

**BARCLAY-VESEY BUILDING,**  
140 West Street, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1923-1927, Ralph Walker of McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 84, Lot 1.

On September 19, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Barclay-Vesey Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 31). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission received one letter in support of designation. At the public hearing, a representative of the owner indicated that the owner was unsure of its position. Subsequently, the owner indicated it would not oppose designation.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Summary

The Barclay-Vesey Building of the New York Telephone Company (also known as the New York Telephone Building) was the first major work of prominent New York architect Ralph Walker. Constructed in 1923-27 and built at a time of great progress and transition in American design, it was a product of the atmosphere of architectural creativity and originality which flourished in New York in the 1920s. A pivotal structure in the history of skyscraper architecture, it is a prototypical example of what came to be regarded as the American Art Deco style. Intended to be completely modern in every feature and detail, from its form, generated by its parallelogram-shaped site and contemporary zoning restrictions, to its construction techniques, materials, unconventional ornament, and style, Walker's design for "the largest telephone company building in the world"<sup>1</sup> was an emphatic statement of the most recent architectural trends. The building, designed to be "as modern as the telephone activity it houses . . . [was] a simple, straightforward solution" to the requirements of the building program.<sup>2</sup> The progressive design of the building was envisioned by company president, Howard F. Thurber, and resulted in a grand statement of his company's size, strength, and success. The overall effect of Walker's Barclay-Vesey Building is one of strong form and bold silhouette, with its blunt setback transitions articulated by vertical buttress-like piers and massive form relieved by intricate, animated ornament. Substantially intact, the building continues to be a dramatic presence on Manhattan's skyline.

## Site History

The block bounded by Barclay and Vesey Streets at the north and south and Washington and West Streets at the east and west was originally located beyond the present shoreline of the Hudson River. (Fig. 1) The waterfront along the west side of Manhattan was developed beginning early in the nineteenth century. As part of the improvement, the banks of the Hudson were filled in, extended, and raised, and piers were constructed at the western end of every street between Vesey and King Streets by the late 1830s.<sup>3</sup> Crucial to the city's mercantile expansion, the improvements helped New York City to achieve recognition as the country's major port and trading center by the 1830s and 1840s. This area and the section of the city just to the north, now known as Tribeca, were transformed into a center for dairy goods, produce, and less perishable goods including tobacco, imported woods, coffee, and spices. Markets for these items were developed in the area close to the docks to facilitate the handling of the commodities. First established in 1812 and repeatedly expanded, the Washington Market, located on the block bounded by West, Washington, Vesey, and Fulton Streets, just south of the Barclay-Vesey Building, grew to be Manhattan's major wholesale and retail produce outlet.<sup>4</sup> Many other buildings were constructed in the area to accommodate the food industry, including approximately thirty-five three-, four-, and five-story brick buildings on the site chosen for the telephone company's headquarters. The activities of the merchants, so important to the site and to the surrounding area, would later be recalled in the ornamental program of the Barclay-Vesey Building. The site was chosen over more popular office locations to the east on Broadway because it was much less expensive. The West Street frontage was considered an asset because it was assumed that the structures along the docks would never rise above two or three stories and the future building's western exposure would, therefore, always remain unobstructed.

### The New York Telephone Company

The telephone business developed rapidly following the early successes of Alexander Graham

Bell's inventions in the 1870s. By the turn of the century the American Telephone & Telegraph Company had become the central institution of Bell Telephone Company operations, with smaller companies, including the New York Telephone Company, conducting its regional services.

After a sluggish period of business during World War I the New York Telephone Company faced a new period of rapid expansion. In an effort to organize and control the growth, the company decided to establish divisional headquarters throughout the state. A reassessment of the company's organization in New York City concluded that its personnel, offices, and equipment were inefficiently scattered city-wide. Howard Ford Thurber (1869-1928), president of the New York Telephone Company from 1919 to 1924, determined that a new central headquarters building would alleviate the problems associated with the company's lack of unity. Thurber's "vision," as it was called in his *New York Times* obituary, was to create a building large enough to "satisfy the [company's] present demands and to reasonably anticipate future requirements."<sup>5</sup> The new headquarters building would consolidate an equipment and administrative center, incorporating six central offices. As explained in a Telephone Company pamphlet, central offices

are the nerve centers of the [telephone] system. Here the wires from the local telephones and from other central offices converge and are carried to distributing frames, where they fan out to the proper points of contact on the switchboards.<sup>6</sup>

Thurber's building program required a large utilitarian facility with specialized mechanical features and space for a centralized work force of 6,000 employees serving 120,000 telephones. Undaunted by the numerous details of the project, Thurber envisioned not just the practical concerns of the building but its potential symbolic quality as well. A large structure, progressively designed, could establish a positive corporate image and symbolize the size and strength of the organization -- an industry whose work was clearly at the forefront of modern technology. With Thurber's plan for a new headquarters building, the New York Telephone Company was established at the vanguard of modern trends in business and architecture.

## Ralph Walker and McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin

For the design of its headquarters building, the New York Telephone Company chose McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin, an architectural firm whose long history with the telephone company began in 1885 with the firm's founding partner Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz (1853-1921). Eidlitz was commissioned by the Metropolitan Telephone and Telegraph Company, the predecessor of the New York Telephone Company, in that year to design its first headquarters building at 18 Cortlandt Street in Manhattan.<sup>7</sup> Andrew McKenzie (1861-1926), born in Dunkirk, New York, and educated in Buffalo, came to New York City in 1884 and worked for the firm of Babb, Cook & Willard. He became associated with Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz in 1902 and the partnership of Eidlitz & McKenzie was active from 1905 to 1909. That firm's major work was the New York Times Building at Times Square.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Voorhees (1879-1965) was born near Rocky Hill, New Jersey, and was educated as a civil engineer at Princeton University, graduating in 1900. In 1902 he began to practice with Eidlitz & McKenzie as an engineer and superintendent of construction; one of his first jobs was the supervision of the foundation work for the New York Times Building. German-born Paul Gmelin (1859-1937) studied in Stuttgart. He came to the United States as a draftsman, was briefly associated with McKim, Mead & White, and then joined the firm of Babb, Cook & Willard, where he met Andrew McKenzie.

In 1910 the firm of McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin was organized and continued Eidlitz's successful relationship with the telephone company, gaining numerous commissions for buildings throughout New York state. By 1912 the firm had completed approximately thirty new telephone buildings in New York City alone (not counting alterations and expansions).<sup>9</sup> The firm also designed the Brooklyn Edison Company Building and the Brooklyn Municipal Building, as well as private residences. McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin was active through 1925.

In 1919 Ralph Walker (1889-1973) joined the office of McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin. Born in Waterbury, Connecticut, Walker began a two-year apprenticeship with the Providence, Rhode Island, architectural firm of Hilton & Jackson in 1907 and then studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In Montreal in 1911 Walker studied with Francis Swales (1878-1962)

who had established architectural firms in London, Montreal, and Vancouver, British Columbia, and later moved his practice to New York. In 1913 Walker practiced with James Ritchie in Boston and three years later won the Rotch Traveling Scholarship. (His two-year trip to Italy was postponed by the war, during which he served in France with the Army Corps of Engineers.) Walker also worked as a designer in the offices of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue and York & Sawyer.

Walker's first major project with McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin was the Barclay-Vesey Building.<sup>10</sup> The appearance of the Barclay-Vesey Building, unlike anything previously produced by the firm, and the general success of the design, established Walker's reputation. Near the completion of the building and following the death of McKenzie, Walker rose to partnership in the firm of Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker. Considered the firm's main designer, Walker continued to produce designs for the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, becoming a specialist in the design of that industry's buildings. Subsequent commissions whose designs were based on concepts first developed in the Barclay-Vesey Building were the New Jersey Bell Headquarters (Newark, 1928-29), the Western Union Building at 60 Hudson Street (1928-30), and telephone buildings in Syracuse and Rochester. The Irving Trust Company Building at 1 Wall Street (1929-31) and the Long Distance Building of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company at 32 Sixth Avenue (1930-32) followed soon after. (The Western Union Building and the Long Distance Building are designated New York City Landmarks.) Walker also designed buildings for other corporate clients including General Foods and IBM, and several pavilions for firms at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. The success of Walker's corporate commissions brought him recognition as one of the city's most prominent designers of Art Deco skyscrapers.

Active in professional circles, Walker was president of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects from 1933 to 1935, president of the Architectural League from 1937 to 1939, and president of the national organization of the American Institute of Architects from 1949 to 1951. In 1957 the AIA gave Walker the title of "architect of the century." In 1958 Walker resigned from active participation in the firm, then known as Voorhees, Walker,

Smith, Smith & Haines, but continued in the capacity of a consultant. He later served on the Fine Arts Commission (appointed in 1959 by President Eisenhower), as president of the Municipal Art Society, and as editor of *Pencil Points*. His firm continued in various forms after his retirement and is today known as Haines, Lundberg & Waehler.

### Zoning and the Creation of a Modern Style

The 1916 Building Zone Resolution had a tremendous impact on architecture in New York City; the final form and appearance of the Barclay-Vesey Building owe much to this law. Overbuilding, increased building heights, and related problems such as a decrease in the amount of sunlight at street level, were the factors which created the need for the ordinance. The *Building Zone Handbook* (1916) stated that the purpose of the law was

to stabilize and conserve property values, to relieve the rapidly increasing congestion in the streets and in the transit lines, to provide greater safety in buildings and in the streets, and in general to make the city more beautiful, convenient and agreeable.<sup>11</sup>

The restrictions created to bring about the "more beautiful city" were based on the use of building setbacks to control height and bulk.<sup>12</sup> Height and setback regulations applied to seventy-five percent of the site; the remaining portion of the building site was unlimited in height, encouraging developers to assemble large building sites to make tower construction more affordable, possibly even profitable. The building shape that resulted from the zoning restrictions took the form of a ziggurat, a rhythmic succession of blocks which grew smaller and more recessed from bottom to top. The ziggurat was then topped by a tower or a pair of towers.

