

November 1, 2018

Testimony before the New York City Council Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Siting and Maritime Uses regarding LU 0218-2018: 550 Madison Avenue (former AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building, later Sony Plaza), Manhattan

Good afternoon Chair Adams and Subcommittee Members, I am Kate Lemos McHale, Director of Research at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and I am joined by Ali Rasoulinejad. Thank you for the opportunity to present LPC's July 31st designation of 550 Madison Avenue, the former AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building and later Sony Plaza.

550 Madison Avenue is located in midtown Manhattan on the west side of Madison Avenue between East 55th and 56th Streets. It was designed by Johnson/Burgee architects, in association with Simmons Architects, in 1978 and completed in 1984. Clad with pinkish-gray granite and crowned by a colossal pediment, it is an icon of the skyline and of Postmodern architecture, and marked a turning point in the history of 20th-century architecture.

Philip Johnson was a significant figure in 20th century American architecture. He began his career as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1930s where he introduced European modernism to a wider American audience, and he later designed such notable modern works as the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, and the former Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building. In partnership with John Burgee in the 1970s and 80s, he worked on many large corporate commissions, and with the design for the AT&T Building, ushered in the era of Postmodernism.

AT&T's new corporate headquarters was the first Postmodern skyscraper. It was a significant part of a broad cultural critique of modernism beginning in the late 1960s that led architects to react against the doctrines of modernism and the International Style. Icons of the style include such works as Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, Michael Graves' Portland Building in Oregon, and the AT&T Building in New York City.

Johnson and Burgee conceived the design for AT&T's new headquarters as a "statement building" in the spirit of Manhattan's classic skyscrapers, which John Burgee described as "solid, with a recognizable top". Clad entirely in pinkish-gray granite to "evoke an earlier time", it stood out against the many mid-20th century skyscrapers with glass curtain walls, like the Seagram Building, pictured at left.

The building's facade has a classical tripartite configuration that rises without setbacks to a colossal broken pediment. The base features a 110-foot-tall entrance arch flanked by groups of flat arches that originally opened to public arcades beneath the tower. AT&T did not want retail on Madison Avenue; instead, retail was included along a covered pedestrian space connecting 55th and 56th Streets behind the tower. These connected, unenclosed public spaces generated bonus square footage that allowed the architects to make the tower taller and more visible on the skyline.

Architectural critics and historians have ascribed sources to the building's design, such as the Pazzi Chapel in Florence, Chippendale style furniture, and our own Municipal Building, but no single work or historic period of architecture seems to have influenced the tower's design.

From the moment the design was revealed in 1978, the AT&T Building generated widespread media attention and a range of critical responses, gaining significance in architectural discourse and even popular culture. Paul Goldberger called it "postmodernism's major monument," while Ada Louise Huxtable confessed to having "mixed feelings" about the design, which she described as "a pedestrian pastiche pulled together by painstaking, polished details." In January 1979, Johnson appeared triumphant on the cover of Time magazine, raising a model of the building in the air – the same year he became the first recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize. In 1982, New York Magazine devoted a two-part article to the building's construction, saying it "brought back craftsmanship unseen since the days of the great pre-war buildings."

Less than a decade after opening the building was leased to Sony USA in 1991, and the public spaces at the base were substantially modified by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates in 1992-94. The open arcades in the base were converted to retail space and the covered pedestrian space at the rear of the building was enclosed with a glass curtain wall at both ends. The alterations were made with the approval of the City Planning Commission and remain under its jurisdiction.

AT&T sold the building to Sony in 2002, and since 2016 it has been owned by the Olayan Group.

The landmark site consists of the tower, a four-story annex at the rear of the site, and the covered pedestrian space between them. Located at the rear of the site, the separate Annex building is a simple structure containing loading, parking and service functions, as well as retail and exhibition spaces. The public passageway between the annex and the tower originally contained retail kiosks and offered visual and physical connections through the block. Our research indicated that the primary focus and intent of the design was the tower and its prominence on Madison Avenue, and the Annex at the rear of the site was secondary. The designation report identifies the office tower as having primary significance within the landmark site.

