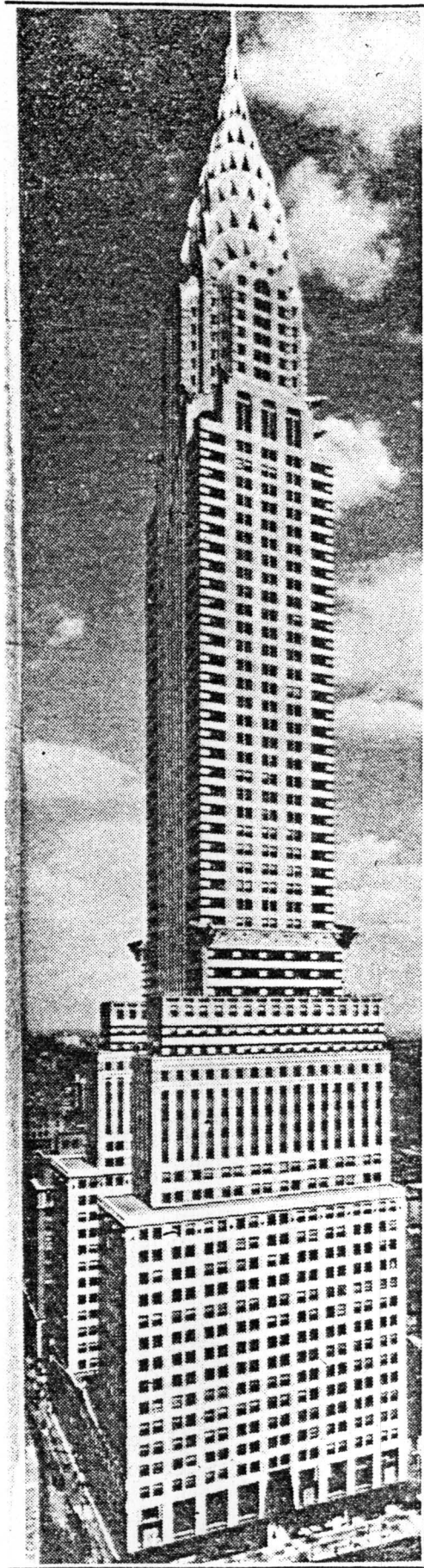


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405 Lexington Avenue
Borough of Manhattan
Architect: William Van Alen
Date: 1928-30