While the creators of the 1916 zoning resolution were motivated by purely practical concerns, architects drew inspiration from the building forms which resulted from the restrictions. In 1922, architect and critic Harvey Wiley Corbett (1873-1954) and architectural renderer Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) explored the possibilities of the zoning law in a series of drawings which illustrated progressive stages of design based on the law's

restrictions. (Fig. 2) The drawings showed 1) the maximum allowable bulk of the building and its form under the zoning law, 2) the addition of necessary light courts to the basic block, 3) the impact of structural limitations, and 4) economic considerations. Finally, Ferriss and Corbett presented drawings of an architecturally "trimmed" design.<sup>13</sup> These dramatic renderings, published in *Pencil Points* (1923) and in *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929), significantly influenced architects of the day. The drawings and the laws from which they came directed the architects' attention to the building as a whole rather than to a single facade of the structure, thus altering the whole design process. By visualizing buildings "from every possible angle" the architect was transformed from a designer of facades into a "sculptor in building masses."<sup>14</sup>

The zoning law provided architects with a sound, rational basis for the form and appearance of the skyscraper as well as a new source of creativity; historical styles did not seem to express this modern sensibility and, consequently, a new "skyscraper style" emerged in the 1920s. William A. Starrett (1877-1932), an engineer, builder and architect, acknowledged the effect of the zoning law in his book, *Skyscrapers and the Men Who Build Them*, a short history of the skyscraper and related topics, and said its effect was "to give to architectural design in high buildings the greatest impetus it ever has known and to produce a new and beautiful pyramidal skyline. . . ."<sup>15</sup> Major characteristics of the new style, as generated by the zoning restrictions, were sculpted massing, bold setbacks, and ornament subordinated to the overall mass. Clearly reflecting the current interest of the designers, the new style was commonly called "Modernistic." Corbett praised the new "setback style" and predicted it would "go down in history along with the Gothic, the Classic, and the Renaissance."<sup>16</sup> The dramatic rendering style of Ferriss and others expressed the new, vertically-oriented, modernistic aesthetic. A rendering by Chester B. Price of the completed Barclay-Vesey Building captures the drama and the energy of the style and the time. (Fig. 3)

The Modernistic style generated additional interest as architects identified it as a distinctively American style. American businesses capitalized on the status achieved by the modern skyscraper. Increasingly, large corporations, such as the

American Telephone & Telegraph Company, chose the skyscraper as the home for their operations, believing a massive skyscraper in a modern style could symbolize their success and progressiveness and project a positive image for their companies.

The Chicago Tribune Company capitalized on the concept of the skyscraper as corporate image for its widely-publicized and much-entertained architectural competition of 1922. The competition for the "most beautiful skyscraper in the world" to house the Tribune's new headquarters had a great impact on American architecture. The first place winners, Raymond Hood (1881-1934) and John Mead Howells (1868-1959), produced a relatively conservative design with Gothic-inspired ornament. The design of the second place winner, Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950), was the highly regarded public favorite and was promoted for its vertical emphasis, setback transitions, and abstracted ornament. (Fig. 4a) These elements appeared in numerous subsequent skyscrapers, including the Barclay-Vesey Building, and critics have traditionally cited Saarinen's entry as the source for Walker's design. However, Walker's own entry for the Tribune Competition, which received an award of Honorable Mention, also exhibits strongly emphasized vertical piers and a form composed of a tower on a base with setback transitions.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 4b) An additional similarity between Walker's Tribune entry and an early design of the Barclay-Vesey Building is the pyramidal roof that caps the buildings in both designs. (Fig. 5) Walker's Tribune entry was due on November 1, 1922; the winner was announced on December 3. Plans for the Barclay-Vesey Building were filed at the Department of Buildings on June 6, 1923.<sup>18</sup> Considering the size of the building, it is not unlikely that Walker had begun its design by the Fall of 1922, and was working on both projects at the same time. Therefore, Walker's experimentation with vertical emphasis and setback tower forms in his Tribune entry seems to have played an important role in his conception of the Barclay-Vesey Building.

#### Design of the Barclay-Vesey Building

*Walker's Design Theory.* Walker's version of the modern skyscraper, as seen in the Barclay-Vesey Building, was based on two simple theories: 1) economy, not extravagance, is the key to good

modern design, and 2) only through machine technology can a modern style develop.<sup>19</sup> Walker was one of many designers who focused on the importance of modern technology and its role in the expression of the new style. Corbett summarized the trend: "The modern architect... must learn to use the machine as a basis of design if his work is to be indigenous to this period."<sup>20</sup> Walker even conceived of the Barclay-Vesey Building "as a machine which had definite functions to perform for the benefit of its occupants."<sup>21</sup> This pragmatic approach to the problem of design was a direct response to the functionalism inspired by the zoning law.

Walker's theoretical analysis of skyscraper design found a physical form in the Barclay-Vesey Building where he attempted to utilize building materials to express modern technology. The majority of the exterior material is brick, a material which Walker preferred for its textural qualities and subtle color variations, and is embellished throughout by stone ornament. Taking advantage of machine production wherever possible, ornament for the upper stories was executed in cast stone. Ornament at the lower stories was executed in limestone, but ornamental motifs were used in repeated patterns as a further expression of machine production. In addition, these materials, given their colors and textures, were chosen to convey a monolithic appearance and to express stability and mass.

Preliminary designs for the Barclay-Vesey Building focused on the size of the structure. Designs for buildings of ten, sixteen, twenty-six, thirty-six, and forty-two stories were drawn to study the relationship between cost and height. It was understood that the taller the building, the less the cost per square foot of the land; however, Walker had to take into consideration the increase of the construction costs with greater heights, as well as the market value of similar space. The thirty-two-story tower, incorporating required setbacks at the tenth and eighteenth stories, was determined to be most economical on all counts.<sup>22</sup> Another set of studies focused on developing the sculptural form of the building. (Fig. 5) Early designs showed a series of stacked blocks connected by blunt transitions. This concept appealed to Walker, but early designs using the concept lacked unity. Visual harmony was ultimately achieved through the emphatic treatment of the structure's vertical

piers, which Walker believed also gave the building "dignity and a style."<sup>23</sup> The piers softened the horizontal lines and, continuing above the rooflines of the setbacks, visually strengthened the overall verticality of the design.

The final form of the building was significantly affected by the allocation of interior spaces. Many functions to be accommodated in the headquarters building did not require natural light. For example, mechanical space was held to the central core of the structure, as was the space for the central operating system which required artificial light. As a result, it was possible to locate office space, where natural light was preferred, along the exterior wall. Consequently, the sizable light courts usually necessary in a building on such a large site were limited, resulting in the opportunity to create a massive base for the structure. The size of the base was also affected by the city's desire to widen Vesey Street. Walker introduced an arcade as a compromise solution; he incorporated the sidewalk inside the building mass, thus providing a larger base for the building. He considered this a pioneering attempt to combat traffic congestion and as the first of many such arcades to be built in the city. Incorporating storefronts into the design, the arcade was described upon its completion as "one of the most comfortable shopping fronts in New York City."<sup>24</sup>

Walker experimented with different stylistic expressions for the building, including Gothic and Italian Renaissance, but grew unsatisfied with his attempts to adapt such traditional styles to a building which was being shaped by purely practical concerns. Coming to terms with this incompatibility, Walker attempted "to treat the problem for its own sake, to make it as modern in conception as the telephone activity it houses."<sup>25</sup> He thus began his successful studies in the Modernistic style.

*The Ornamental Program.* For Walker, ornamental embellishment was needed to add texture and interest in a large building, and to reduce the scale of the mass to a more human level. To engage the passerby, Walker believed the ornament should be "so complicated in its structure as not to be readily comprehended; its framework should be as hidden as the steel structure itself. It should repay repeated interest and study. . . ."<sup>26</sup> As to the actual content of the ornament, he believed that overly-used traditional

motifs, such as the egg and dart, had lost all significance to the modern viewer. The ornament executed on the Barclay-Vesey Building met all of Walker's standards concerning texture, complexity, and unconventionalism. To complement the overall design, the ornament was given a vertical emphasis. It did not project from the wall surface but rather was cut into the stone for better weathering of the material. The desired texture of the ornament was achieved in a combination of low relief and high relief which resulted in the softening of the rigidity of the massing and of the strict vertical lines of the structure.

The sculptural ornament of the Barclay-Vesey Building was carried out by Ulysses Ricci (1888-1960) and John DeCesare. Born in New York, Ricci studied at Cooper Union, the Art Students League, and with James Earl Fraser. He designed medals for the American Numismatic Society and executed sculptural work for many buildings in New York, including the Bowery Savings Bank and a series of bronze plaques for the Times Square Schrafft's restaurant. For a time he was a member of the firm Ricci & Zari. John DeCesare was a member of the National Sculpture Society and for a time was a member of the firm Stifter & DeCesare.

Walker attempted to express the modernity of the telephone industry by casting aside all traditional ornamental forms. Thus, the ornament has no basis in historic architectural styles; instead it recalls the history and traditions of the site and surrounding area. Fruits, vegetables, vines with leaves, marine life, birds, small animals, and other natural objects populate the ornamented surfaces and recall the nearby Hudson River and the market area which earlier occupied the site. The lower stories of the building are so filled with ornament that Lewis Mumford called them "a rock garden."<sup>27</sup> While the ornament was not intended to symbolize the telephone specifically, the use of grapes and grapevines can be seen as a representation of communication. In addition, an occasional bell, the company symbol, is found in the ornamented surfaces.