At LPC's public hearing on June 19, 2018, 31 people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the owner, Community Board 5, Landmarks Conservancy, DOCOMOMO US, Historic Districts Council, Municipal Art Society, New York Building Congress, Real Estate Board of New York, the Society for the Preservation of the City, Association for a Better New York, 32BJ SEIU, and the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York. Among the speakers, 20 testified that designation should allow flexibility to redesign the public spaces at the rear of the building, and five testified that the original features at the rear of the site should be preserved. LPC also received 11 pieces of correspondence in support of designation, including letters from New York City Council Member Keith Powers and the Society of Architectural Historians.

Although it continues to arouse varied opinions, this extraordinary tower is one of Philip Johnson's and New York City's most recognized skyscrapers, included in numerous surveys on the history of American architecture. The former AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building is known internationally as an important Postmodern work and as a turning point in the history of 20th-century architecture, and LPC urges the Committee to uphold the designation. Thank you.

550 Madison Avenue
(former AT&T Corporate
Headquarters Building,
later Sony Plaza)

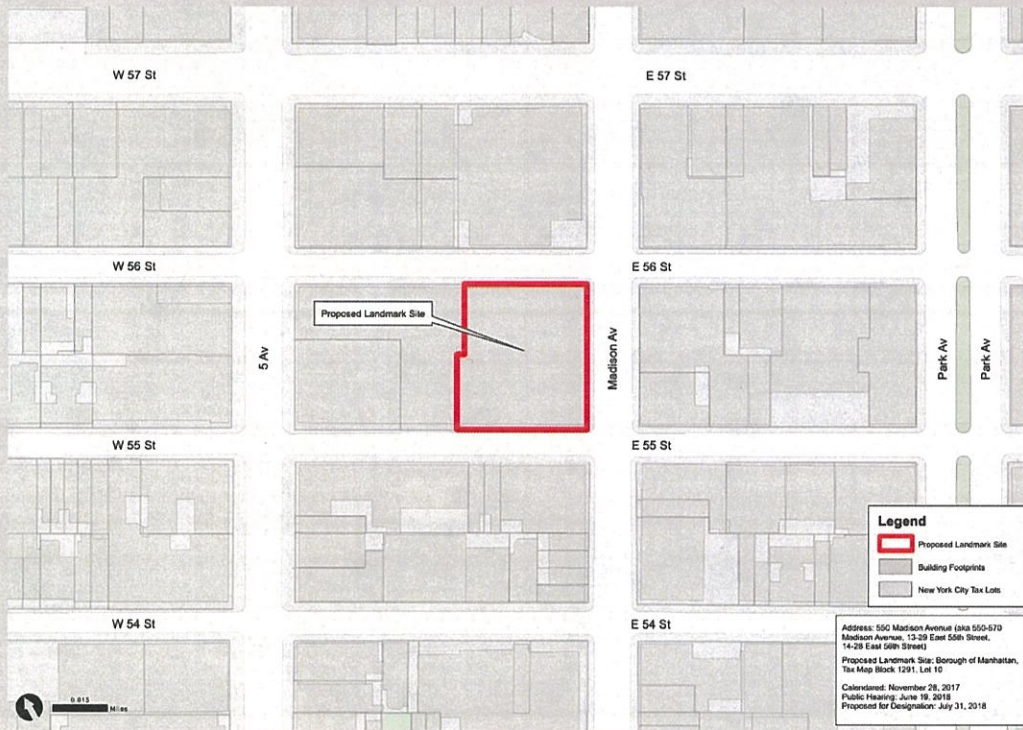
Address: 550 Madison Avenue, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10

