

WOOLWORTH BUILDING, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the entrance lobby hallway, the intersecting elevator hallways, the lobby extending from the entrance lobby hallway, and the staircases extending from the entrance lobby hallway to the mezzanine (second floor) level; mezzanine (second floor) level interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance lobby hallway and the lobby up to and including the ceiling, the elevator hallways; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, carvings, mosaics, sculpture, murals, grilles, transom grilles, stained glass skylight, directory boards, mailboxes, wall clock, railings, and lobby shop window enframements; 233 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1911-1913; architect, Cass Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 123, Lot 22.

On January 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Woolworth Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the entrance lobby hallway, the intersecting elevator hallways, the lobby extending from the entrance lobby hallway, and the staircases extending from the entrance lobby hallway to the mezzanine (second floor) level; mezzanine (second floor) level interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance lobby hallway and the lobby up to and including the ceiling, the elevator hallways; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, carvings, mosaics, sculpture, murals, grilles, transom grilles, stained glass skylight, directory boards, mailboxes, wall clock, railings, and lobby shop window enframements; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was continued to March 11 (Item No. 7). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received letters in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS.

The lobby and related spaces of the Woolworth Building comprise one of New York's finest such designs, and one of the most important of the type in the country. At the time of its completion in 1913, the lobby served as the grand entrance to the tallest inhabited building in the world. In keeping with this role, both patron and architect believed that it should be treated as a monumental civic space. Cass Gilbert, carrying the Gothic motif of the building into the interior, created a grand arcade and entrance hall rich in marble, bronze Gothic filigree, sculpted relief, mosaic vaults, glass ceilings, and painted decoration. The sheer size of the building demanded and received an unprecedented interior treatment; moreover, the dual function of the lobby as entrance both for Woolworth's company and for the Irving Bank, a major tenant, made necessary the complexity of form which distinguishes the space. The splendor of the design, however, resulted from Cass Gilbert's convictions about the proper approach to public spaces -- he brought to the Woolworth Building the same kind of programmatic decorative treatment that he believed proper to public monuments. Its size, complexity, and programmatic treatment made the Woolworth lobby the outstanding skyscraper interior

of the era, and fully worthy of the building which the Reverend S. Parkes Cadman christened "The Cathedral of Commerce."

F.W. Woolworth & Company: The "5 and 10" and the World's Highest Building

By most accounts, the life of Frank Winfield Woolworth was a prototypical turn-of-the-century American success story. A poor farm boy with a clever idea, Woolworth rose to become the proprietor of a multi-million dollar international chain of stores. Woolworth's "5 and 10" become an American institution, and Woolworth eventually built a skyscraper headquarters that was a monument to himself and his stores, one of New York City's most important skyscrapers, and the tallest building in the world.¹

Frank Woolworth grew up on his family's farm near Great Bend in Jefferson County, New York; the Woolworths had been farmers since the 17th century. Frank Woolworth did not like farm life, and in 1873, encouraged by his mother, found a job with Augsbury & Moore, a leading drygoods store in nearby Watertown, N.Y., where he worked sporadically over the next five years. In 1878, a visitor to the store told Woolworth and Moore a story about a five-cent counter which seems to have been the direct inspiration for the "5 and 10": a salesman named Bennet had bought a discount lot of handkerchiefs from an overstocked New York supplier, and convinced Michigan storekeepers that they could be sold for a nickel -- the goods moved quickly and in volume. The success of that venture led to several stores setting up five-cent counters. Moore himself was skeptical, but later that year bought \$100 worth of nickel goods from the same New York supplier, Spelman Brothers, and sold them all in one day. The five-cent counter soon caught on in upstate New York.

Woolworth, impressed with the possibilities of the counter, left Moore to start a business dealing only in nickel goods. His first venture, "The Great Five Cent Store" in Utica, New York, met with little success; he therefore moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which seemed to him a livelier town, and increased the scope of his goods by including items for ten cents. On June 6, 1879, he opened the first "Woolworth's 5 and 10 cent store."²

Woolworth's basic operation was to find articles which could be sold for either a nickel or a dime, display them on counters, and let customers choose their own merchandise, eliminating the cost of paying salespeople. Attributing his success in Lancaster in part to the "thriftiness of the Pennsylvania Dutch," Woolworth began to open similar stores elsewhere in the state. Stores in Harrisburg and York did not succeed, but one in Scranton, opened in 1880, did; Woolworth brought in his brother Charles to run it, and the business became "Woolworth Bros. 5 and 10 Cent Store."

By 1886 Woolworth had seven stores in Pennsylvania. As the business grew, he was able to convince manufacturers to sell him goods at prices low enough for resale at five or ten cents, because they could make up in volume what they lost in price. In some instances he actually was able to show manufacturers how to cut their production costs. In this way Woolworth gradually increased the range of goods that could be sold for a nickel or dime, and to the pots and pans of the first 5¢ counters he added candy (5 cents per quarter-pound), tinsel ornament, white china cups and plates, dolls, and other items which had never before been sold at so low a price.

Woolworth did all the buying himself at first, and since most of his suppliers were in New York he moved to the city in 1886, setting up a Manhattan office and taking a house in Brooklyn. In 1888 he moved his office into the Sun Building, at Chambers Street and Broadway, and remained there for the next twenty years.³ In pursuit of cheaper goods, Woolworth began to look to Europe, where labor and material costs were often lower, and made his first buying trip there in 1890. It was in the course of these trips that he was first exposed to European architecture; on his first visit to London he wrote home that he was tremendously impressed by the Houses of Parliament, the buildings which twenty years later he hoped to emulate in his Woolworth Building.⁴

The first big-city Woolworth's opened in 1895 in Washington, D.C., quickly followed by stores in Brooklyn, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Pittsburgh. The first Manhattan "5 and 10" was at 259 Sixth Avenue near 17th Street, in the heart of the then fashionable "Ladies' Mile" shopping district. The chain grew to 59 stores by the end of 1900.