Walker called his ornament "free and flowing,"<sup>28</sup> a description which in many ways contradicts the strict rigidity of his overall design. However, the blending of complicated ornament with simple forms, naturalistic elements with geometric shapes, and large massing with small

details can be seen as one of Walker's major triumphs. The synthesis of these elements allows the Barclay-Vesey Building to be admired both from a distance and from a closer perspective.

Walker's theory of ornament and its execution in the Barclay-Vesey Building was called "straightforward and appropriate and eminently right."<sup>29</sup> Praise for the building's ornament was not restricted to the exterior. By repeating the vertical emphasis and ornamental patterning on the interior, Walker achieved a continuity between interior and exterior design which was unusual at the time; many contemporary buildings which appeared modern on the exterior still reverted to historical styles on the interior. Mumford saw this compatibility between interior and exterior as a perpetuation of the work of H.H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright,<sup>30</sup> and he credited Walker as the first since Sullivan to carry through a significant scheme of decoration.<sup>31</sup> In fact, many aspects of Walker's ornament -- the textural quality, the complicated all-over patterning, the non-historicist subjects, the combination of naturalistic and geometric elements, and the synthesis of flowing ornament with geometric building forms -- were used by Sullivan and came to be seen as hallmarks of his style. Buildings such as the Carson Pirie Scott Department Store (Chicago, 1899-1904) and the Transportation Building at the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893) clearly illustrate Sullivan's use of these techniques.

*The Stylistic Context of the Barclay-Vesey Building.* The bold geometric massing of the Barclay-Vesey Building, its set-back form, its emphasis on verticality, and its flattened non-historical ornamental program all combine to make the building a prototypical example of what came to be known as the American Art Deco style. The Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels in Paris, which opened in 1925 after much of the design of the Barclay-Vesey Building had been completed, disseminated many of these elements which had been pioneered by Walker: abstracted naturalistic and geometric ornament in all-over patterns, linear and vertical emphasis in design, streamlined forms, and dramatic juxtaposition of colors and textures of materials. These elements were used by numerous American architects for subsequent set-back skyscraper designs. Reaching its zenith between 1928 and 1931 in New York

City this new architectural style was called "Modernistic" in contemporary sources. By the time of its critical re-assessment in the 1960s and '70s the style had achieved the popular name of Art Deco.<sup>32</sup> Taking into account the source of the term Art Deco and the timing of the design, it is accurate to call the style of the Barclay-Vesey Building "Modernistic." "Modern Perpendicular," another contemporary stylistic term, calls attention to the vertical emphasis of the design. Walker clearly expressed his view of the building's modern style and its origin:

It was Emerson, I think, who told us to stop building the sepulchers of our fathers and build our own house. The Barclay-Vesey building is an attempt to build a house of today. A house that is not Greek or Gothic, or Mayan; that looks little to the past, much to the present, and tries to glimpse the future.<sup>33</sup>

#### Contemporary Reactions

The Barclay-Vesey Building was hailed in its day as the ultimate modern skyscraper. Critics commented on all aspects of its design and construction. The Telephone Company was pleased with the result of its new headquarters building, calling it "a symbol of service and progress" and a "graphic example of [the] movement in modern telephony."<sup>34</sup> In addition, the building became a model for subsequent telephone headquarters in New York State, including the South State Street Building in Syracuse (1928). The wide acceptance of the building as a symbol of modern architecture was confirmed when its photograph was used as a frontispiece in the English translation of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*. The Architectural League of New York awarded the building its Gold Medal of Honor in 1927.

Many critics were struck by the size and form of the building. Corbett described it as "a building clean limbed and sure footed, rising with sheer, cliff-like walls."<sup>35</sup> Joseph Pennell, an etcher struck by New York's skyscrapers, proclaimed it "the most impressive modern building in the world."<sup>36</sup> Talbot Hamlin anticipated a prominent place in architectural history for the structure: "The whole building is destined to be a monument of American progress in architecture."<sup>37</sup> Still

other accounts commented on the elusive qualities of the design, citing the ability of its "rugged beauty" to "hold one breathless with its force."<sup>38</sup> Mumford commended its thorough design, calling it "one of the few skyscrapers that [could] bear close inspection."<sup>39</sup> Corbett agreed:

The Telephone Building is worth the careful study of every modern architect, and should receive the admiration of every layman. Let it be hoped that it stands at the dawn of a new day, both for architects that sin, and the public that is sinned against.<sup>40</sup>

### Construction<sup>41</sup>

Demolition of the existing buildings on the site was begun on May 23, 1923, and was completed on July 14. Foundation work was begun on June 20, 1923. Due to the instability of the land fill on the site, an elaborate system was created for the construction of the foundations which required twenty-two caissons sunk to bedrock at the perimeter of the site. The depth of the excavations allowed for five stories below ground, one more than had been originally planned. An innovative construction method was utilized thirty-eight feet below grade as permanent steel struts were substituted for temporary wooden cross-lot bracing at a savings of approximately \$30,000. This was believed to be the first use of this construction method. The steel-framed building is faced with brick backed by terra cotta.

The first ten floors of the structure were allocated to central office use (although it would take several years for all the necessary equipment to be moved and installed). The upper floors were allocated to administrative use, with the twenty-ninth floor reserved for executive offices. Usable floor space in the building amounts to 850,000 square feet. The seventeenth story divides the building into two mechanically separate sections. It forms a basement for the tower section, holding all the equipment (which is typically housed in the basement of a building) needed to provide services to the tower. The seventeenth story also holds typical rooftop equipment for the base of the building. In an emergency, the tower equipment can serve the base.

The final rivet was placed in the structure by telephone company president J.S. McCulloh; Thurber by this time had assumed the position of

chairman of the board. The last brick and stone were placed by tradesmen elected by their co-workers. On February 19, 1926, the first occupants entered the building, beginning what was referred to as "the longest moving day in New York's history."<sup>42</sup> Contemporary accounts indicate that the building was completed on June 30, 1926, but the Department of Buildings did not sign off on the work until April 8, 1927.

### Description

The Barclay-Vesey Building is a thirty-two-story structure with an additional five stories below ground. There are mezzanines above the first, seventeenth, and thirty-first stories. A New York Telephone Company publication equated the building's height with that of Egypt's tallest pyramid.<sup>43</sup> The building occupies a parallelogram-shaped site approximately 210 by 250 feet wide, covering 52,000 square feet, with nineteen bays on the east and west facades of the base and twenty-three bays on the north and south facades. Above the granite base, the structure is faced in gray-, gold- and buff-colored brick in common bond which has been repointed in several areas on each facade. Detailing is executed in limestone at the lower stories and in cast stone above.

The building takes the form of a tower rising from the center of a massive base. (Fig. 6) The orientation of the tower reflects the orthogonal grid of Manhattan and appears to have been rotated atop the parallelogram-shaped base of the structure. The building rises straight from the ground to the tenth story, where the first setback occurs along the length of the north and south facades. A setback also occurs at the center of the east and west facades at this point, creating light courts for the eleventh through the seventeenth stories in front of the tower. At the seventeenth story another major setback occurs at all facades. From this point the tower, measuring 108 feet by 116 feet, rises to a total height of thirty-two stories. Minor setbacks occur at other points between the thirteenth and nineteenth stories, highlighted by detailing in stone and brick.

Much of the decorative ornament of the building consists of intertwining vines sprouting leaves, flowers, and grapes. Scattered throughout the interlaces are cherubs, human figures, and a variety of creatures including fish, snails, mice,



lizards, frogs, birds, squirrels, and snakes. While some specific decorative patterns may be repeated, numerous variations on the intertwining vine theme are found throughout the building's ornamental program. Rather than describe in detail all variations represented, particular architectural elements will be cited as using the intertwining vine pattern and it will be understood that the pattern may contain any combination of the figures mentioned above. Especially significant or unusual features will be addressed.

The east and west (main) facades are similar in design and contain identical double-height entrances which are recessed in the center of the facades, the width of each entry spanning three window bays. (Fig. 7) Two revolving multipane doors and a pair of doors are framed in bronze. The framing members are filled with strings of creatures or with a repeating chevron pattern, and pinnacles with cherubs are capped by bells. (Fig. 8) (Another pair of doors is found to the right of each bronze-framed entryway.)

Above each door arrangement at the east and west facades is an expansive window covered by an elaborate bronze grille of intertwining vines and grapes, arranged vertically, which is also visible at the interior through the colored window glass. (A metal replica of the Bell Telephone Company logo, a bell within a circle, has been attached to the window grille.) A limestone frieze above the window displays an intertwining vine pattern featuring human figures and a central bird. (Fig. 9) A light fixture with an inverted setback form hangs between two ceiling panels filled with ornament.

The two-story entrance surround is faced in limestone; chamfered surfaces are elaborately ornamented. In the stone lintel above the opening are found figures of an American Indian and a Mongolian which are meant to symbolize the lands of the west and the east, the directions the entrances face. Flanking the center panel, which displays a bell, are the patterned, projecting bases of the vertical piers which articulate the overall height of the facade; their patterning of roots and stems further reinforce the vertical emphasis.

Two single window bays flank the West Street entry. (Fig. 10) These are flanked at each side by a larger opening spanning three bays, then another single bay. The two end bays of this facade are each articulated by wide arches, the southern one opening onto the Vesey Street arcade. The

storefronts of the building are based on a tripartite design: a solid panel at the base, a glazed area at the middle, usually divided into three vertical sections, and a transom with additional vertical subdivisions topped by a decorative cornice consisting of dolphins, seahorses, and birds. (Fig. 11) Winged figures act as pinnacles at the top of the window frame. A sketch, drawn by Walker and published in a history of the Rotch Traveling Scholarship, illustrates a centralized sculpture with similar winged elements.<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 12) Some storefronts are recessed, some are punctuated by doors (some with transoms and steps). Most glass within the ground-story bays is now painted.

