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Landmarks Preservation Commission
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UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE, Foley Square, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1933-36; architect Cass W. Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 158, Lot 61.

On January 28, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the United States Courthouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This imposing neo-classical skyscraper, begun in 1933, was the last building designed by the noted American architect Cass Gilbert, who died in 1934 while the courthouse was under construction. It was completed by his son, Cass Gilbert, Jr. Gilbert was born in 1858 in Zanesville, Ohio, studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and then joined the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead & White as Stanford White's personal assistant. In 1882, he left New York to open his own architectural office in St. Paul, Minnesota, where his best known work was the State Capitol, designed in 1896 and completed in 1903. After he won the competition of 1905 for the United States Custom House at Bowling Green--now a designated New York City Landmark--he moved back to this city. With the completion of the Woolworth Building in 1913--then and for many years the tallest building in the world--he gained international fame. The innovations necessary for the construction of such a high building reflected his lifelong interest in structural techniques. Among his best known later buildings are the West Virginia State Capitol, the Detroit Public Library, the United States Chamber of Commerce and the United States Supreme Court in Washington, D. C., the New York County Lawyers' Association Building, another New York City Landmark, and the New York Life Insurance Building.

Gilbert felt that the key to good architecture was proportion. By this he meant not only the ratio of various elements to each other, but also the amount of decoration, and a style that was appropriate to the building's function. It was not then considered inappropriate for a commercial skyscraper, such as the Woolworth Building, to be a neo-Gothic structure--it was, after all, a "cathedral of commerce"--but it was generally assumed that a government building, such as a state capitol or a courthouse, should be classical in style. This solution to the problem of the skyscraper worked very well in the design of the United States Courthouse. As seen from a distance, it is the tower of the building, with its golden pyramidal roof, that dominates. From Foley Square, the monumental colonnade at the entrance is the dominant architectural feature, in the tradition of the adjoining New York County Courthouse and the Municipal Building. Interestingly enough, this colonnade theme is repeated in the arrangement of stilts supporting the new annex to the United States Courthouse located on Police Plaza.

Following the principles of classical architecture, the building is divided into three parts, reflecting the principal features of a column: the base, the shaft, and the capital. The base of the courthouse is irregularly shaped, expressing the shape of the lot. The back of the building, toward Cardinal Place, is rounded, and the facades on Pearl Street and Police Plaza each have a pair of engaged columns flanked by pilasters. These are all narrow streets, however, and it is the colonnaded portico on the Foley Square front of the building that forms the visual base of the entire composition. Here, the building projects slightly forward, emphasizing the base in relation to the shaft or tower above it. The portico, approached by a broad flight of steps, is supported by a colonnade consisting of ten four-story high unfluted Corinthian columns and is flanked by piers framed by pilasters. A frieze above bears the inscription "United States Court House." This entablature, adorned with guilloche motifs above the piers at each end, is surmounted by a dentiled cornice and a low attic story pierced by square windows separated by carved pilasters. At each end of the attic story there is a man's head carved in bas-relief. A bronze flagpole rises above the center of this base section of the building.

The square main tower is set back from this base and rises twenty stories above it. The first sixteen stories are given vertical emphasis by the shafts on each side, which separate the tiers of windows. The windows are separated horizontally from each other by rectangular spandrel panels. Surmounting the seventeenth story, a dentiled cornice sets off the three stories above it, which are treated as a unit. The lowest of these three floors, with small square windows, acts as a visual base for the other two which have high round-arched windows surmounted by small square ones, separated and enhanced by two-story pilasters. The end bays at the corners are of solid masonry pierced by slit windows. This section is crowned by a pierced stone parapet with urns at the corners emphasizing the setback of the tower section above it.

The setback portion, supporting the pyramidal roof, rises behind the parapet and in its enrichment may be considered the capital of the columnar form. Five bays on each side provide depth: the windows are separated by three-story high, engaged Ionic columns with paired pilasters lending solidity to the corners.

A shallow cornice and low attic story crowns the topmost section of the tower with eagles at the corners connected by simple low parapets. These elements form the base for the pyramidal roof which is adorned with gold leaf. At the base of the roof, a small pedimented dormer lends emphasis at the center of each side, while three tiers of diminutive dormers adorn the upper portions of the sides. The pyramidal roof is crowned by a small gold-leafed lantern which has a railing at its base and is crowned by corner finials and a steep roof with an oblong finial.

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 United States Courthouse 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 United States Courthouse is one of the most imposing skyscrapers of the 1930s, that it was designed in the neo-classical governmental style of the period by the architect Cass Gilbert, best remembered for the Woolworth Building, that the main shaft of the courthouse rises above an impressive portico which provides an architectural focus for Foley Square, and that it is in the tradition of the adjoining government buildings, the New York County Courthouse and the Municipal Building.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 United States Courthouse, Foley Square, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 158, Lot 61, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.