

FORMER TIFFANY BUILDING, 397-409 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1903-06; architects McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 866, Lot 76.

On May 5, 1987, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Former Tiffany Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing was continued to September 15, 1987 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The representative of the owner expressed no opinion at the hearing on the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The former Tiffany & Company Building at Fifth Avenue and 37th Street is one of the most elegant commercial palaces in New York. Built in 1903-06, the structure was designed by McKim, Mead & White, one of the nation's most influential architectural firms. The design, modeled on the sixteenth-century Palazzo Grimani in Venice, provided a suitable setting for the fifth (and third major) home of America's premier jewelers, Tiffany and Company, which had grown in wealth and prestige throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The move of the firm to this location from Union Square reflected the continuing northward movement of retail establishments in New York City in the early years of the twentieth century and helped to establish Fifth Avenue as the city's most exclusive shopping street.

History of Tiffany & Company

Charles Louis Tiffany (1812-1902), the founder of the company, began his merchandising career at the age of fifteen, managing a family-owned general store, then joining his father, Comfort, in a cotton-manufacturing business which became known as C. Tiffany & Son. In 1837, with a loan from his father, Charles joined a former classmate, John B. Young, in opening a stationery and notions store located at 259 Broadway.¹ The year was not an auspicious one in which to begin a new commercial venture. The city and the country were in the grips of one of the worst financial crises yet experienced, known as the Panic of 1837.² So severe was this economic

1. move to new location -> est. 5th Ave - 400 New York St
2. Tiffany's Bldg Crown jewel buyer
3. Palazzo - Arch - 11th
4. Description of bldg.

depression that it must not have greatly surprised Tiffany and Young that their sales for the first three days of business totaled \$4.98.³

Nonetheless, the firm survived its initial difficulties, expanding in 1841 by bringing J. L. Ellis in as a partner and sending John Young to Europe as the store's agent.⁴ Within four years the store had shifted its merchandise from stationery and notions to Bohemian glass, porcelain, and jewelry of a quality and beauty far above any of its competitors, and with Young as its agent in Europe, the store was able to make available to the New York public fine grades of jewelry from Italy and England. The firm continued to prosper throughout the decade, and, in 1851, Tiffany, Young & Ellis made its first move north along Broadway to No. 271,⁵ a particularly fortuitous location opposite the A.T. Stewart department store which had opened the year before. By the late 1840s New York was undergoing an unprecedented rapid expansion with inevitable accompanying effects on the city's physical appearance. The Stewart store not only introduced new merchandising methods but also a new architectural style, the palazzo mode, for commercial buildings, "creat[ing] architectural repercussions up and down the Atlantic seaboard."⁶ By the beginning of the 1850s, the palazzo style as the symbol of wealth and aristocracy was fixed in the popular imagination, and Broadway and its side streets metamorphosed from a collection of small brick retail shops into a boulevard of marble, brownstone, and cast-iron palaces.

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Young and Ellis left the company in 1853, and the firm name was changed to Tiffany & Company.⁸ In keeping with the trend to grand palazzo structures, Tiffany made its third move in 1854 to a five-story stone-fronted Italianate building at 550 Broadway, designed by Robert G. Hatfield. Five bays wide, it also had a cast-iron storefront from Daniel Badger's foundry.⁹ Above the front door was installed the famous nine-foot wood figure of "Atlas," carved by Henry Frederick Metzler to support the store's master clock. This figure became a Tiffany symbol and has adorned every Tiffany store since.

During the years at 550 Broadway the company thrived. It had already established its reputation as the nation's undisputed first class jewelry merchant by 1848 when John Young, on a buying expedition in Paris during the overthrow of Louis Philippe, managed to acquire some of the crown jewels plus pieces from numerous other nobles more than willing to have cash in exchange. The success of this venture prompted the firm to open a Paris branch of the store under the management of Gideon F.T. Reed. Tiffany also entered into contract with Edward C. Moore, considered by many to be the finest silversmith of the day, to produce the company's silverware which they agreed was to be as pure as English sterling silver. The competition followed Tiffany's lead and the English sterling standard eventually became law.¹⁰

Three years after the Civil War, on May 1, 1868, Tiffany & Company was incorporated with Charles Louis Tiffany as president. Gideon F.T. Reed, still head of the Paris branch, became vice president; Edward C. Moore sold his silver company to Tiffany and became a shareholder in the firm; George McClure, the firm gemologist and diamond expert, became secretary; Charles T. Cook was the assistant secretary, and, on Tiffany's death in 1902, succeeded him to the presidency.¹¹ That year, 1868, the company opened another European branch, this time in London, and began planning for

another northward move along Broadway to Union Square.