Over the next ten years, Woolworth undertook three major operations which completed the spectacular growth of the company under his direction: in 1904 he took his stores to the Midwest; in 1909 he expanded to England; and in 1910 he merged his company with those of four competitors to create the F.W. Woolworth Company, a corporation controlling 611 stores. With no effective competition left, Woolworth's potential for expansion was virtually unlimited; the 1000th store (now demolished) was erected in 1918 on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 40th Street. The press criticised such an "invasion" of the luxury avenue by the dime store, but in fact Woolworth's location there was not much different from the location of his first Manhattan store on Sixth Avenue in the "Ladies' Mile," the late-19th century equivalent of Fifth Avenue.

Woolworth began planning his skyscraper headquarters in 1910, the year of the major consolidation with his competitors. Although his original intention was only for a modest office building, the structure eventually evolved into the world's tallest building. The Woolworth Building was to be the last of the enormous skyscrapers which capped the early development of that architectural type which ended with World War I.⁵ The "5 and 10" offices hardly required such an enormous office building; nor could the Woolworth Building be considered a symbol of the frugality which Woolworth hoped for in his customers. Its creation has to be seen, rather, in light of Woolworth's changing conceptions of himself and his company. As F.W. Woolworth & Company emerged as a commercial empire, Woolworth made certain changes. In 1900, he ordered that all of his 59 stores be given identical facades, creating the familiar look of "carmine red" fronts and store windows.⁶ The same year he opened his first "Woolworth Building" in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home of the first "5 and 10."⁷ No longer were his stores just individual ventures in the 5 cent principle; each was now a constituent part of a publicly visible institution. Likewise, Woolworth was no longer just a merchant; he was becoming a recognized member of New York's wealthy elite. He had already left his middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood to live in the Hotel Savoy on Fifth Avenue at Grand Army Plaza, but in 1901 he built a mansion at 990 Fifth Avenue, on Manhattan's gold coast.⁸ Later he built an entire compound of town houses for his family along East 80th Street, and bought a Glen Cove estate which he renamed "Winfield Hall." These changes in Woolworth's personal image and the company's image found their most dramatic statement in the building of the world's tallest skyscraper as Woolworth's corporate symbol.

Besides being Woolworth's symbol, however, the building was from the start also intended to be a headquarters for the Irving National Bank, today the Irving Trust Company. Lewis Pierson, president of the bank and a friend of Woolworth, was trying in 1910 to engineer a merger between the Irving National and the New York Exchange Bank, but meeting resistance on the part of several bankers. Woolworth saw an opportunity to acquire a partner in his long-contemplated new headquarters, and proposed to take out "the additional stock necessary to make the consolidation of the two banks a success if the bank would move up to Broadway and take quarters" in the proposed Woolworth Building.⁹ The bank agreed, Woolworth acquired a lot on the corner of Broadway and Park Place, and Cass Gilbert was hired as architect. By the time the building was complete, it had grown from a proposed modest corner-lot office building to the tallest skyscraper in the world.

Cass Gilbert (1859-1934)¹⁰

Cass Gilbert, although not a native of the city or the designer of more than a dozen of its buildings, was one of the most important architects to work in New York. Among his commissions are several of the city's major landmarks; the two most important of these, the U.S. Customs House and the Woolworth Building, are of national significance.¹¹

Gilbert was a Midwesterner who trained and later practiced in the East. His career falls roughly into two parts: a local practice in St. Paul, Minnesota in the 1880s and 1890s, and a national practice, based in New York, from 1900 until his death in 1934. His work has been described as a synthesis of architectural trends in the two regions,¹² and both his buildings and the language in which he discussed them seem to combine a Midwestern belief in structural expression with an Eastern respect for tradition.

Gilbert was born the son of an engineer in Zanesville, Ohio, a town in part laid out by his grandfather. While still a child, he and his family moved to St. Paul, where he completed his secondary education. In 1876 he entered the office of A.M. Radcliff, a local architect. Two years later he went east to study at the architectural school of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then headed by William R. Ware; his teacher was a Frenchman, Eugene Letang.¹³ After two years of study, Gilbert went to Europe; he had hoped to work for an English architect -- G.E. Street, Alfred Waterhouse, Norman Shaw, or William Burges -- but was unable to find employment. After traveling briefly through France and Italy, chiefly to see Gothic cathedrals, he was obliged to return to the United States later the same year. In New York he joined the firm of McKim, Mead & White, which had been formed barely a year earlier in September 1879.

Gilbert was one of the few major architects of his era who did not study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His architectural education, however, reflected the American interpretation of Beaux-Arts ideas as promulgated through academic institutions and architectural apprenticeships. Eugene Letang had been an Ecole student; William R. Ware was one of the five architects who had studied in the New York atelier of Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to attend the Ecole. McKim, who was an Ecole student, and White, who was not, had both worked in the office of the second American to attend the Ecole, H.H. Richardson.

During Gilbert's two year stay with McKim, Mead & White in 1880-1882, the firm's work consisted largely of Shingle Style houses.¹⁴ Among the other build-

ings designed or constructed during that period were the Newport Casino, the Charles Whittier residence in Boston, the Tiffany residence in New York, and the Ross Winans residence in Baltimore, for which project Gilbert was made superintendent.¹⁵ The Villard Houses in New York, first of the firm's commissions to reflect the influence of the Italian Renaissance, was designed in 1882, at the end of Gilbert's term.

Returning to St. Paul in 1882, Gilbert set up his own practice. Mead had suggested he open a St. Paul Branch of McKim, Mead & White¹⁶ but instead Gilbert formed a partnership with fellow M.I.T. graduate James Knox Taylor, which lasted eight years. During the last two decades of the century he built a solid reputation in St. Paul designing residences, churches, and office buildings; most of his designs were in the Shingle Style or the Richardsonian Romanesque.¹⁷ When John Welborn Root died in 1891, Mead wrote to Gilbert from New York urging him to go to Chicago to become Daniel Burnham's new partner; Gilbert, however, chose to remain in St. Paul. He became president of the Minnesota chapter of the A.I.A. and was invited to sit on various juries -- he was the only Westerner on the jury for the New York Public Library competition.

