

LIBERTY TOWER, 55 Liberty Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1909-10; architect Henry Ives Cobb.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 64, Lot 8.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Liberty Tower and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A letter has been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Liberty Tower, designed by Henry Ives Cobb and built in 1909-10, is one of the early group of romantic skyscrapers which changed the skyline of New York in the 20th century. Built shortly after the Singer Tower, contemporaneously with the Metropolitan Life Tower, and shortly before the Woolworth Building, the Liberty Tower, like them, adapted an historic style to the newly emerging tall steel-cage structure, while partially breaking away from the tripartite formula of skyscraper design. Although only half the height of the Woolworth Building, Liberty Tower anticipated much of the revolutionary character of its more famous counterpart by being almost entirely freestanding, clad largely in terra cotta, and designed in a Gothic style. Henry Ives Cobb, an architect trained in Boston who practiced for many years in Chicago, was particularly well-suited to the task of adapting traditional Eastern styles to Midwestern skyscraper technology, and his Liberty Tower remains one of the most distinctive skyscrapers in lower Manhattan.

History of the Site and the Liberty Tower Project

The site of Liberty Tower in the middle of the 19th century was not quite within the financial district, and from the 1850s until the 1870s was occupied by the New York Evening Post building. The Post, edited by poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) from 1827-1877, bought the property in 1853, and remained on the site until 1875.

The site changed hands several times over the next thirty years. Parke Godwin bought it in 1881, and sold it to the Bryant Building Co. in 1883. Both the building company and the seven-story building on the site were named in honor of the Post's editor. The Bryant Building Company sold the site in January 1909 to the C.L. Gray Construction Company of St. Louis, which actually was buying it for another company, not yet incorporated, in which, it was said, "several St. Louis men will be interested."¹

The new company, called the Liberty-Nassau Building Company, built Liberty Tower as a speculative office building, as the site was by this time within the confines of the financial district. The new structure was at first called the the "Bryant Building," like its predecessor, but soon afterward became known as Liberty Tower.

The advertising brochure for the building issued by the company claimed that "with a floor plan, every inch of which will be available for office uses, and with the perfect light and ventilation afforded only by the expensive tower plan of construction, it will successfully challenge comparison with any office space in New York."² According to the brochure the company intended to limit tenants to stock brokers, financial institutions, large industrial corporations and lawyers, and they promised to "treat their tenants as their partners

in the enterprise." The brochure announced that "the building was not erected as a speculation, but as a permanent investment on behalf of the Liberty-Nassau Building Company, and therefore the design, material, workmanship and equipment are the best that genius and money could suggest and supply.

In accordance with these intentions, the company brought in the C.L. Gray Construction Co. from St. Louis, the company's home base; contracted with the Atlantic Terra-Cotta Company, the leading firm in the field; and hired Henry Ives Cobb to design the striking Gothic-style terra-cotta clad skyscraper.

Henry Ives Cobb (1859-1931)

Henry Ives Cobb, an architect who trained in the east, spent many years working in Chicago.³ His training left him with pronounced preferences for traditional historic styles, but his practice in Chicago, during the developing years of the first Chicago School, put him in touch with the latest technological developments. A very prolific architect, Cobb's commissions included residences, churches, public buildings, clubs, and office and commercial buildings.

Cobb was born in Brookline, Mass., in 1859. He attended private schools and the Brookline High School where he acquired drafting skills. While still in high school, he was sent by his father on a sea voyage for his health and visited England and France. After returning home he resumed study at the Brookline High School and graduated in 1876. He entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he remained one year, and then the Lawrence Scientific School of Harvard University, graduating in 1880 as an engineer.

Cobb studied architecture with William R. Ware (1832-1915), the founder in 1865, of the first school of architecture in the United States at M.I.T. and later the school at Columbia University in 1881. Training in both these schools, as in others in the late 19th and early 20th century, was based on the system used in the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which Ware would have learned while studying in the atelier of Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to study at the Ecole. Ware himself was a partner in the successful firm of Ware & Van Brunt, much of whose work was in the High Victorian Gothic style. Ware & Van Brunt designed Memorial Hall at Harvard, the construction of which was completed in 1878 while Cobb was still a student there.⁴ Memorial Hall was one of the most prominent buildings in the Victorian Gothic style.