The store's location at 550 Broadway between Spring and Prince streets was rapidly changing in character, in many ways reflecting the general displacement that the entire country was feeling in the aftermath of the Civil War. The streets running parallel to Broadway were turning into a sordid red light district, and many of the earlier buildings were being torn down and replaced by loft buildings which housed the wholesale garment trade, factories, and warehouses. The area was no longer fashionable; Broadway at 14th Street was becoming the center for the carriage trade to which Tiffany catered and on which it depended. The site chosen for the new store was the southwest corner of Broadway and East 15th Street occupied by the Church of the Puritans, an important early Romanesque Revival building (1846) designed by James Renwick.

Tiffany's new cast-iron fronted building, built in 1869(?)–70, was designed in the Italianate palazzo mode by John Kellum, one of New York's prominent architects who was responsible for many important buildings of the period including A. T. Stewart's Venetian Renaissance-inspired cast-iron department store at Broadway and 10th Street. The building that Kellum designed for Tiffany was five stories high and seven bays wide along Broadway with the central three bays brought forward. George Templeton Strong, the noted nineteenth-century New York diarist, commented in a caustic November 1870 entry: "Tiffany is moving into his hideous new iron store that occupies the site of Cheever's hideous meetinghouse."¹² The company was to remain in this building for over thirty years before moving off Broadway to Fifth Avenue. It was while on Union Square that the firm was acknowledged as one of the world's famous jewelers. The firm won national and international prizes for design, it was appointed the official jeweler to the British, Russian, and Austrian courts and, under the direction of the firm's mineralogist, George F. Kunz, gained an unequalled position for the discovery of new gemstones and the acquisition of famous existing collections and pieces.¹³

By the turn of the twentieth century, the area around Union Square had begun to change, and the retail center of the city was once more moving north. Major civic improvements were underway, particularly in rapid transit which would change the character and pattern of movement of the city's residents. The first subways were being built; three East River bridges were either in the planning stages or under construction, as were the two great railroad stations, Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal; and the city had incorporated the adjoining counties of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Richmond (Staten Island) into a single municipality.

In April 1903, Charles T. Cook, the new president of Tiffany & Company, announced that the firm was moving to a new site on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 37th Street and that the architect for the new building was to be the firm of McKim, Mead & White.¹⁴ According to Tiffany tradition, Charles Cook instructed McKim, Mead & White to "build me a palace."¹⁵ The firm had worked for Charles L. Tiffany some twenty years earlier, designing his residence (1882–85) at 19 East 72nd Street. Stanford White¹⁶ chose as the model for this "palace" the sixteenth-century Venetian Palazzo Grimani by Sanmicheli.¹⁷ The Grimani were among the richest families in Venice, so their palace may have seemed particularly

apt as the inspiration for the new home of America's foremost purveyor of jewels, silver, and other luxuries.¹⁸ The result is one of the most elegant and sophisticated commercial buildings in New York.

The Architects¹⁹

The architectural firm for the new Tiffany building, McKim, Mead & White, was one of the most famous and productive firms in the history of American architecture, exerting considerable influence over the development of this country's architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Slowly breaking with the Richardsonian Romanesque of the 1880s in which both McKim and White were trained, the firm played a leading role in promoting the popularity of classically-inspired forms in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries. Both the Colonial Revival and Italian neo-Renaissance styles were favored by the firm.

Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909) after study at Harvard, apprenticed in the firm of the prominent New York architect Russell Sturgis, as did William Rutherford Mead (1846-1928) after attending Amherst. The two began collaboration in 1872; in 1878, the firm of McKim, Mead & Bigelow was established, William Bigelow being replaced in 1879 by Stanford White (1853-1906), who had trained with Henry Hobson Richardson. Mead was involved with the management of the firm, for the most part leaving design to McKim and White. After White's murder in 1906, and McKim's retirement in 1907, the firm continued under Mead's direction until his retirement in 1920, after which the firm was headed by William Mitchell Kendall (1856-1941), one of the many talented young architects who had joined the firm over the years. The remarkable success and influence of this firm in the re-introduction of classical styles and design to America have been noted by both critics and admirers.