In 1895, Gilbert won the competition for the new Minnesota state capitol, a commission that established a national reputation for him.¹⁸ Clearly reflecting the impact of the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, Gilbert's design was an elegant Beaux-Arts building which, in its monumental composition, classical style, and elaborate decoration, laid the groundwork for his 1899 winning entry in the New York Customs House competition.¹⁹ In 1900, Gilbert moved permanently to New York.

Once established in New York, Gilbert went on to produce similar Beaux-Arts governmental buildings, including the Detroit Public Library (1914), the West Virginia state capitol in Charleston (1928-32), the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. (1933-35) and the Federal Courthouse in New York (1934), among many others. These public monuments comprised a major portion of his national work, and a major part of their design was the lavishly decorated interior spaces.

Gilbert believed that public buildings should serve the public, and deserved whatever expenditure necessary to make them beautiful.²⁰ He also recognized that the decorative arts were beginning to flourish in America, especially mural painting and also sculpture, and believed that they should be encouraged; in accordance with these beliefs, his own public buildings were lavishly decorated. In a 1934 address honoring artist Edwin H. Blashfield, Gilbert traced the history of the arts in America, and credited much of their growth to the architects.

Richardson made opportunities for men like William Morris Hunt and John LaFarge in the Albany Capitol and in Trinity Church in Boston. When the great Exposition in Chicago in 1893 occurred, Burnham and his associate architects made mural painting a notable feature of the great Fair, and a remarkable group of American artists rose to the occasion. Frank Millet of beloved memory, Gari Melchers, Dodge, Low, Dielman, Alexander, Walker, Kenyon Cox, Blashfield, and others made the buildings notable with their works.²¹

Referring to his own building, he wrote:

The state capitol of Minnesota, like a pioneer in the West erecting a standard in a far country, gave new opportunity in a new field.

Blashfield, LaFarge, Simmons, Kenyon Cox, H.O. Walker, Millet, Pyle, Zogbaum, and Garnsey; assisted by Wiley, Mackay, and a group of skilled others joined in making a splendid series of mural decorations and gave fresh impetus to this noble art. Public appreciation and approval were instant and outspoken.²²

The Minnesota Capitol decorations included much programmatic work, murals representing History, a statue by Daniel Chester French of Jurisprudence, and so on. The U.S. Customs House was intended from the start to have a similarly elaborate program of decoration, although it was not entirely carried out until the 1930s:

The decorations of the interior will illustrate the commerce of ancient and modern times, both by land and sea; thus providing a series of themes of great pictorial interest appropriate to the structure.²³

Ultimately, Gilbert brought this same kind of programmatic interior design to the publicly accessible interiors of the Woolworth Building.

The other major portion of Gilbert's work was made up of private commissions, particularly office buildings. An early effort in Boston, the Brazer Building (1896) was followed by the Broadway-Chambers Building in New York (1899-1900); both were designed in the tripartite "base-shaft-capital" manner, typical of the response then developing to the design of tall office buildings. The contemporary critic, Montgomery Schuyler, considered the Broadway-Chambers to be the finest of the tripartite type.²⁴ Gilbert's next office building, the West Street Building (1906-1907), was different; although something of a tripartite formula could be discerned, the building's design emphasized its verticality with a Gothic skin, making it the clear predecessor of the Woolworth Building. With the West Street and Woolworth Buildings, Gilbert initiated a different approach to the skyscraper.

Gilbert unquestionably believed in the value of studying the architecture of the past, not to copy it, but certainly to adapt it. Speaking on the occasion of the presentation to him of the Gold Medal of Architecture by the Society of Arts and Sciences in honor of the Woolworth Building design, he said:

...as in language new words are coined to express new meanings and old words become obsolete, as old uses are abandoned so new forms to meet new needs are developed (I almost said invented) as the necessity requires. This does not mean that one should ignore the culture, the knowledge and experience of the past to wilfully and pridefully discard all that has gone before and start all over at the beginning. It is not progress to go backward.... Why not then pick up the threads where we find them and weave into the pattern of our own civilization the beauty that is our inheritance? My plea therefore is for beauty and sincerity, for the solution of our own problems in the spirit of our own age illuminated by the light of the past; to carry on, to shape new thoughts, new hopes, and new desires in new forms of beauty as we may and can; but to disregard nothing of the past that may guide us in doing so.... It is in this spirit that the building you have chosen was designed.²⁵

Gilbert also believed, however, that his approach to skyscraper design was based on structural expression and the aesthetic treatment of materials. He argued that since commercial buildings required thin surfaces, these therefore had to be treated decoratively, and that a thin, decoratively treated surface expressed the structural fact that the skyscraper was a steel-cage structure, clearly not supported by its terra-cotta or stone cladding. One of the prime devices he used in this decorative treatment was color. He explained this theory in a 1912 discussion of the Woolworth Building:

...we have endeavored to "express" the plan and to so design it that it will be frankly a masonry and terra-cotta covering of a steel frame instead of pretending to be a masonry building. There are three elements which are commonly counted upon for architectural expression-- length, breadth and thickness. In a business building we may have length and breadth, but our wall surfaces cannot have thickness. In short, we cannot waste space for arches or colonnades or other architectural features, without sacrificing the rentable area, and we cannot project beyond the property line, therefore we have to deal with a perfectly flat surface without "relief" which would give light and shade. We have also to provide windows at frequent and regular intervals both horizontal and vertical. It is these conditions that make the skyscraper problem so difficult of solution. I have endeavored to meet them by the use of detail in the treatment of wall surface and by the careful adjustment of polychromatic decoration.²⁶