Cobb was employed briefly by Peabody and Stearns, a prominent Boston firm that worked in various historical styles, but left for Chicago in 1881 to accept a commission for the Union Club building there. Soon after his arrival he entered a partnership with Charles Sumner Frost, and they worked together until 1888. Cobb was responsible for design, while Frost was in charge of construction.⁵ Afterwards, Cobb worked independently.

Cobb lived in Chicago from 1881 to 1896, formative years for the Chicago School. Cobb, as an engineer, was very receptive to the technical advances of the Chicago architects, and in fact was one of the first to use steel construction in his buildings. Nevertheless, in stylistic matters he remained faithful to his eastern education and background and worked in historic modes all his life. Unlike the leading Chicago architects, he was evidently not interested in the search for new aesthetic principles corresponding to new technology.

Among Cobb's major commissions in Chicago were the Chicago Opera House, the Newberry Library, the Chicago Historical Society Building and the Chicago Athletic Association Building. For about ten years he was the architect for the University of Chicago, and designed many buildings for it, including the Yerkes Observatory. He also built a number

of mansions for prominent Chicagoans, including C.W. Cass, Dr. J.A. McGill, and Potter Palmer.

Cobb was a member of the Board of Architects for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893, the exposition which brought the Beaux-Arts Classic style to prominence in the United States. For it, he designed several buildings, among them the Fisheries Building and Aquarium, and the Indiana State Building. From the middle of the 1890s till the early 1900s Cobb was also an architect for the federal government, and in this capacity he designed governmental buildings in Chicago and other cities.

Cobb moved to Washington in 1896 and then to New York in 1902 where he lived until his death in 1931. In New York he built mostly office and commercial buildings, among them the 42 Broadway Office Building, Liberty Tower and the Harriman Bank Building.

Cobb also had a number of important commissions in other cities including the Church of Atonement, Edgewater, Ill.; the Durand Art Institute for Lake Forest University, Ind.; the Albany Savings Bank and the New York State Bank Building, Albany, New York; buildings for American University, Washington, D.C.; and the Clement Studebaker, Esq. Residence, South Bend, Ind.

In his later years Cobb gave much time to the problems of arbitration. He was one of the organizers of the Arbitration Society of America in 1922 and a member of its first Board of Managers. He contributed to the unification of the other two bodies in that field and to the establishment of the American Arbitration Association in 1926. At the time of his death he was its director. Cobb was an active member of the Merchants' Association of New York City for many years. In 1924-28 he was a vice president of the association.

Throughout this career, the Gothic style was one of Cobb's favorites and he used it in various types of buildings. One of the leading architectural critics of the time, Montgomery Schuyler, wrote that "of the many styles in which the architect has worked, those in which he works most freely and most successfully, are those that are at once romantic and refined, and this implies some mode of the later Gothic."⁶ Schuyler noted also that "picturesqueness is the characteristic of the architect's most striking successes."⁷

The Liberty Tower Design

In 1909, when Cobb was hired by the Liberty-Nassau Building Company to design Liberty Tower, he had been in New York for seven years. The development of office buildings in the city had seen the construction of increasingly high towers, designed in historic styles, occupying an increasingly dense financial district. Ernest Flagg, in 1908, designed an addition including a tall Beaux-Arts style tower to his Singer Building; Napoleon LeBrun's Metropolitan Life Tower, based on the Campanile of St. Mark's in Venice, was already in progress; and soon the Gothic-style Woolworth Building would top both to become the world's tallest building. These three skyscrapers were the culmination of the development of the tall steel-cage office structure that had begun in the late 19th century, and they set the type for the "romantic skyscrapers" of the first half of the 20th century. Cobb, with his long experience in Chicago, was eminently qualified to design a 33 story tower and his stylistic leanings fit into New York's aesthetic trends. (In this respect his background was similar to that of Cass Gilbert, architect of the Woolworth Building, who was a mid-western architect with Beaux-Arts training.) Structurally, his Liberty Tower evoked much interest; stylistically, although a smaller building, it was one of the first of the new type of skyscraper. It was also important as being one of the first New York buildings fully clad in terra-cotta.⁸