The firm's early reputation resulted from their Shingle Style country houses, but its lasting fame and influence is associated with the revival of Renaissance forms. The Henry Villard Houses of 1882-86 in New York (designated New York City Landmarks) and the Boston Public Library of 1887-95 are the two most important monuments which reintroduced the Renaissance style to America. The influence on architectural styles in New York was dramatic and was continued by later works of the firm. The palazzo mode, one of the longest lived of the nineteenth-century styles and one of the classically-inspired styles advocated by the firm, played a dominant role in American classicism. The former Tiffany building is one of the firm's finest works in this mode.

McKim, Mead & White's national reputation is largely attributable to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. This "Great White City" presented a vision of a neo-classical city of monumental buildings and ushered in a new era in American urban planning known as the City Beautiful movement. Such grand buildings as the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University (1895-97) and the U.S. Post Office (1910-13), both designated New York City Landmarks, display the firm's ability to design in a neo-classical style more Roman than Renaissance in inspiration.

The prominence of McKim, Mead & White in the history of American

architecture can hardly be exaggerated. Not only did their work mark the full maturity of American architecture, but it was also an important force in turn-of-the-century architectural fashion. This prestigious partnership also set the way for the larger architectural firms which dominate the architectural field today.

The Building and its Role on Fifth Avenue

The announcement by Tiffany & Company that they would build their new building on Fifth Avenue created a stir within the real estate community. It was noted that the move by Tiffany marked the end for Broadway as the most prestigious shopping street and the beginning of its transformation to a street devoted to the wholesale trade:

At one time Broadway almost monopolized both the best wholesale and the best retail trade. A certain portion of the latter overflowed upon . . . crosstown streets . . . , but Broadway was decidedly the most important thoroughfare. . . . Firms doing retail business of both classes still remain on Broadway, but almost certainly they will in the end find [it] profitable to move . . . Broadway . . . [is] definitely marked off for wholesale business.²⁰

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It also confirmed Fifth Avenue as the location for shops that served the fashionable carriage trade:

This is a move . . . [that] puts the stamp of absolute finality of the tendency of Fifth Avenue to become the one desirable and necessary location for shops that cater to a larger or smaller number of fashionable customers.²¹

Along with Tiffany other prestigious stores were also locating nearby on Fifth Avenue, among them the Gorham Building (1906) at 36th Street, also designed by McKim, Mead & White, and the new department store of B. Altman and Company (1906) at 34th Street, designed by Trowbridge & Livingston. Writing in 1907, A. C. David commended these structures:

The buildings erected by rich retail firms for their own occupancy constitute the last and individually the most interesting examples of commercial architecture on the avenue. Indeed they constitute the new Fifth Avenue. It is these buildings which linger in the minds of visitors to New York, and constitute a sort of select and glorified vision of the thoroughfare, as the most remarkable and interesting business street in the country.²²

nice quote

The architectural design of the former Tiffany building is in keeping with the exclusive shopping character of Fifth Avenue. In 1915, it was described as:

. . . one of the world's famous streets. What Regent and Bond Streets are to London, the Rue de la Paix to Paris, the Unter den Linden to Berlin, the Ringstrasse to Vienna, Fifth Avenue is to New York. It is the most aesthetic expression of the material side of the metropolis . . . from 34th to 59th Streets, department stores and exclusive shops now predominate, having either swept away or flowed around churches, clubs, hotels and residences. . . . establishments wherein may be found products of the greatest ancient and modern artisans make this part of Fifth Avenue one of the most magnificent streets in the world.²³

5th Ave compared to

Tiffany & Company remained in the 37th Street building until moving in 1940 into its present home at Fifth Avenue and 57th Street.