In the case of both public buildings and skyscrapers, Gilbert believed the overriding quality which governed either the programmatic decorative interiors or the carefully detailed and polychromatically "adjusted" exteriors was proportion. In discussing public buildings, he wrote in 1929 that:

It goes without saying that sound construction, good planning, adaptability to needs and proper economy are all essentials of a properly organized and well-managed building -- but, speaking purely from the standpoint of design, the greatest element of monumental architecture is good proportion.²⁷

With the Woolworth building, although Woolworth determined the minimum height for the skyscraper, Gilbert insisted that the final height should be determined by questions of proportion. Gilbert's daughter later recalled that,

...he did once say the study he gave to the Woolworth Building destroyed his sense of scale for several years, because of the unprecedented attuning of detail to, for those days, such an excessive height.²⁸

In 1910, when Frank Woolworth commissioned Cass Gilbert to be the architect of his building, he expected an excellent skyscraper design. The Broadway-Chambers Building must have been familiar to him as it was across the street from his office in the Sun Building, and the West Street Building was only a few blocks to the south. In addition, he may also have looked for someone who could give his building a suitable interior. In any case, Gilbert brought his principles for public building design to the public spaces of Woolworth's private monument, and created an unprecedented programatically designed space combining architecture, painting, and sculpture.

Conception and Design of the Woolworth Building Interior

The conception of the main interior spaces of the Woolworth Building was shaped by a number of considerations: the size of the building, the need for a grand lobby for Woolworth's monument, the need for a grand entrance to the Irving Bank, and Cass Gilbert's belief in public beauty and programmatic decorative design. The result was an intricate and lavishly designed interior far exceeding anything attempted in an office building up to that time, and one of the finest publicly accessible interior spaces in New York.

Rather than being planned from the first as the world's highest building, the Woolworth Building only gradually developed into a tall skyscraper. Woolworth's original idea was for a modest twelve- to sixteen-story office building on the corner of Broadway and Park Place. As his conception grew, he acquired progressively more lot area, and the proposed tower gradually increased to 25 stories, 35 stories, and finally to its actual height of 60 stories, or not quite 800 feet, the tallest inhabited building in the world at that time. One of the major points in favor of building the world's highest building, in Woolworth's mind, was advertising value, a cross between increased financial return and institutional and personal pride. In a 1913 interview Woolworth explained:

Much has been said about the Woolworth Building, and though that structure had been taking form in my mind for a great many years, and though it is, as I have said, the result of one of my day dreams, I must in all honesty admit that it did not exactly originate with me. While in Europe a few years ago, wherever I went the men with whom I came in contact asked me about the Singer Building and its famous tower. That gave me an idea. I decided to erect a building that would advertise the Woolworth five and ten cent stores all over the world. I kept thinking about it, and finally, when the opportunity seemed to be right, I went ahead with my plans.²⁹

The Singer Building was soon topped by the Metropolitan Life building in height; those two and the Woolworth Building were by far the largest skyscrapers built to that date. The unprecedented size of the Woolworth Building in its final form led to an unprecedented interior treatment.

The building from the start was a joint venture between the Woolworth Company and the Irving Bank, and the architect had to meet the requirements set by both Frank Woolworth and Lewis Pierson. Both clients were demanding in the extreme, and the minutes of the weekly conferences, as well as Gilbert's notes to himself, describe late-night conversations with both men because of differences over details in the building's layout.³⁰ The lobby, which went through many proposals, eventually combined the requirements of the two clients by joining an arcade at the east forming Woolworth's grand lobby with a large hall at the west and grand central staircase serving as the formal entrance to the Irving Bank offices at the mezzanine level.

The arcade was apparently intended from the beginning. Even before it was certain what the height of the building would be, Gilbert indicated that the arcade would be "about 20' high and about 15' wide. They want a cross corridor from Park Place to Barclay Street near the rear"³¹ None of the notes discuss the genesis of the idea, but it seems to have no precedent in New York office building lobbies. It might have been Woolworth's, as an arcade of shops would have been

familiar to a retailer. In any case, such a shop-arcade treatment eventually became common for office buildings, as in the Chrysler and Empire State buildings, the Woolworth Building's successors as the world's tallest.

The bank's entrance area was called the "Marble Hall," and was always intended to center on a staircase rising to the mezzanine level offices, with shops below. How this area would be combined with the arcade was, however, problematical, as revealed by Gilbert's notes:

I showed him (Woolworth) one plan indicating the stairs of the Bank on each side of the arcade rising from the east to the west and we discussed the fact that it would shut off the rear of three of the stores which seemed to him undesirable. We also discussed placing the stairs to the Bank east of the east tier of elevators, that is to say, between the elevators and the Broadway front, but the space was not sufficient without considerable modification of the column plan and he approved the plan which showed the stairs to the Bank rising at right angles with the arcade just back of the tower.³²

Pierson, however was unhappy with this solution, and had Woolworth call Gilbert to say so later that evening.

Mr. Pierson took the telephone then and told me most emphatically and forcibly that the stairs as suggested by me and approved by Mr. Woolworth...would not be satisfactory.³³

Pierson may have felt that the bank was being overshadowed by the Woolworth Corporation. The plan as executed was not finally approved by all parties until January 1912, a year after the above conversation took place.