Most of the spandrels between the first- and second-story windows are faced with ornamented stone. The stone sills and surrounds of the second-story windows also have elaborate ornamentation featuring a stylized plant form. Stone sills of third story windows also have carved ornament, and, excluding the end bays, have a geometric border below. Windows above the first story have steel, double-hung, three-over-three sash. A minimal number of windows have been replaced by aluminum windows at each facade. Also, several louvered vents fill window openings, either fully or partially, at each facade. Window sills above the third story have smaller proportions than those below and have no elaboration.

The base of the building receives its vertical emphasis from piers which rise from the first and second stories to a point above the setbacks where they are capped with cast stone; the central piers display carved snails. Windows at this level are emphasized with elaborate stone ornament at the head and sill.

The Vesey Street facade (Fig. 13) at the south side of the building incorporates a ground-story arcade whose vaulting system utilizes Guastavino arches. (Fig. 14) The twelve-bay arcade is sixteen feet wide, eighteen feet high, and 252 feet in length. The tile arches rest on brick piers with granite bases. The openings are faced in stone carved with an intertwining vine pattern, cherubs, roosters, and squirrels, and a chevron pattern borders the soffit. (Fig. 15) The arcade incorporates storefronts, similar to those of the West Street facade but with recessed transoms, in each bay opening. The storefront openings are faced with limestone.

Along Vesey Street, the stone spandrels between the first-story arches and the second-story

windows are trimmed with a geometric pattern. Pairs of second-story windows have continuous stone sills with lions carved below the windows and surrounds which are similar to those of the West Street facade. Above the second story, the treatment of the facade follows that of the east and west facades. The Barclay Street facade on the north is similar to the Vesey Street facade. Ground-story openings of the north facade are similar to those inside the Vesey Street arcade, however, a central entrance spanning four bays provides for freight service.

At all facades, the amount of cast stone ornament increases above the twenty-eighth story. (Fig. 16) Intricately carved panels fill the spandrels and cap the piers which, above the twenty-ninth story, form buttress-like elements. Corner piers at the twenty-ninth story display elephant heads with ears transformed into geometric shapes and trunks extending down the corner of the tower in a geometric pattern. The arched, multipane, double-height windows encompassing the thirtieth, thirty-first, and thirty-first-mezzanine stories are topped by elaborate cast stone ornament composed of geometric forms terminating in a pineapple or a rabbit. Window surrounds of the top story are simple, as are the

piers extending above the roofline. Metal fencing now encloses rooftop equipment, with additional equipment located in front of some thirty-second-story windows.

#### Subsequent History

Apart from a few minor changes, the Barclay-Vesey Building remains substantially intact. One of the significant qualities of the building is its dual function as office space and a communications center. As technology in the field of communications has progressed, equipment has been added to the roof and regularly upgraded, while respecting the building's original design. This has enabled the structure to retain its significance as an office and operations center for the New York Telephone Company. It is anticipated that rooftop equipment will continue to be upgraded on a regular basis.

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*Report edited by Elisa Urbanelli,  
Research Department Editor*

## NOTES

1. New York Telephone Company, "The Site," *Telephone Review* (Sept., 1926), 326.
2. Ralph T. Walker, "A New Architecture," *Telephone Review* (Sept., 1926), 323.
3. Ann C. Bittenwieser, *Manhattan Water-bound* (New York, 1987), 39-40.
4. The market survived until it and the surrounding buildings were demolished in the late 1960s. The site is now occupied by the U.S. Customs Building.
5. Born in Brooklyn, Thurber began his life-long career in the telephone business in 1890 as an assistant engineer for the Metropolitan Telephone and Telegraph Company in New York. He rose to the position of general superintendent in that company from 1894 to 1906, then transferred to the New York Telephone Company as general manager. "Howard F. Thurber," *Who Was Who in America*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1968), 1238. See also: Howard F. Thurber obituary, *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1928, p.31; New York Telephone Company, "The New Telephone Building at 140 West Street," *Telephone Review* (Sept., 1926), 321.
6. New York Telephone Company, "The World Behind Your Telephone," (New York, 1936), 29-30.
7. Voorhees, Walker, Smith, Smith & Haines, *Telephone Buildings Since 1885* (New York, 1961), 3. Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz was the son of the prominent nineteenth-century New York architect Leopold Eidlitz, and established his business in New York in 1876. In Paul Gmelin's obituary, it was reported that the 1885 telephone building was designed by McKenzie and Gmelin for a competition. *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 21, 1937, p.80.
8. The New York Times Building still stands, although its exterior cladding was destroyed in a remodeling of 1965.
9. Voorhees, Walker, Smith, Smith & Haines. *Telephone Buildings Since 1885*, 39-45.
10. When awarded the Medal of Honor of the Architectural League of New York, McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin attributed the work to Walker. Walker cited David C. Comstock, Oliver Razor, Joseph Ballantyne, Chauncey Pierpoint, and John Baker as designers in the firm who assisted in the project.
11. Quoted in: Carol Willis, "Zoning and Zeitgeist: The Skyscraper City in the 1920s," *JSAH* 45 (Mar., 1986), 47.
12. Creators of the law divided the city into five height districts, called 1, 1-1/4, 1- 1/2, 2, and 2-1/2 districts. These numbers refer to multiples of the width of the street onto which a building faced. The building could rise straight to this height (150 feet for a building in a 1 1/2 district facing onto a street 100 feet in width) before a setback was required. A line drawn from the middle of the street through a point at the top of the first setback formed the spatial envelope for the remainder of the building.
13. Harvey Wiley Corbett, "Zoning and the Envelope of the Building," *Pencil Points* 4 (Apr., 1923), 15, 18.
14. Corbett, "Architecture," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 2 (Chicago, 1929), 275.
15. William A. Starrett, *Skyscrapers and the Men Who Build Them* (New York, 1928), 101.

16. From "The Coming City of Setback Skyscrapers," *New York Times*, Apr. 29, 1923, sec.4, p.5, as quoted in Willis, 55.
17. In his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry entitled "Architecture," Harvey Wiley Corbett included a set of four images of the Barclay-Vesey Building in various stages of the design process. His arrangement of these images recalls Corbett's earlier presentation of drawings illustrating the stages of design of an imaginary building under the Zoning Law, published in 1923. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 287, plate 2.) See Fig. 5.
18. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 84, Lot 1. NB 312-1923.
19. This theory did not completely rule out hand craftsmanship. Walker believed that a combination of machine production and handwork could truthfully express modern architecture. Walker, "The Barclay-Vesey Telephone Building," *The American Architect* 130 (Nov. 5, 1926), 397.
20. Corbett, "New Heights in American Architecture," *Yale Review* (1928), 696.
21. Walker, "The Barclay-Vesey Telephone Building," *American Architect* 130 (Nov. 5, 1926), 397.
22. "The Barclay-Vesey Building for the New York Telephone Company," *Architecture and Building* 58, no.10 (Oct., 1926), 109.
23. Walker, "A New Architecture," 323.
24. Unfortunately, the arcade never gained the popularity its designers had hoped, probably due to the fact that the covered area was so dark. "The Barclay-Vesey Building for the New York Telephone Company," 111.
25. Walker, "The Barclay-Vesey Telephone Building," 391.
26. *Ibid.*, 398.
27. Lewis Mumford, "The Barclay-Vesey Building," *New Republic* 51 (July 6, 1927), 176-77.
28. Walker, "A New Architecture," 323.
29. Corbett, "Editorial Comment," *The American Architect* 130 (Nov. 20, 1926), 401.
30. It is interesting to note that Wright called Walker "the only other architect in America." *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1973.
31. Mumford, 176-77. For more information on the building's interior see LPC, *The Barclay-Vesey Building, First Floor Interior Designation Report*, (New York, 1991). Walker continued this theme of continuity between interior and exterior design in the New Jersey Bell Headquarters using sandstone, and in the Western Union Building using brick. For more information see LPC, *Western Union Building*.
32. Other terms referring to this or related styles include Art Moderne, Jazz Modern, Zig Zag Modern, the Twenties or the Thirties Style, and Streamlined Modern. Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York* (New York, 1975), 41.
33. Walker, *Ralph Walker -- Architect*, 28.
34. "The World Behind Your Telephone," 10-11; "The New Telephone Building at 140 West Street," 321.

35. Corbett, "Editorial Comment," 401.
36. "The New Telephone Building at 140 West Street," 322.
37. Quoted in Robert A.M. Stern, et al., *New York 1930* (New York, 1987), 565.
38. "The Barclay-Vesey Building," *Architectural Record* 61 (Apr., 1927), 301.
39. While Lewis Mumford generally praised the building, he believed there was one major flaw in the design, saying "the Barclay-Vesey Building is about as good as an architect can do today -- business permitting." His main problem with the design arose from the shape of the site and the transition between the base and the tower. The transition was too abrupt for his taste and the skewed juncture between the parts was to him an "annoying defect." Mumford, 176-77.
40. Corbett, "Editorial Comment," 401.
41. For more information on the construction of the building see: New York Telephone Company, "The Excavation," and "Foundations," *Telephone Review* (Sept., 1926), 329, 414. The General Contractor for the project was Marc Eidlitz & Son, Inc. Consulting engineers included Moran, Maurice & Proctor; Meyer, Strong & Jones; Todd, Robertson & Todd; and H.G. Balcom. New York Telephone Company, "The New Telephone Building at 140 West Street," 322.
42. "Telephone Moving Day," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1926, p.13.
43. "Our Neighbor's New Home," *Long Lines* 6 (Aug., 1926), 26.
44. A building in the same sketch has a setback form detailed with an all-over pattern of geometric ornament. *The Rotch Traveling Scholarship: A Review of its History, 1883-1963*. (Boston, 1963).