Description

Sheathed in white marble, the Tiffany & Co. building was designed to appear as a three-story structure but in reality consists of seven stories. Each of the three major horizontal divisions consists of two stories with a full seventh or attic story beneath the hipped roof. The building is five bays wide along Fifth Avenue and extends seven bays along East 37th Street. A major alteration to the building changed the configuration of the ground floor along Fifth Avenue and, to a lesser extent, on East 37th Street.²⁴

Fifth Avenue Elevation

When first opened, the two ground-floor end bays on Fifth Avenue contained the main entrances to the store and the three central bays were display windows. Large expanses of plate glass were employed for the shop windows and for the square-headed windows of the second floor. These second-floor windows were separated from the ground-floor windows by large stone entablature spandrels. The bays were flanked by smooth, paired, Corinthian piers of monumental height which rose from shared plinths. There was also a sidewalk platform extending along the entire length of the facade that varied from two to four steps high following the gentle southward slope of Murray Hill at this point on Fifth Avenue.²⁵ Six storefronts have been inserted into the original five-bay width and the division between the stores is marked by black, polished granite piers. The storefronts also create the effect of dividing the original double-height first story into two stories. All the Corinthian capitals have been removed from the piers, and the stone spandrels separating the original first and second floors have been obscured.

The imposing entablature carried by the piers is surmounted by a continuous balustrade. This entablature also emphasizes the shift from the angularity of the first level with its squared piers and square-headed windows to an arched order of engaged Corinthian columns enclosing round arches with ornamental keystones. The arches spring from engaged piers and the stone spandrels at impost level mark the change from the third to the fourth story. The windows within the bays are tripartite, multipaned and

double-hung. The fourth floor has six-over-six sash and, in an interesting treatment, no spandrel panels over the arch, thus exposing the rectilinear glazing of the upper sashes. Metzler's statue of Atlas stood in the central bay atop the balustrade at this level.

A simple classical entablature indicates the beginning of the fifth and sixth floors which are treated in a similar manner to the two directly below. The differences within the arch order of this third and last level include the use of panels on the engaged piers, and spandrel panels over the arches. The engaged columns of this level carry the modillioned roof cornice which is enhanced by elegant and subtle details. The projection of this cornice and the pitch of the roof render the seventh or attic story invisible from the street.

37th Street Elevation

There is a variation in the original treatment of the East 37th Street facade. Not only is the facade seven bays wide, two more than on the Fifth Avenue front, but the central three bays have single engaged columns as opposed to the paired columns and piers on the rest of this facade and the Fifth Avenue one. Because the East 37th Street facade was the secondary face of the building, the alterations along the ground floor have been less extensive than on Fifth Avenue. The two ground-floor bays nearest Fifth Avenue have been given the same treatment as those on Fifth: the base of the marble piers have been cut away and refaced with black, polished granite; the spandrels between the original first and second floors have been smoothed and refaced; and the Corinthian capitals have been shaved off. The seventh or last bay has been changed to an entrance of trabeated black granite. The plinths and bases of the piers have been cut and refaced with black granite. The original ground-floor stone display window enframements and spandrels remain at the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth bays. However, new storefronts have been inserted within the space and black granite spandrels added between the ground floor and the new second or mezzanine level. The windows of the original second floor (now the third) appear to retain the original tripartite window frames. The upper levels of this facade are designed in the same manner as the Fifth Avenue facade and are intact.