With the general layout decided on, Gilbert made sketches³⁴ for the present arcade and hall. Although the Woolworth Building was a private commission, its owner thought of it as a monument for public view, and Cass Gilbert brought to the design of the interior the same type of treatment he accorded public monuments. The Woolworth interior continues the Gothic motif of the exterior. This motif had apparently been chosen because of its suitability to the expression of verticality Gilbert believed proper for skyscrapers, and because Frank Woolworth had long admired the Gothic design of the Houses of Parliament in London. From the day the building opened and the Reverend S. Parkes Cadman christened it "The Cathedral of Commerce," the assumption that its architecture looked to ecclesiastical sources was widespread. Gilbert insisted, however, that ecclesiastical references were unrelated to his design, which was based rather on secular sources:

...there was no intention of making it anything like a cathedral, and in fact it bears no resemblance to a cathedral in the plan or exterior design or in any other respect. There are many medieval civic buildings to which it might be likened such as the Halls at Middleburg and Alkmaar in Holland, the City Hall in Brussels, the Hotel de Ville in Compiegne, the Cloth Hall at Ypres (destroyed in the great war) and many others all of which have towers of proportionately great height although of course very much smaller than the Woolworth tower. All of them were studied, none were copied... It was my thought that since the building must have a tower, that there were quite enough examples to justify it among civic buildings

regardless of ecclesiastical examples and that I must express the idea of a civic or commercial building rather than of an ecclesiastical one... An any rate, in the final development of the design the Woolworth tower stands on its merits; for I know of no prototype.³⁵

Reverend Cadman, might have been thinking more of the interior which in plan does have ecclesiastical overtones. The arcade bears a great likeness to a barrel-vaulted nave with a transept, intersected by a shallow dome at the crossing; the mosaic ceilings, sculpted grotesques, and painted triptychs only add to the similarity. The Marble Hall, on the other hand, is a rectangular space with a flat roof and centrally located stairway, and is more suggestive of a guildhall.

Gilbert's reference to the Woolworth as trying to express the idea of a "civic" building makes it quite clear that he wished to bring to it the kind of treatment he had developed for monumental public buildings. He later explained Woolworth's interest:

Mr. Woolworth loved beautiful architecture and earnestly desired that his building should be noted for its beauty as well as for its practical convenience and substantial construction.

(This phrase is Gilbert's formulation of the 2000-year-old dictum, restated by architects over the centuries, that architecture should combine "firmness, commodity, and delight.")

He realized that beauty is an asset and has a business value, and was himself the strongest advocate thereof.³⁶

Gilbert's elaborate decorative scheme was worked out in fine marbles used on the walls, Gothic bronze tracery used even in the elevator doors and mail chutes, a colored glass ceiling in the Marble Hall, sculpted grotesques in both the Hall and the arcade, exquisite abstract floral mosaics reminiscent of early Christian designs in the ceiling, and painted triptychs in the mezzanine spaces over the north-south corridor of the arcade. The design was carried through to the smallest elements. Where the programmatic material of the Minnesota Capitol had included references to law and history, and the Customs House to ports and shipping, in the Woolworth interior it included a glorification of commerce and finance, reflecting both the Woolworth Company and the Irving Bank; in addition, it included references to the individuals involved in the creation of the Woolworth building itself. The painted triptychs in the galleries portray allegorical figures of Commerce and Labor; they were the work of Paul Jenewein.³⁷ The glass ceiling in the marble hall is inscribed with the names of great commercial nations. The "grotesque" figures supporting the arcade galleries, by Tom Johnson,³⁸ a popular caricaturist of the day, portray not only Woolworth, Pierson, and Gilbert, but also Gunwald Aus, the steel engineer, Louis Horowitz, the builder, and even Edward Hogan, the renting agent. Hogan, in fact, was not originally included, but when he heard of the scheme he wrote to Gilbert and insisted that room be made for him:

...I was very much disappointed to learn that I was not even thought of. I have been with the undertaking from its very inception and thought that if you were all pushed a little closer together you could possible (sic) make room for me. I have Mr. Woolworth's permission to speak to you and arrange for this if it is at all consistent.³⁹

The completed interior is stunning in its decorative effect, and succeeds in both its functions: it complements the extraordinary Gothic exterior of the building, serving as symbolic welcome to Woolworth's tower, and by drawing visitors

down the arcade towards the central staircase it marks the grand entrance to the Irving Bank. The interior is still one of the most outstanding such spaces in New York.

Description

The grand lobby of the Woolworth Building is decorated in great detail; most of the decoration is Gothic in inspiration. The space is divided into three main sections: an arcade, consisting of two crossing corridors, at the eastern end; a marble staircase hall in the center; and a smaller hall west of the staircase hall. Shops open into both halls.

The arcade is formed by two crossing passageways, one leading east-to-west from the principal Broadway entrance to the staircase hall, and the other running north-to-south connecting the secondary entrances at Park Place and Barclay Street. Each passageway is two stories high, but the north and south wings include an open mezzanine level which divides each wing into an upper gallery, which is visible from the ground floor, and a lower hall. Both passageways are barrel-vaulted and meet in a central crossing. The arcade is entered from Broadway through a one-story high entrance vestibule. Just beyond the vestibule, on either side, is a staircase leading to the mezzanine level. Both the east and west walls of the arcade are divided into two round-arched bays by marble piers which become ribs in the ceiling. Within the bays are set the elevator banks. The western end of the arcade opens onto the staircase hall.

The one-story high entrance vestibule has a ceiling of bronze and marble set in hexagonal panels. A doorway on either side, leading to a store, is set in a carved marble Gothic-style surround. Above the vestibule, the eastern wing of the arcade ends in a multi-paned Tudor-arched window. Beyond, each staircase to the mezzanine has marble walls and brass railings and is vaulted with shallow gilded coffers; several coffers have been replaced with down-lights. The vault arches rest on corbels with reliefs of mythological creatures.