Built: 1978-84

Architects: Johnson/Burgee Architects,
Simmons Architects

Designation July 31, 2018





550 Madison Avenue, west facade

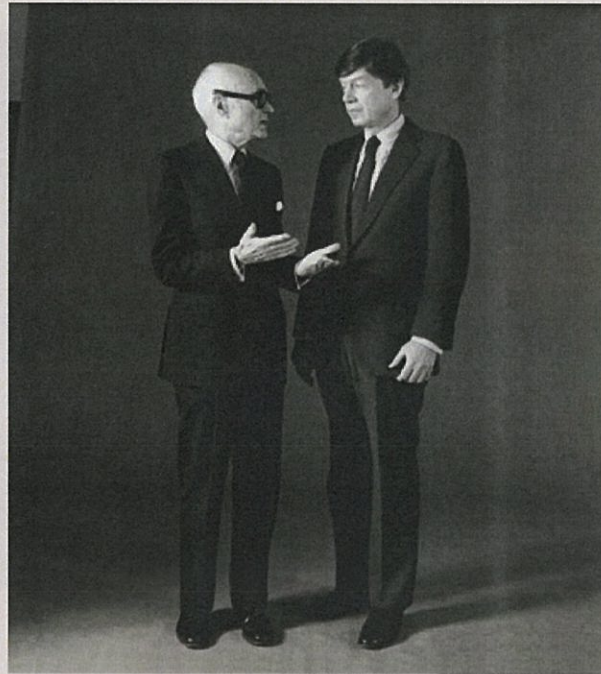


**THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE:
ARCHITECTURE SINCE 1922**

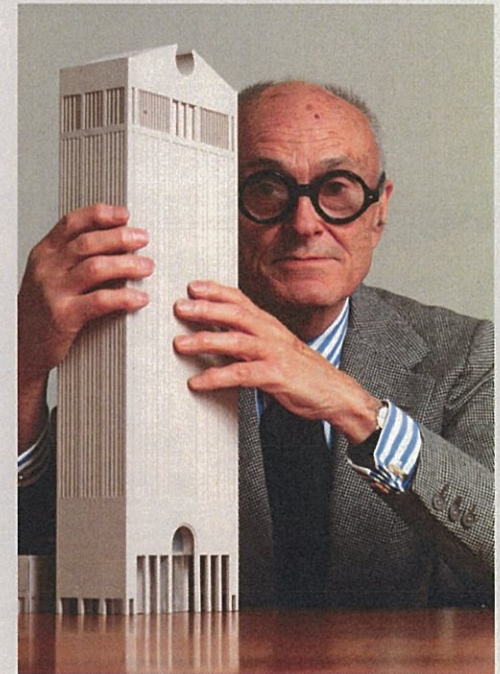
BY HENRY-RUSSELL HITCHCOCK, JR., *and* PHILIP JOHNSON