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The Barclay-Vesey Building, 140 West Street, Block 84, Lot 1, Landmark Site. (Graphic Source: Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book*, 1988-89.)
2. Ferriss and Corbett renderings of stages in the design of a building based on zoning law setback restrictions. (*Skyscraper Style*, 9.)
3. The Barclay-Vesey Building, rendering by Chester B. Price. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)
4. Entries for the Chicago Tribune Competition. a) Eliel Saarinen, Second Place. (Pictured in *Skyscraper Style*, 7.) b) Ralph Walker, Honorable Mention. (Pictured in *Chicago Tribune Competition*, plate 96.)
5. "Trial Models and Completed Structure of the New York Telephone Company Building." (Illustrated in "Architecture," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 287, plate 2.)
6. The Barclay-Vesey Building, view from southwest corner, c.1960? (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Research Files.)
7. Washington Street entrance. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
8. Entrance detail showing top of door frame and lower part of bronze window grille. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
9. Entrance detail. Note light fixture and limestone detailing. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
10. Historic view of the Barclay-Vesey Building from the south showing the Washington Market in foreground. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)
11. Detail of storefront enframement and second-story windows. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
12. Sketch by Ralph Walker showing a central winged sculpture and a setback structure. (*The Rotch Traveling Scholarship: A History, 1883-1963*.)
13. Historic view of the Barclay-Vesey Building showing Washington Street facade and Vesey Street arcade. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)
14. View of Vesey Street arcade taken from Washington Street looking west. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
15. Detail of limestone ornament at arcade. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster, LPC, 1991.)
16. View of upper stories of Barclay-Vesey Building. (*Year Book of The Architectural League of New York*.)

## 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 the Barclay-Vesey Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Barclay-Vesey Building, built in 1923-27, was the first major work of Ralph Walker, a prominent New York City architect; that, commissioned by the New York Telephone Company, the building was intended to stand as a corporate symbol and was promoted as the world's largest telephone building; that, a pivotal structure in the history of skyscraper architecture, it is a prototypical example of the American Art Deco style, and at the time of its construction was called Modernistic in style; that its set-back form, a response to the 1916 New York City Building Zone Resolution, is an achievement of the incorporation of the law's restrictions into a completed architectural design; that Walker's intention that the building be completely modern in every aspect of its design was a response to contemporary architectural trends and his objective was carried out in the building's form, construction techniques, materials, unconventional ornament, and style; that Walker approached the design of the building as a whole -- a sculptural mass -- and executed a critically acclaimed ornamental program which recalls the history of the site and the surrounding area; that the overall effect of Walker's successful design includes a blending of complicated ornament with simple forms, naturalistic elements with geometric shapes, and large massing with small details; that the building's dual function as office space and communications center has enabled the building to retain its significance to the telephone industry; and that the substantially intact building was, upon completion, heralded as a monument to American architecture, and today continues to be a dramatic presence on Manhattan's skyline.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534, Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Barclay-Vesey Building, 140 West Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 84, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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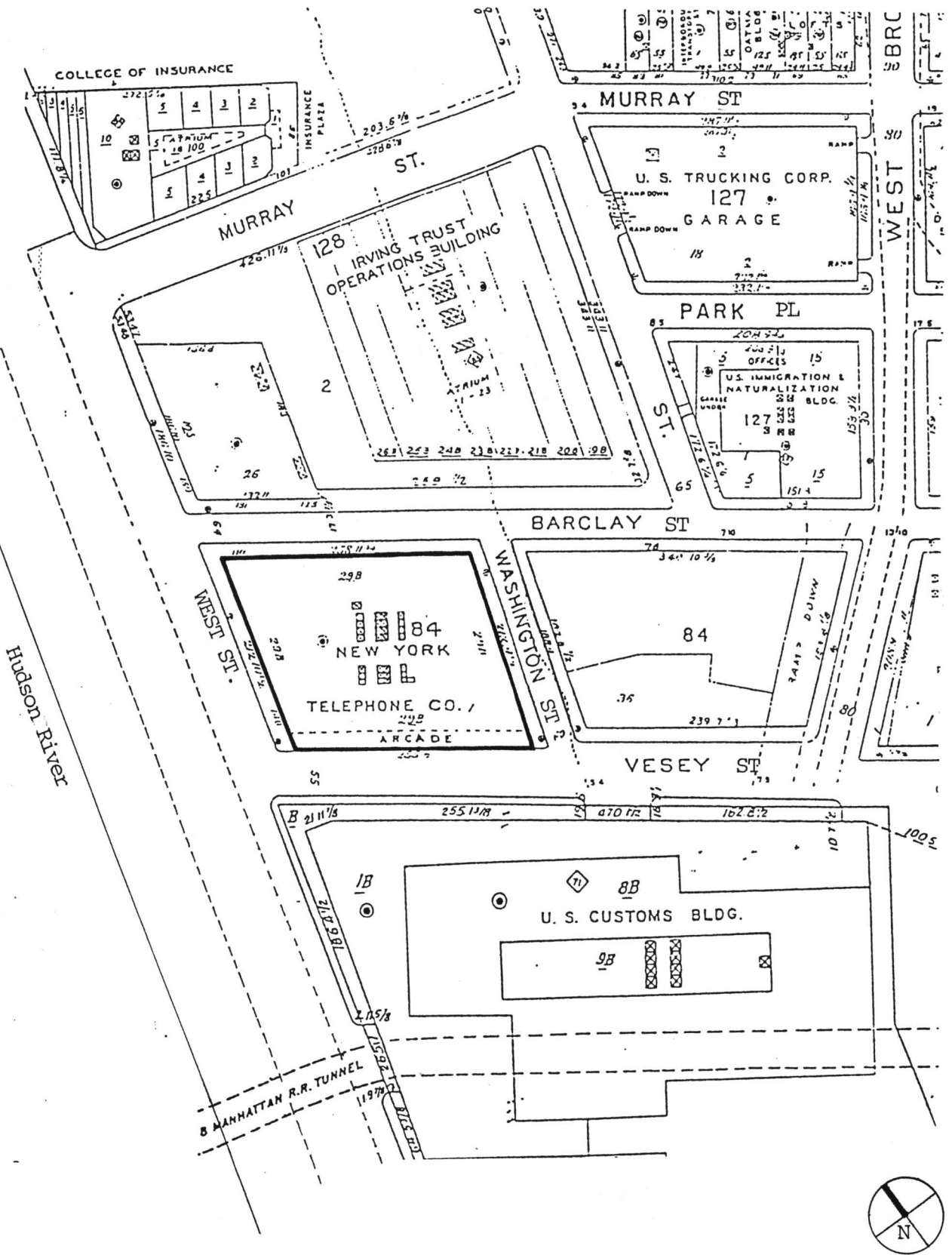


Fig. 1: The Barclay-Vesey Building, 140 West Street, Block 84, Lot 1, Landmark Site. (Graphic Source: Sanborn, Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.)

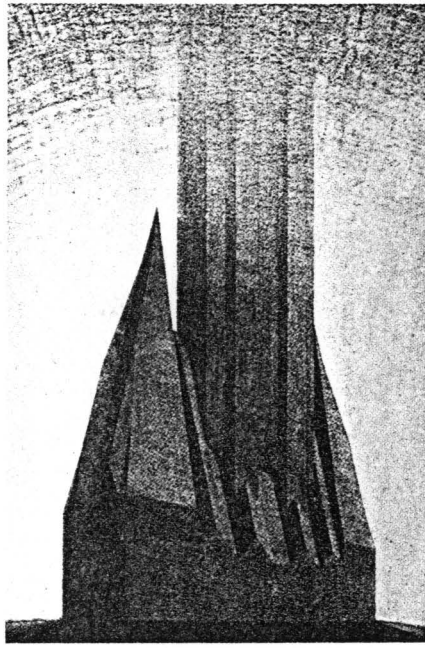


Figure 1

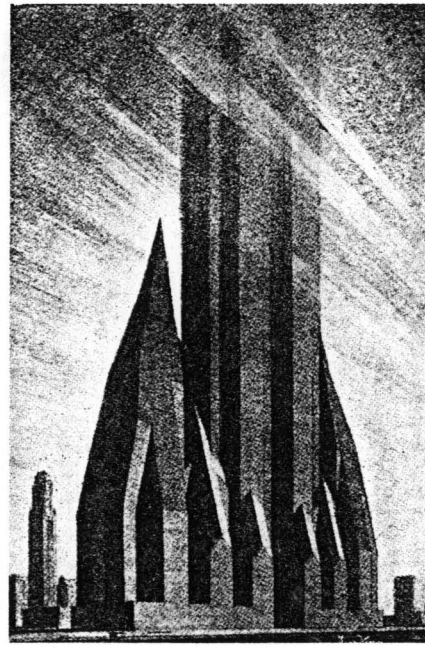


Figure 2

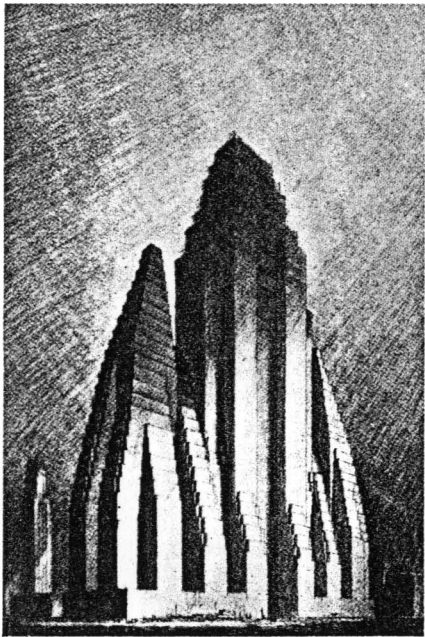


Figure 3

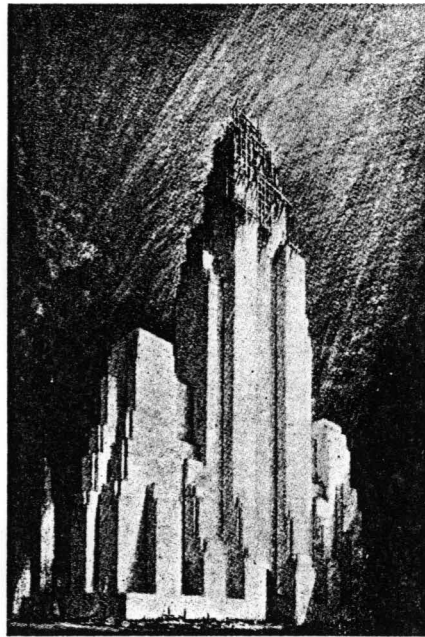


Figure 4

Fig. 2: Ferriss and Corbett renderings of stages in the design of a building based on zoning law setback restrictions. (Skyscraper Style, 9.)