The walls of the arcade are lined with marble of various hues, quarried on the Greek Island of Skyros. The barrel-vaulted ceilings and crossings are covered with colored glass mosaics of blue, green, and gold, with red accents, set in an abstract pattern of curving floral forms reminiscent of early Christian and Byzantine work. The mosaic ceiling is separated from the marble walls by an elaborate Gothic-style carved-stone cornice. Elaborate Gothic style bronze tracery adorns the elevator banks in the east and west wings of the arcade, as well as the entrance vestibule and the ends of the galleries over the north and south corridors. The Gothic-style tracery is continued in the design of the mailboxes, set in each corner of the arcade crossing, and also in the directories set in the western arcade wing. Hidden lights behind the stone cornice indirectly illuminate the mosaic ceiling. At the corners formed by the meeting of the mezzanine levels in the north-south corridors with the walls, and at the entrances to the staircases leading to the mezzanine, are a series of portrait-grotesques, representing, among others, F.W. Woolworth (paying for the building with nickels and dimes), Cass Gilbert (holding a model of the building), the steel engineer Aus. (holding a steel beam), banker Lewis Pierson, rental agent Frank Hogan, and builder Louis Horowitz. The north-south halls of the arcade narrow towards the end; the revolving door entrances are framed by gilded Gothic-style metal surrounds with a large central "W." Each has an elaborate hexagonal-paneled ceiling, with a modern lighting fixture. The elevators in these corridors, four on each wall, are not surrounded by tracery, but have tracery transom grilles above the Gothic-style doors and projecting Gothic-style indicators. In the galleries above the corridors the walls are marble-covered,

and have similar elevator banks. At the end of the south gallery, over and in front of a set of doors leading to bank offices, is a painted mural in the form of a triptych representing Commerce; a similar mural in the north gallery represents Labor. Between the mural walls and the office entrance is a groin-vaulted area painted blue with stars. The annunciator panels for the elevator, smoke detectors, and fluorescent lights are new. All storefronts are original except for Irving Trust, on the west side of the north entrance corridor.

The staircase hall in the center of the interior is a two-story rectangular room, with storefronts on the lower level and arched windows above; the storefronts are rectangular with rounded corners and their metal enframements are cast in Gothic motifs. The main staircase rises from the center of the room up to the eastern mezzanine level which was originally the main entrance to the bank office; the entrance retains its enormous bronze clock. The walls of the hall are lined with marble. The stone cornice from the arcade is carried onto the eastern wall of the staircase hall, and continues as bronze filligree across the second floor windows. The windows are separated from the lower level by a bronze course with Gothic filigree and coats-of-arms. The windows and doors are trimmed in bronze. The staircase, rising in two levels, has marble banisters set with cast-bronze panels. The ceiling of the hall is a stained-glass skylight, ringed with the names of countries (Spain, China, Japan, Russia, Italy, German Empire, Austria, Argentina, Brazil, France, United States, Great Britian), the letter "W," and the dates "1879" (founding year of the Woolworth Company) and "1913" (completion year of the Woolworth Building). The skylight is set with a decorative and deeply coffered ceiling gilded with a blue-green background, adorned at the edges with small polychromed grotesque figures. Downlights have been added to the ceiling.

West of the staircase hall is a smaller hall with marble walls and storefronts on the north and south; the marble western wall has a central niche. Unlike the major lobby spaces, this area is only one story high. Its coffered ceiling is gilded, with a blue-green background, but no mosaics. There are Roman portrait heads in the cross-beams, and sculpted grotesques ringing the hall at the cornice line; unlike those in the main lobby, these are not individual portraits. At the far western end of the hall are north and south exits with marble doorways. Modern light fixtures have been added, and new telephones have been placed in the wall.

Conclusion

Although the Woolworth Building lost the title of "world's highest building" fifty years ago, it remains one of the city's and the country's major architectural monuments, and its interior public spaces still awe visitors to the "Cathedral of Commerce." The building today stands not only as a monument to F.W. Woolworth and his company, but also to the gilded age of New York commerce, and the emergence of New York as a major world city. Its interior owes much of its splendor to Cass Gilbert's belief that publicly accessible spaces require special attention; his design was intended not just for Woolworth but in a sense for the people of New York. An army of fine craftsmen, working with an abundance of fine materials, translated Gilbert's design into one of the handsomest publicly accessible interiors in the city, and one of the most significant in the country. Unprecedented in size, richness, and conception for a skyscraper lobby, it has rarely been equalled since, and the Woolworth Building interior remains one of the major architectural landmarks of New York.

FOOTNOTES

1. The following account of the life and career of Frank W. Woolworth is based on John K. Winkler, Five and Ten; The Fabulous Life of F.W. Woolworth (New York: R.M. McBride & Co., 1940), except where otherwise noted.
2. Winkler, p. 51.
3. The Sun Building was built in 1846 to house the Stewart store, the country's first department store; forty years later, after Stewart's had moved uptown and the building had been turned into the offices of the Sun newspaper, Woolworth's offices continued the department store tradition of the building.
4. Winkler, p. 84.
5. For a good history of the development of the skyscraper as an American building type see Winston Weisman, "A New View of Skyscraper History," in The Rise of an American Architecture (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).
6. Winkler, p. 129.
7. Winkler, p. 129.
8. Winkler, p. 132.
9. Leo L. Redding, "Mr. F.W. Woolworth's Story," interview with Woolworth published in World's Work (April 1913, pp. 659-665); clipping in Cass Gilbert papers, New-York Historical Society; p. 664.
10. The following account of Cass Gilbert's career is based on Robert Allan Jones, Cass Gilbert, Midwestern Architect in New York (Ph.D. dissertation for Case Western Reserve University, 1976), except where otherwise noted.
11. Both buildings are National Historic Landmarks.
12. This is Jones's main thesis, outlined p. viii.
13. Jones, p. 10-11.
14. These works are described in A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915 (New York: Arno Press, 1977, reprint).
15. Jones, p. 50-55.
16. Jones, p. 62.
17. Jones, p. 63 ff.
18. "The New Minnesota State Capitol at St. Paul," The Western Architect, 4 (Oct. 1905), 3-32.
19. See United States Custom House Interior designation report (LP-1022; by Ruth Selden Sturgill for the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, New York: City of New York, 1979). The Custom House commission was hotly contested by local architects, who considered Cass Gilbert an outsider with no claims to it and charged collusion between Gilbert and his former partner Taylor who sat on the jury.