Johnson's Glass House, 1949



Philip Johnson and John Burgee



Philip Johnson with model of the AT&T
Building. 1978



Charles Moore: Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans, 1975-79



Michael Graves: Portland Building, 1978-83



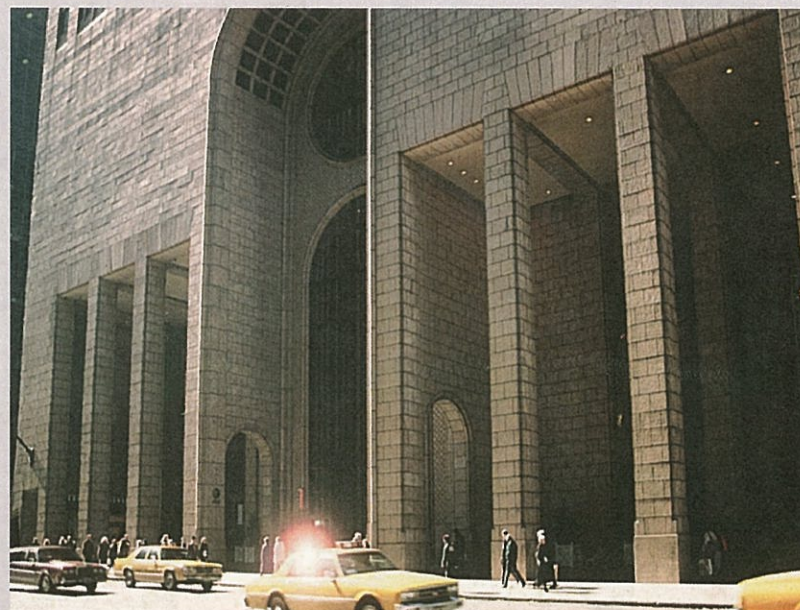
Johnson/Burgee, AT&T Building, 1978-84



Seagram Building, 1955-58



550 Madison Avenue, west facade



Madison Avenue, base, c. 1984

Model of the AT&T Building



Pazzi Chapel, Florence



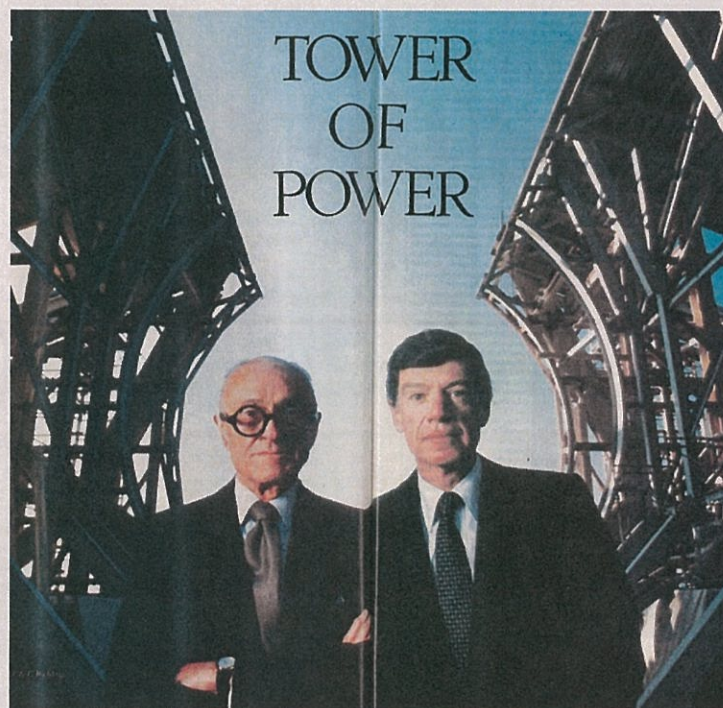
Chippendale style furniture



NYC Municipal Building



Time Magazine, January 8, 1979



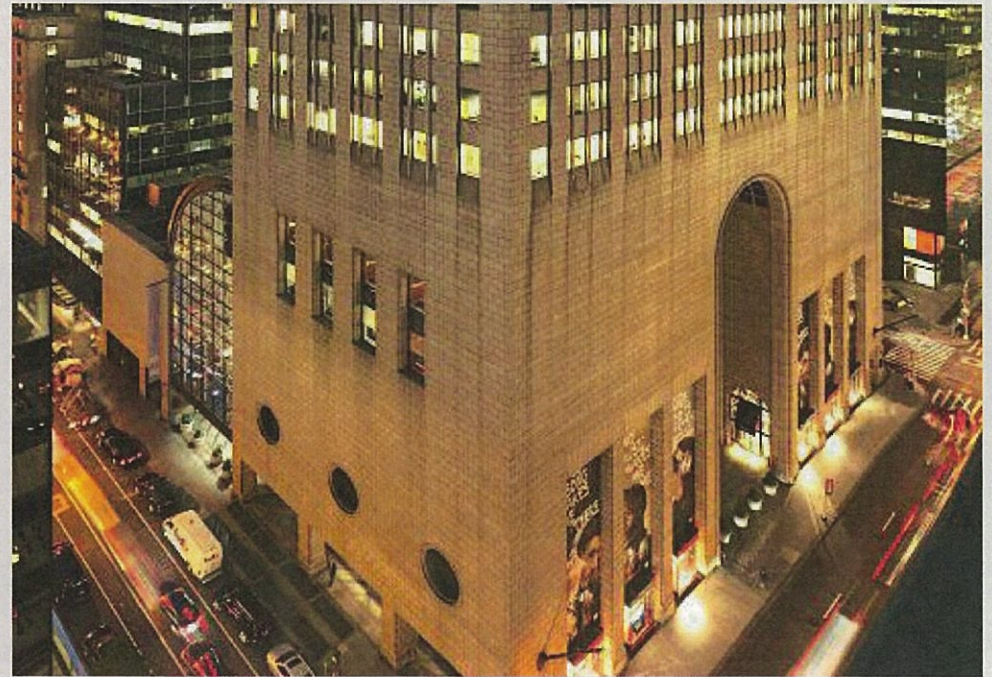
Johnson/Burgee on the roof, *New York Magazine*,
November 15, 1982