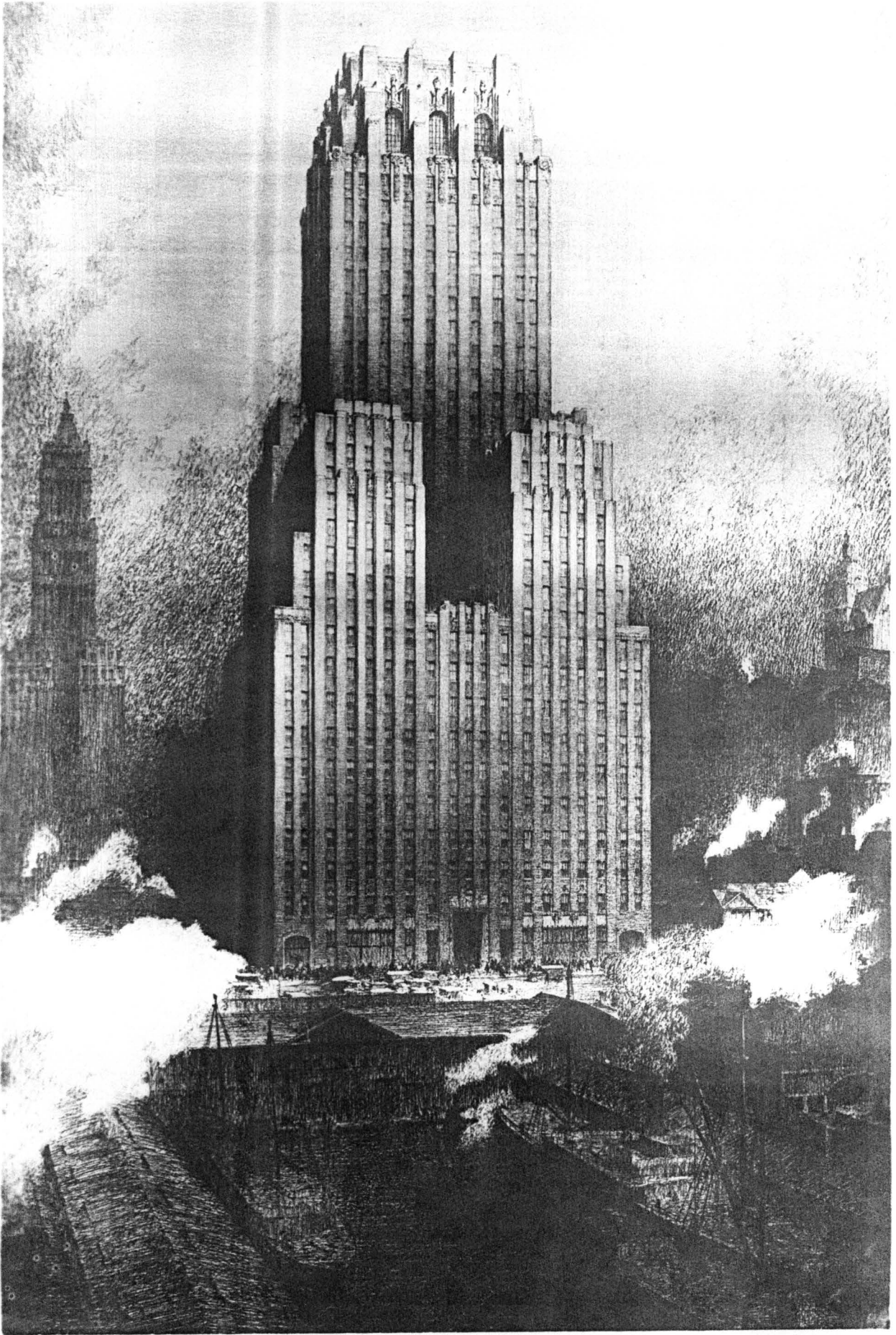


Fig. 3: The Barclay-Vesey Building, rendering by Chester B. Price. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)