The Liberty Tower, built in 1909-10, is a 33-story skyscraper, rising about 400 feet above street level. It occupies the site bounded by Liberty and Nassau Streets, and Liberty Place, a narrow street on the west separating it from the New York Chamber of Commerce Building; adjoining it on the north are a few low-rise structures. Its location makes the building practically freestanding. The small lot measures 57.9 feet on Liberty Street, 86.1 feet on Liberty Place, 65.8 feet at the rear, and 82.1 feet on Nassau Street.

The building was constructed according to the latest technological achievements of its time, and its construction was discussed in the press. It has caisson foundations, with the caissons sunk to a depth of about 94 feet below the curb through quicksand and boulder-filled hardpan to rock.⁹ The foundations were made completely watertight by means of special connections between the wall caissons to resist exterior pressure and exclude ground water. It was stated in the advertising brochure issued by the Liberty-Nassau Building Co. that foundations at such a depth would eliminate all possibility of vibration.¹⁰ At the time of its construction, the Liberty Tower was considered to have the deepest foundations in the city with the exception of only one building that had foundations of the same depth.¹¹ The building had steel framework and was completely fireproof. It was equipped with five high-speed elevators.

Cobb chose an English variant of the Gothic style, his general preference, for the tower. His tower was praised in the press as a very successful adaptation of the Gothic. The design as a whole has a clearly defined base, central shaft, and top, but unlike earlier buildings does not fall into a strict division of base-shaft-capital; rather the three segments merge into each other.

The three major elevations are entirely clad in white terra-cotta. The base consists of the first two stories, slightly rusticated, the second story being slightly taller than the rest. Stores occupy most of the first floor. The base is demarcated from the next three floors by a string course; these three stories act as a transition to the shaft; the windows at each level with unadorned spandrels are paired beneath drip lintels while the windows at the fifth floor are capped by small cornices. Above the fifth floor the shaft rises, in identical stories, up to the twenty-third floor. Each of these stories has piers between the bays emphasizing the verticality of the shaft, and each has blind Gothic arcades in the spandrels. Beneath and above the twenty-third floor are ornate terra-cotta cornices supported by brackets, with grotesque figures on the piers on the cornice under the twenty-third floor; there are also cornices beneath and above the twenty-seventh floor, and above the twenty-eighth floor. The cornice above the twenty-seventh floor projects further from the wall than the other two and is more ornate. Above the twenty-third floor the flat piers of the lower floors become rounded pilasters at the corners.

The striking copper-clad roof begins at the level of the thirtieth floor and rises 64 feet. Inside the roof above the thirtieth floor are the attic floor, the superintendent's floor, and the tank floor. Corners of the roof are adorned with pilasters with pinnacles crowned with finials. The dormers are flanked by small piers surmounted by animals cast in terra cotta. This tall, high-pitched roof was praised in the press of the period: "The Liberty Tower has employed a high sloping roof to complete the structure and that this is a more desirable termination than a plain flat deck is generally conceded."¹²

The main facade of the building is the Liberty Street front. It is divided into three bays and has one large dormer at the roof which is a continuation of the central bay. The side bays have paired double-hung windows; the central bay has two groups of paired double-hung windows that are a little bit smaller than the windows of the side bays, and continue into the large dormer at the thirtieth floor.

The entrance consists of the door opening, with a Tudor arch, now beautifully restored. The bronze and glass entrance doors are surmounted by a bronze transom incorporating Gothic arcades.¹³ Above the entrance, extending up to the fifth story, is a four-sided bay window with double hung sash, surmounted by battlements. The door opening and the bay window are flanked by paneled buttresses with pinnacles, rising four stories.