The Tonight Show With Jimmy Fallon, 2018
NBC.com



Madison Avenue shops, after 1994



South and east facades, after 1994



Corner of Madison Avenue and 56th Street, 2017



Entrance to covered pedestrian space,
East 55th Street, 2017

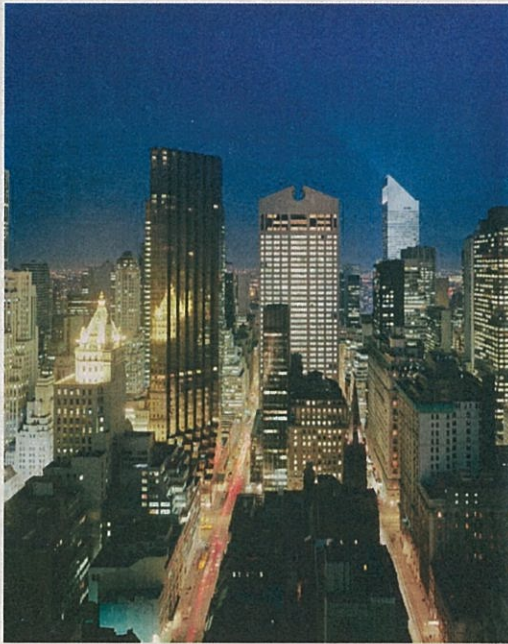


Tower viewed from west, 2018



550 Madison Avenue, west facade





View from west



View from East 55th Street



View from northeast

550 Madison Ownership Statement

Erik Horvat – Director, Real Estate, Olayan America

New York City Council

November 1, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council today. My name is Erik Horvat and I am here on behalf of the 550 Madison ownership and management team – The Olayan Group, Chelsfield and RXR. Together, this is a team with deep experience, knowledge, and expertise in successfully and sensitively preserving and redeveloping historic properties while adapting them to meet the needs of modern tenants, in New York and around the world. We treasure historic buildings and have a clear intention of owning this building as a long-term asset.

On behalf of the entire team, I am proud to confirm our strong support for the designation of 550 Madison’s iconic office tower as an Individual Landmark. 550 Madison has a significant place in New York City’s architectural heritage. It is a symbol of the postmodern movement and has been a recognizable part of the city’s skyline for more than 30 years.

Since acquiring the building, the 550 ownership team has taken its role as stewards of this important building seriously. We have stepped away from the design renderings that were made public a few months ago, and we have met with dozens of stakeholders and assembled a world-class professional team to breathe new life into the building and restore its place as a commercial destination in East Midtown.

Delivering on the promise of the East Midtown rezoning, our plans for 550 Madison are to provide revitalized world-class office space, while exploring the opportunity to nearly double the public open space at the site. Our approach is straightforward: to preserve and enhance the fundamental architectural values of Johnson/Burgee’s original design intent, to provide a generous open air public space, remove the clutter of later alterations, and dignify the tower by improving its connection to the streets and city neighborhood.

All of this being said, the tower is not without its challenges. The reality is that it was designed for single-tenant occupancy with a capacity of just 800 people. This is one of the reasons it was previously in danger of being converted to residential condominium use. The only viable way to achieve our goal of preserving it as a Class A commercial destination is by making smart and sensitive modifications that will ensure the property’s viability as a modern multi-tenant office building. This will greatly increase its capacity to about 3,000 office workers. These additional jobs will have positive ripple effects on the economy of East Midtown and the wider City itself. It will also become a sustainable model for historic preservation, with the aspiration of LEED Gold certification.

With your confirmation of the Individual Landmark designation, we look forward to completing plans for the building that strike a balance, respecting 550 Madison’s importance while addressing these challenges. In the coming months, we expect to begin to engage with the public, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and the City Planning Commission on this new design – a process that we are eager to begin.

We are very excited about the future of 550 Madison, and are happy to reiterate again the ownership’s strong support for this designation. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 0218 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition
Date: Nov 1

(PLEASE PRINT)
Name: Kate Lemos McTale

Address: _____

I represent: _____

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 0218 Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition
Date: 11/1/18

(PLEASE PRINT)
Name: ERIK HORVAT

Address: _____

I represent: OLAYAN

Address: 505 ~~ST~~ PARK AVE, NY, NY

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