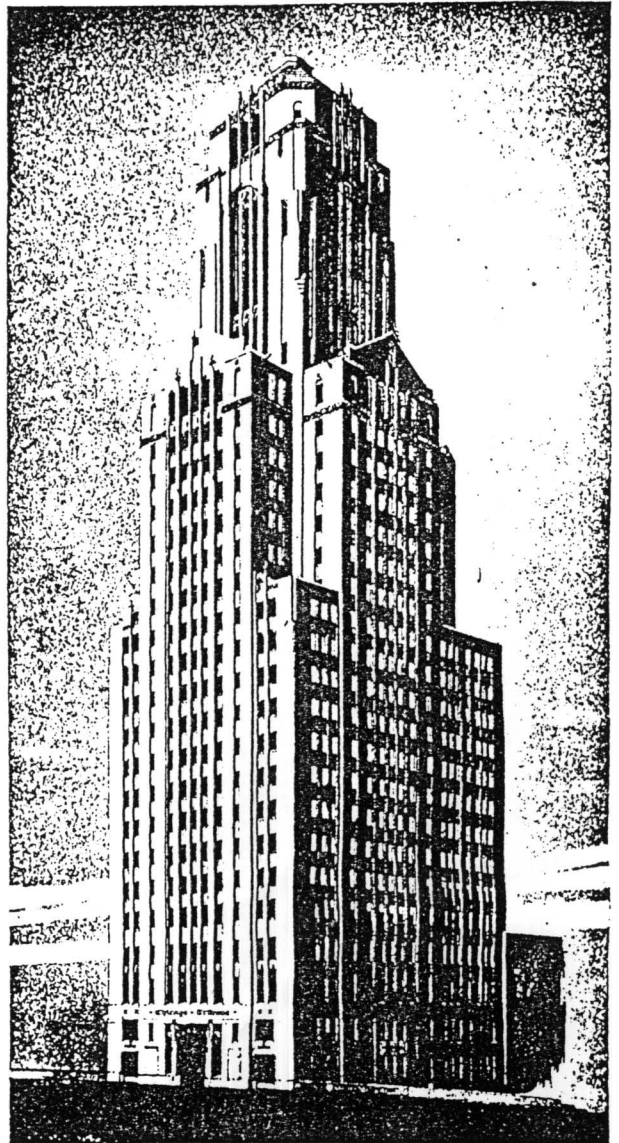
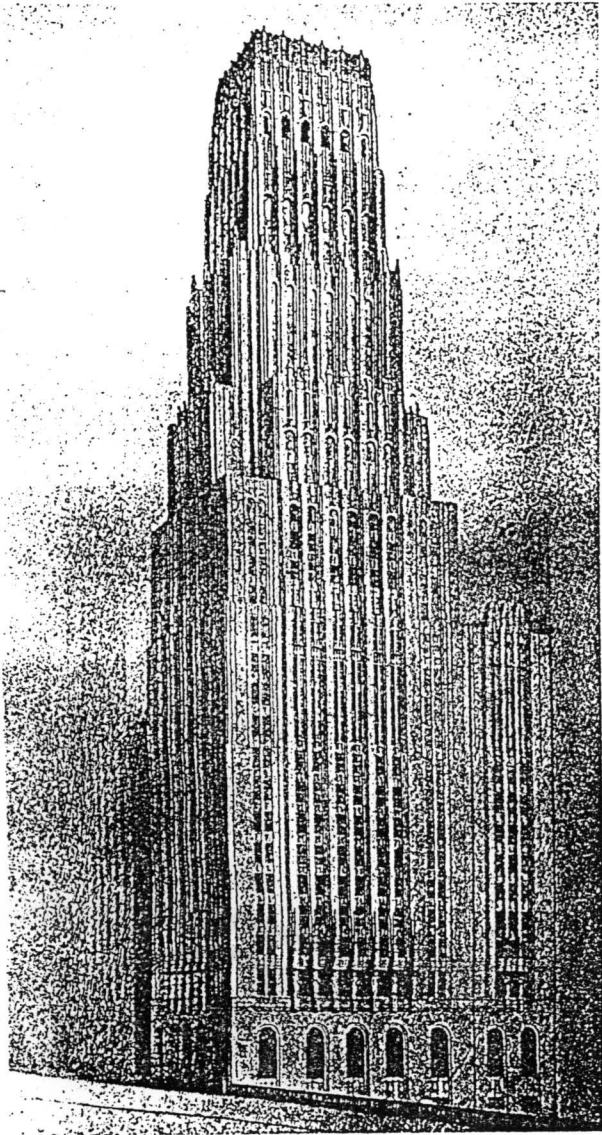
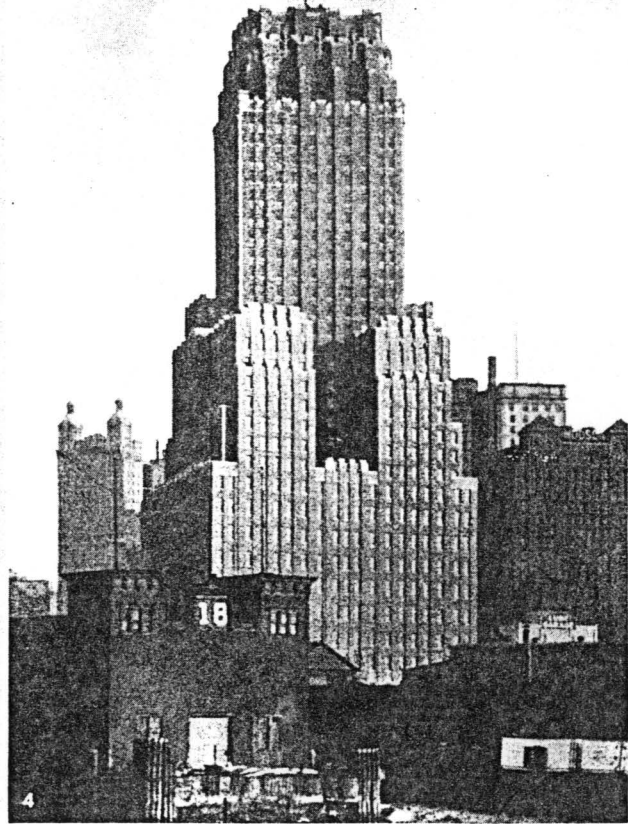
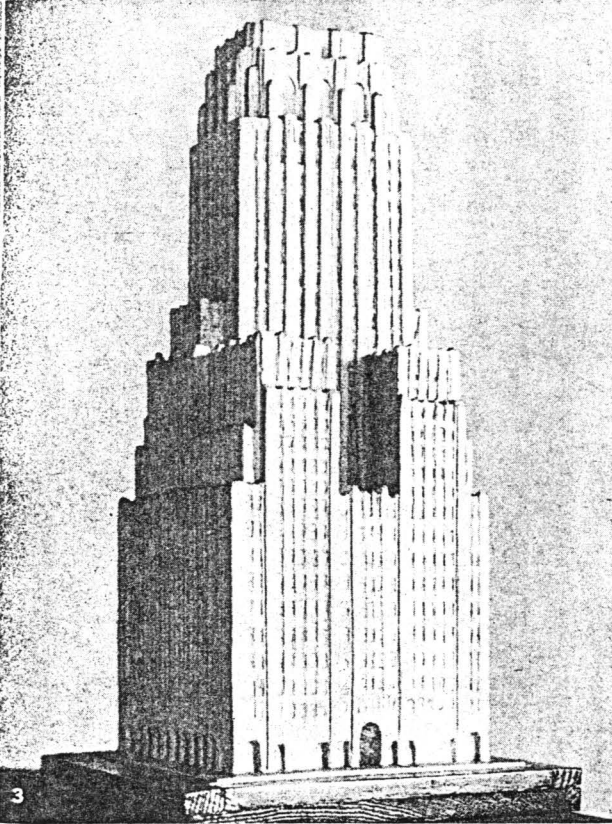
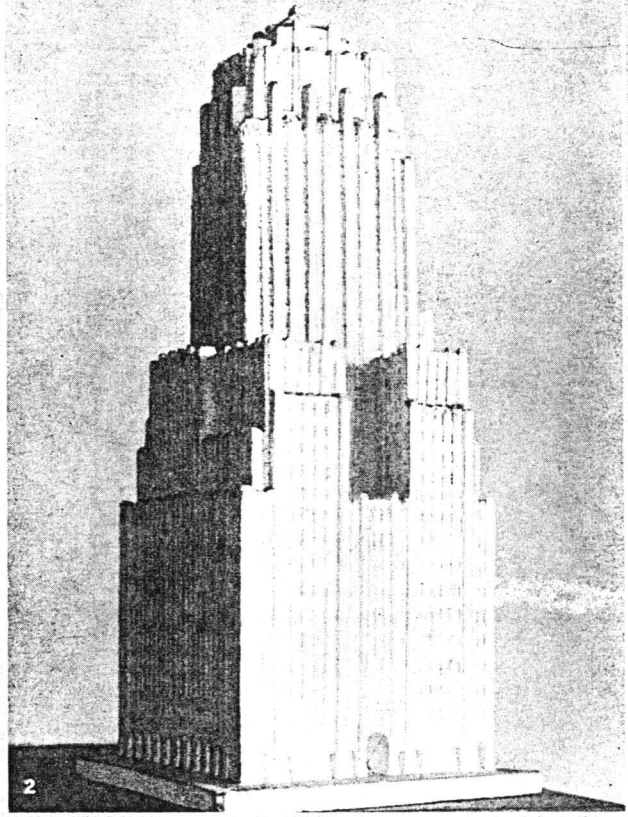
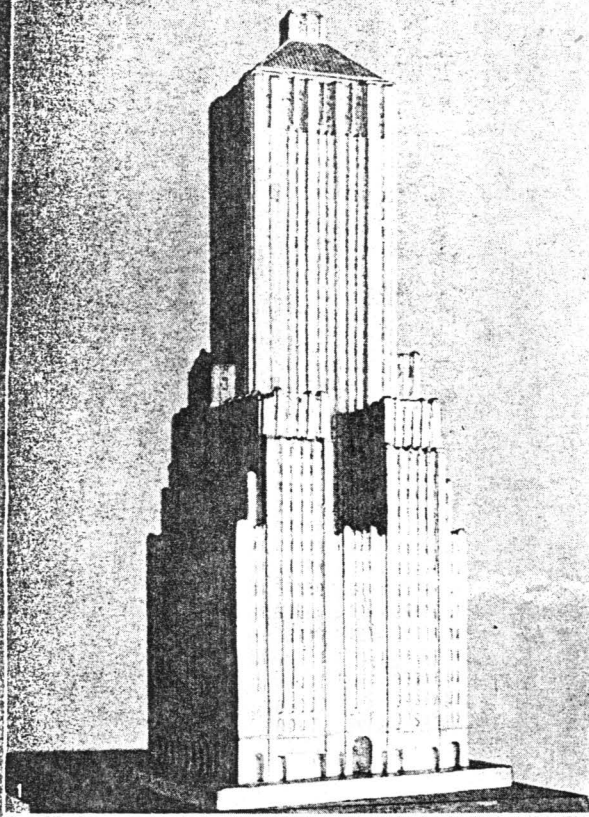


Fig. 4: Entries for the Chicago Tribune Competition. a) Eliel Saarinen, Second Place. (Pictured in Skyscraper Style, 7.) b) Ralph Walker, Honorable Mention. (Pictured in Chicago Tribune Competition, plate 96.)



MODELS AND PHOTOGRAPH BY COURTESY OF VOORHEES, GMLIN & WALKER

**TRIAL MODELS AND COMPLETED STRUCTURE OF THE N. Y. TELEPHONE COMPANY BUILDING**

1. First trial model, which, taking advantage of all the bulk possible under the restrictions of the zoning law, carried the tower higher than was finally deemed necessary
2. Second trial model, showing tower reduced in height, thus forming a pleasanter relation to the general mass of the supporting building
3. Final model. The top of the tower has been simplified
4. The completed building, at Barclay and Vesey streets, from the Hudson river side. Such an exceptional view, showing the apportionment of the tower to the building mass, cannot be obtained of most New York towers, because of lack of sufficient space in front

Fig. 5: "Trial Models and Completed Structure of the New York Telephone Company Building."  
(Illustrated in "Architecture," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 287, plate 2.)



Fig. 6: The Barclay-Vesey Building, view from southwest corner, c.1960? (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Research Files.)