20. This theory is explained in Cass Gilbert, "The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture," in American Architect, 136 (August 1929) 141-144.
21. The address was reprinted in Julia Finch Gilbert, Cass Gilbert: Reminiscences and Addresses (New York: Privately printed, 1935), p. 115.
22. Ibid., p. 116.
23. "Cass Gilbert's New York Customhouse Design," The Inland Architect and News Record, 35 (February 1900), p. 7.
24. Montgomery Schuyler, "The Woolworth Building," American Architecture and Other Writings, edited by William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 614.
25. "Response on the occasion of the presentation of The Gold Medal for Architecture of the Society of Arts and Sciences to Cass Gilbert, New York, January 16, 1931" in Cass Gilbert: Reminiscences and Addresses.
26. "The Woolworth Building, Most Modern Example of the Fireproof Skyscraper... How It Was Built," in The Real Estate Magazine, July 1912, p. 56.
27. Gilbert, "The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture," p. 141-144.
28. Julia Finch Gilbert, Cass Gilbert: Reminiscences..., p. 14.
29. Leo L. Redding, "Mr. F.W. Woolworth's Story," p. 663.
30. The correspondence and notes on the various meetings and conversations are preserved in the Cass Gilbert Papers at the New-York Historical Society.
31. Cass Gilbert, notes dated June 22, 1910, in the Cass Gilbert Papers, New-York Historical Society.
32. Cass Gilbert notes dated January 21, 1911, in folder marked "Reports 1911," Cass Gilbert Papers, New-York Historical Society.
33. Ibid.
34. Some of the sketches are in the Cass Gilbert Papers, New-York Historical Society.
35. Cass Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday of a Notable Structure," Real Estate Magazine of New York, May 1923, p. 344-345.
36. Ibid.
37. New York Sun, July 4, 1915, cited in Gilbert scrapbook 255, Cass Gilbert papers, New-York Historical Society.
38. Jones, 131.
39. Letter from Edward J. Hogan to Cass Gilbert, dated January 18, 1913, in the Cass Gilbert Papers, New-York Historical Society.

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 Woolworth Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the entrance lobby hallway, the intersecting elevator hallways, the lobby extending from the entrance lobby hallway, and the staircases extending from the entrance lobby hallway to the mezzanine (second floor) level; mezzanine (second floor) level interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance lobby hallway and the lobby up to and including the ceiling, the elevator hallways; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, carvings, mosaics, sculpture, murals, grilles, transom grilles, stained glass skylight, directory boards, mailboxes, wall clock, railings, and lobby shop window enframements; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City; and that the interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Woolworth Building contains one of the finest skyscraper interiors in New York and one of the most significant nationwide; that this interior was designed by Cass Gilbert, one of the most important architects to have worked in New York and one of the most prominent architects of his era; that it is an extraordinary Gothic-style design joining an arcade with a marble staircase hall; that it is an excellent and well-executed programmatic design, illustrated with attributes of commerce, of the Woolworth Company, and of the people involved in the building's construction; that the building and its interior were created as a monument to Frank W. Woolworth and to the Woolworth "5 and 10" stores, which had become an American institution; that the design of the interior combined with spatial and symbolic requirements of Woolworth and of the Irving National Bank with Cass Gilbert's conception of the appropriate decoration for public spaces, which he believed should be treated as a public monument; that in size, richness and conception the interior was unprecedented in New York skyscrapers; and that as a skyscraper interior it has rarely been equalled since, in New York or elsewhere.

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 Woolworth Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the entrance lobby hallway, the intersecting elevator hallways, the lobby extending from the entrance lobby hallway, and the staircases extending from the entrance lobby hallway to the mezzanine (second floor) level; mezzanine (second floor) level interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance lobby hallway and the lobby up to and including the ceiling, the elevator hallways; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, elevator doors, carvings, mosaics, sculpture, murals, grilles, transom grilles, stained glass skylight, directory boards, mailboxes, wall clock, railings, and lobby shop window enframements, 233 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 123, Lot 22, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

Report Prepared by
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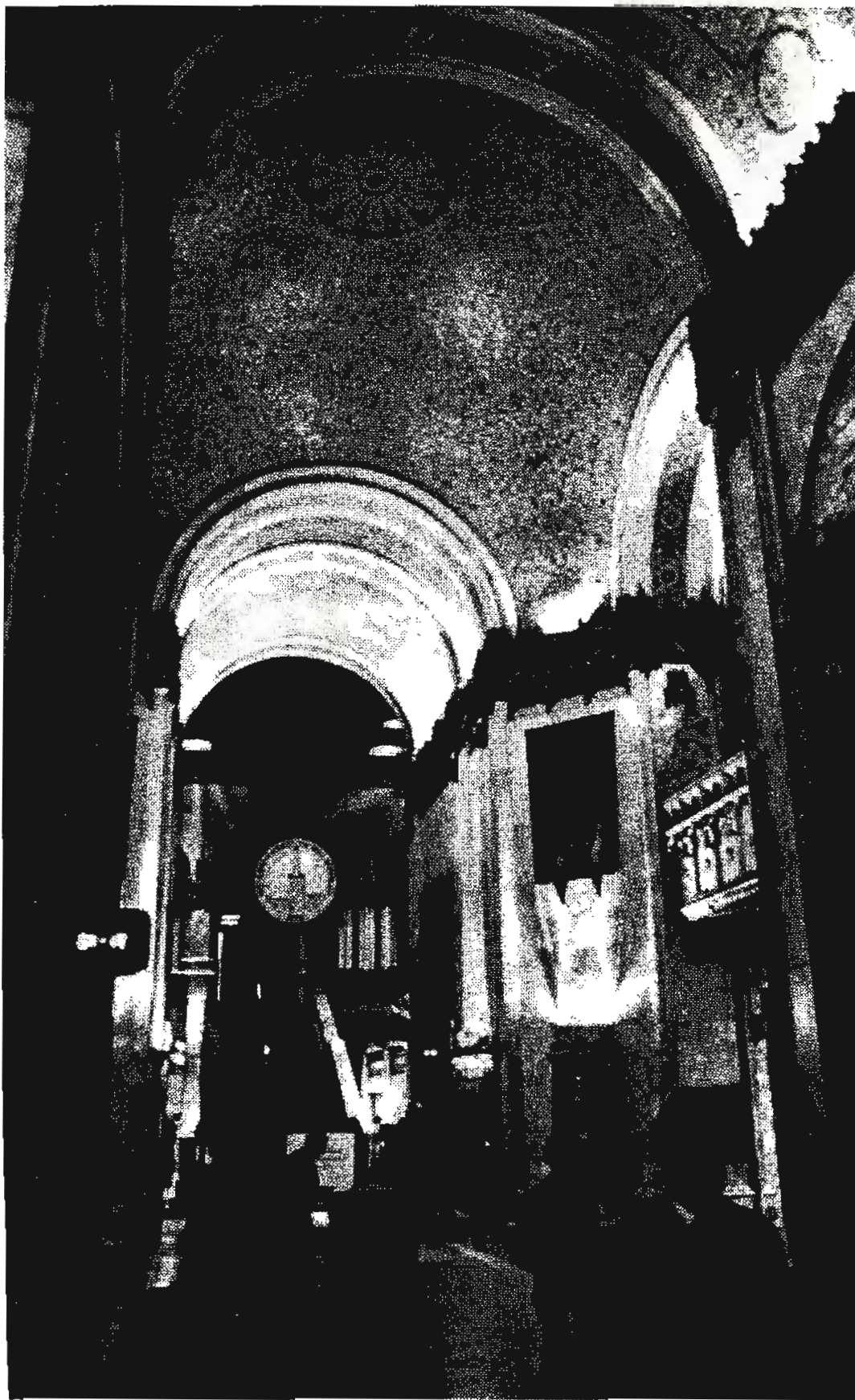
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Woolworth Building Interior
233 Broadway
Manhattan