The Liberty Place and Nassau Street fronts are almost identical. Each extends five bays, with the second and fourth bays continuing into large dormers at the roof. The double-hung windows in each are paired on both fronts, except for the south of the Liberty Place front, where the double-hung windows are tripled, reflecting the difference in length of the two sides of the lot.

On all three main elevations the cornices running beneath and above the twenty-seventh floor are interrupted, and do not extend across the windows of the bays which continue into the dormers. The north front faced with white brick with terra-cotta detail, is practically plain.

Conclusion

The Liberty Tower passed out of the hands of the Liberty-Nassau Company in 1916, when it was sold to the Garden City Company of Long Island; it was resold in 1919 to the Sinclair Building Company, to house the main offices of the Sinclair Oil Company, and for a while was known as the Sinclair Oil Building. The Sinclair Building Company sold the building in 1945. Liberty Tower continued to be used for offices until 1979, in which year it was converted to co-operative apartments by the architectural firm of Joseph Pell Lombardi & Associates.

Once one of the tallest buildings in lower Manhattan, Liberty Tower is now surrounded by many larger structures. Nevertheless, its unusual Gothic style, its white terra-cotta cladding, and its picturesque roof all continue to distinguish it from surrounding office buildings. The product of a period that saw such major monuments as the Singer, Metropolitan Life, and Woolworth Buildings, Liberty Tower still stands out as a "romantic skyscraper," and is an important visual landmark in lower Manhattan.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, January 28, 1909.
2. The Liberty Tower, New York, brochure by the Liberty-Nassau Building Company, 1910.
3. Information on the life and work of Henry Ives Cobb varies from source to source; his papers, unfortunately, were destroyed at the time of his death. Julius Lewis, Henry Ives Cobb and the Chicago School, unpublished M.A. Thesis (Chicago, 1954), p. 4.
4. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 207, 272.
5. Lewis, p. 3.
6. Montgomery Schuyler, "Henry Ives Cobb," in the "Great American Architects Series," Architectural Record, (February 1896), pp. 103, 110.
7. Schuyler, p. 103.
8. Terra cotta was introduced to New York area buildings by George B. Post in an 1877 residence on West 36th Street and in the Long Island Historical Society Building, 1878, in Brooklyn Heights; it was some time, however, before buildings were completely clad in the material. An early example is Louis Sullivan's Bayard-Condict Building, 1897-99, at 65-69 Bleecker Street in Manhattan. It is interesting to note that Sullivan, like Cobb, practiced extensively in Chicago, and that exterior terra-cotta cladding began to be widely used in that city in the 1890s.
9. "The Bryant Building Substructure," in Engineering Record, 61. (May 21, 1910), 665.
10. The Liberty Tower, New York.
11. "Bryant Foundations Finished," in Real Estate Record and Guide (October 16, 1909), 678.
12. Architecture (August 15, 1910), 116.
13. The entrance leads into the building's lobby, originally one of the building's most interesting features. It is faced with cream-colored marble and has an English Gothic style vault. The east and west walls of the stairway were originally adorned with murals showing "Spring, Youth and Ambition" on one side and "Autumn, Age and Achievement" on the other. The central figure represented William Cullen Bryant, in tribute to his work in the earlier building on the site. The interior is not included in this designation.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Liberty Tower 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, Liberty Tower, built in 1909-10, is one of the early group of romantic skyscrapers which changed the skyline of New York in the 20th century; that it was designed by Henry Ives Cobb, an architect particularly well-suited to the task of adapting traditional Eastern styles to Midwestern skyscraper technology; that among its innovative technological features are its caisson foundations and exterior terra-cotta cladding, which is an early use of this material in New York; that being almost entirely freestanding, the building is one of the early New York tower skyscrapers; that the design of the building adapted the Gothic style to a tall steel-cage structure while partially breaking from the more traditional tripartite formula of skyscraper design; that among the notable and finely handled details are the rusticated base, the entrance bay, the cornices, and the picturesque copperclad roof, all further emphasized by the white terra-cotta cladding; and that Liberty Tower continues to stand as an important visual landmark in lower Manhattan.

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 Liberty Tower, 55 Liberty Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 64, Lot 8, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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