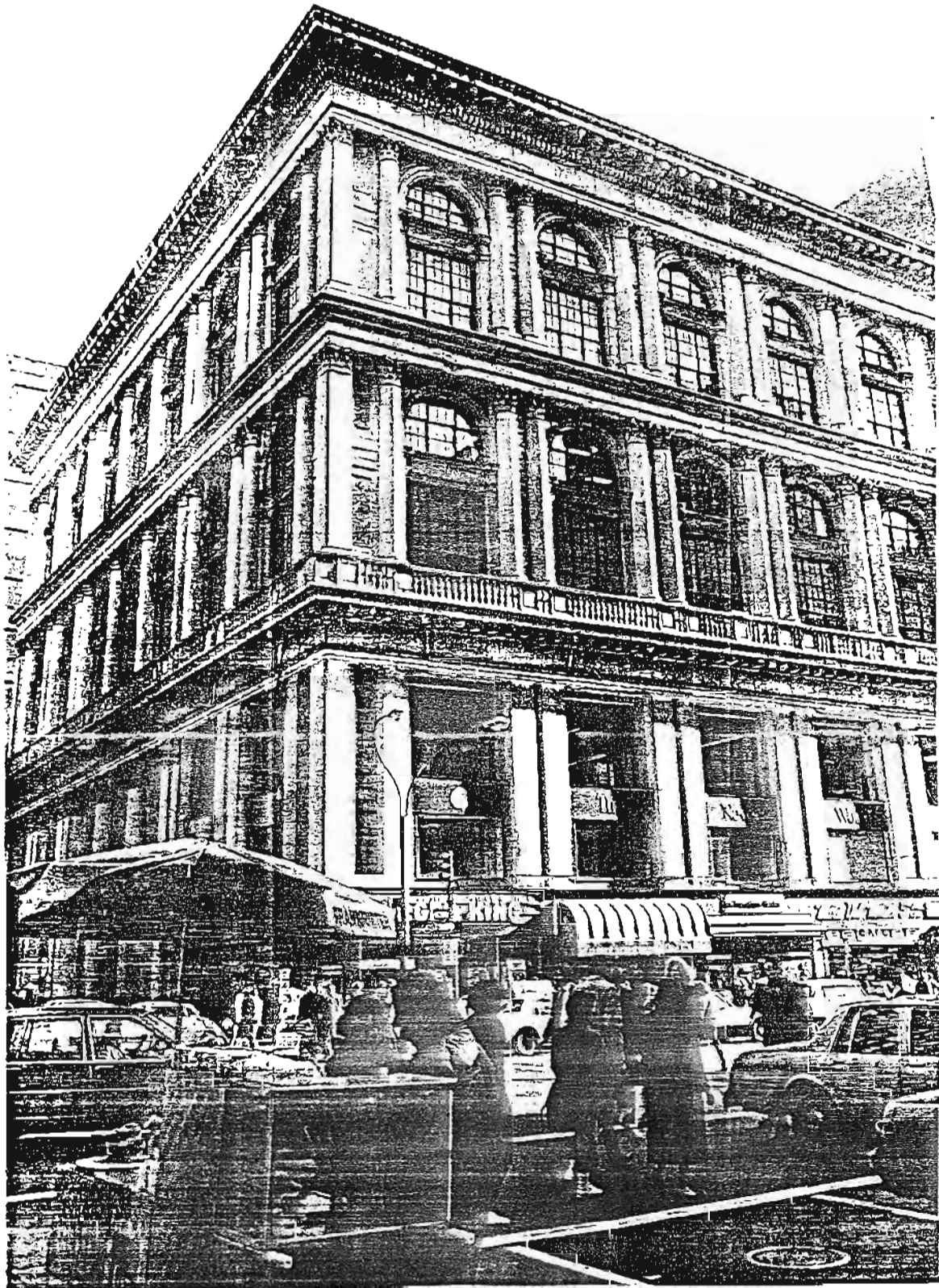
Report prepared by James T. Dillon
Research Department

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 Former Tiffany 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 former Tiffany Building is a marble, commercial palace in the Italian neo-Renaissance style dating from the turn of the century, and one of the most elegant and sophisticated buildings of its type in New York City; that its design was executed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White which ranks among the most famous and influential firms in the history of American architecture; that the building, one of McKim, Mead & White's finest neo-Renaissance designs, was modelled after the sixteenth-century Grimani palace in Venice; that despite the ground floor alterations, it remains a building of exquisite tripartite proportions and majestic design, including its giant Corinthian order and fully developed entablature; that, at the time the firm moved into their new "palace," Tiffany was internationally recognized as one of the world's famous jewelry firms; and that the choice by Tiffany & Company to move from their traditional address on Broadway to Fifth Avenue marked the end of Broadway as the fashionable area and confirmed midtown Fifth Avenue as the most prestigious shopping street in the city.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Title 25, Chapter 3, of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Former Tiffany Building, 397-409 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 866, Lot 76, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



Architects: McKim, Mead &
White
Built: 1903-06

FORMER TIFFANY BUILDING
397-409 Fifth Avenue
Borough of Manhattan

Photo: Carl Foster
Landmarks