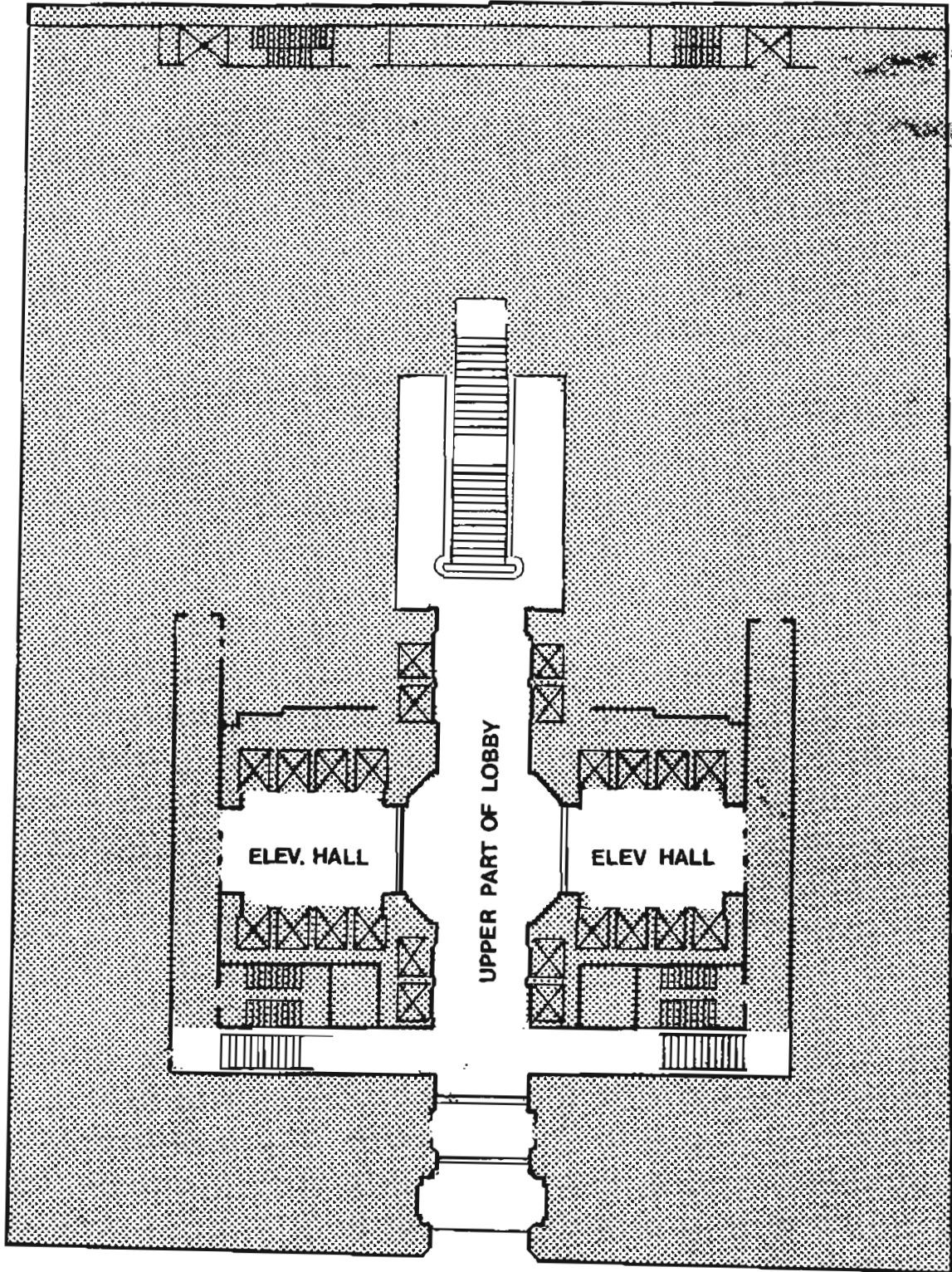
Architect: Cass Gilbert
Built: 1911-1913

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Preservation Commission

WOOLWORTH BUILDING

MEZZANINE LEVEL INTERIOR

BARCLAY ST.



PARK PLACE

BROADWAY

KEY



Designated

Not Designated