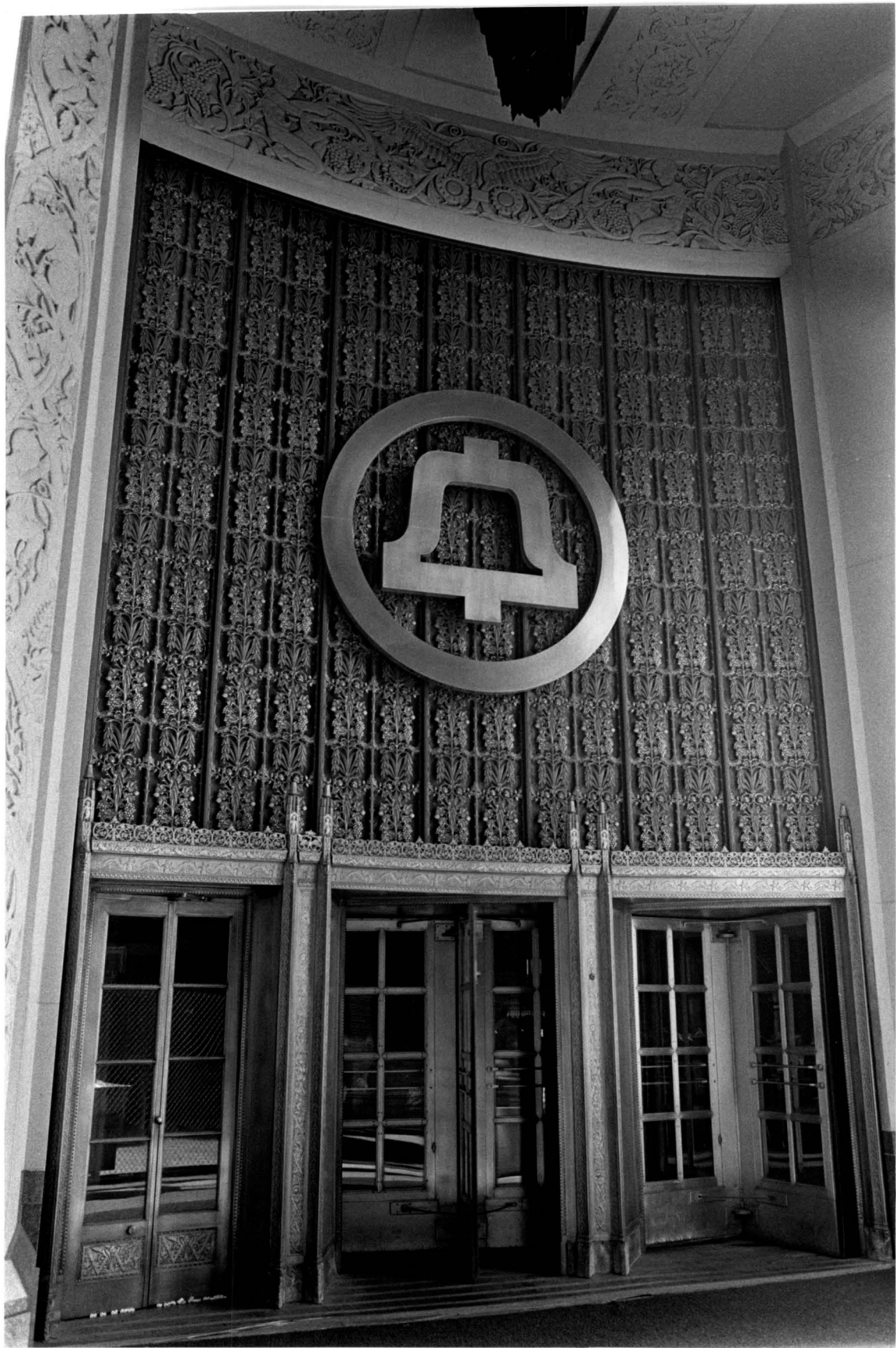


Fig. 7: Washington Street entrance. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster.)



Fig. 8: Entrance detail showing top of door frame and lower part of bronze window grille. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster.)



Fig. 9: Entrance detail. Note light fixture and limestone detailing. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster.)



Fig. 10: Historic view of the Barclay-Vesey Building from the south showing the Washington Market in foreground. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)



Fig. 11: Detail of storefront enframement and second-story windows. (Photo Credit: Carl Forster.)

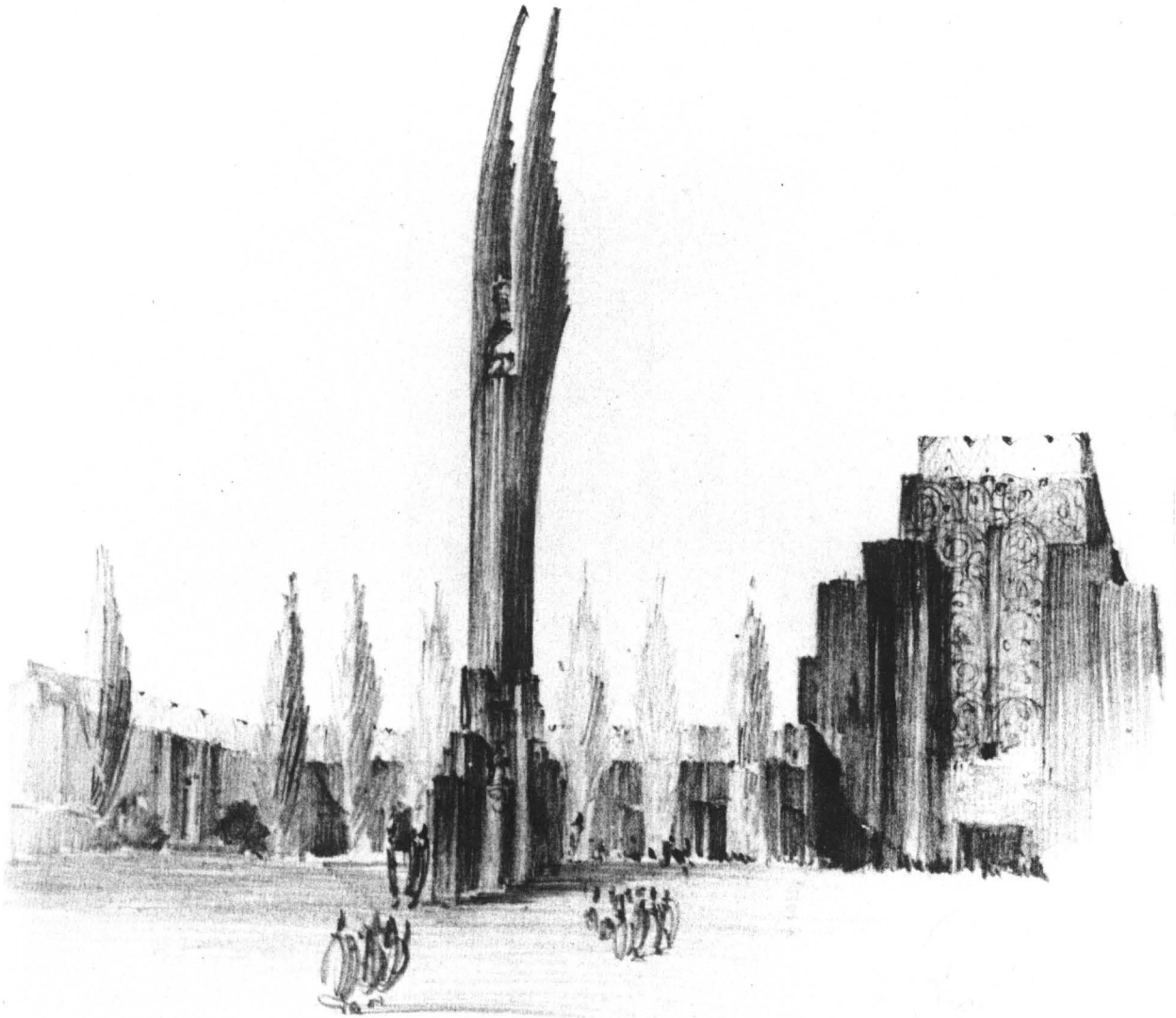


Fig. 12: Sketch by Ralph Walker showing a central winged sculpture and a setback structure. (The Rotch Traveling Scholarship: A History, 1883-1963.)



Fig. 13: Historic view of the Barclay-Vesey Building showing Washington Street facade and Vesey Street arcade. (New York Historical Society, Postcard Collection.)



Fig. 14: View of Vesey Street arcade taken from Washington Street, looking west.

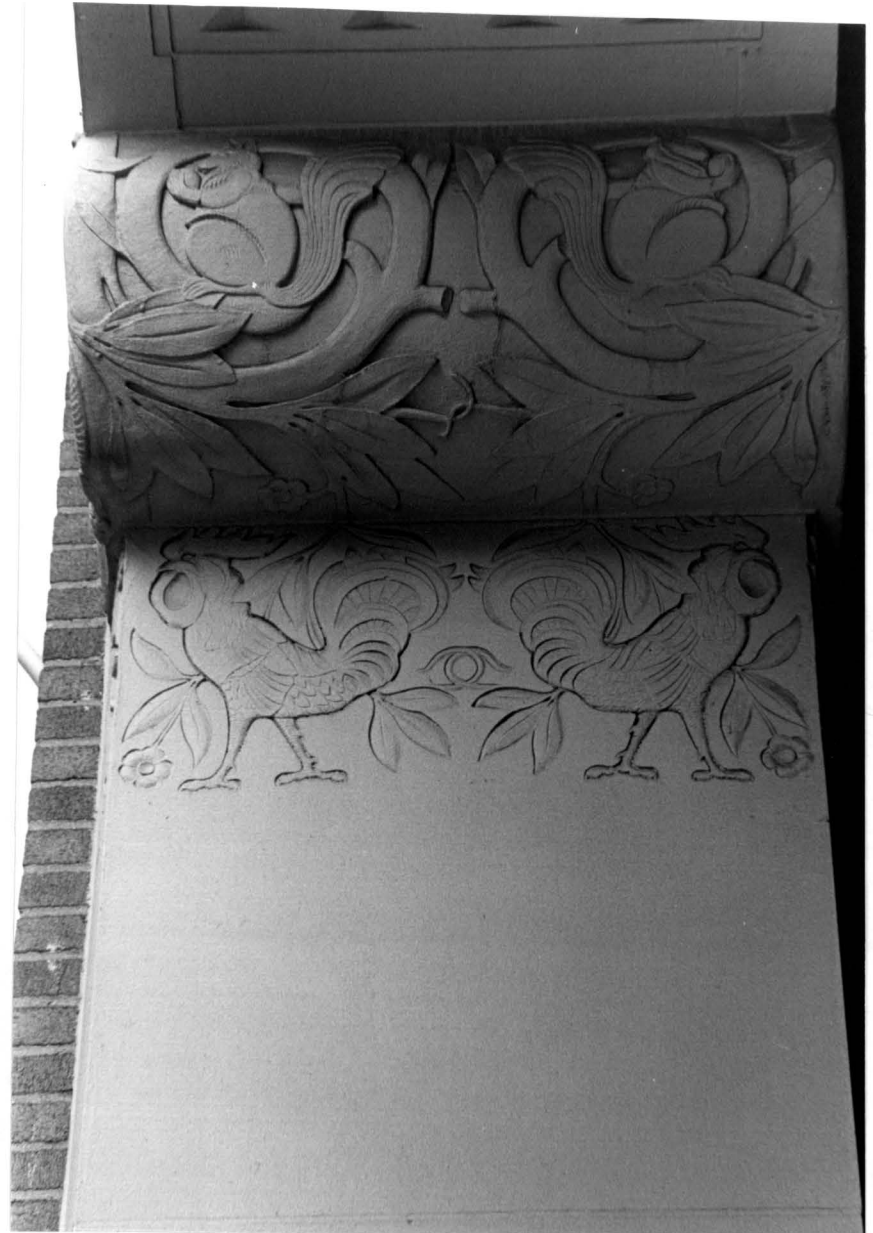


Fig. 15: Detail of limestone ornament at arcade.  
(Photo Credits: Carl Forster.)



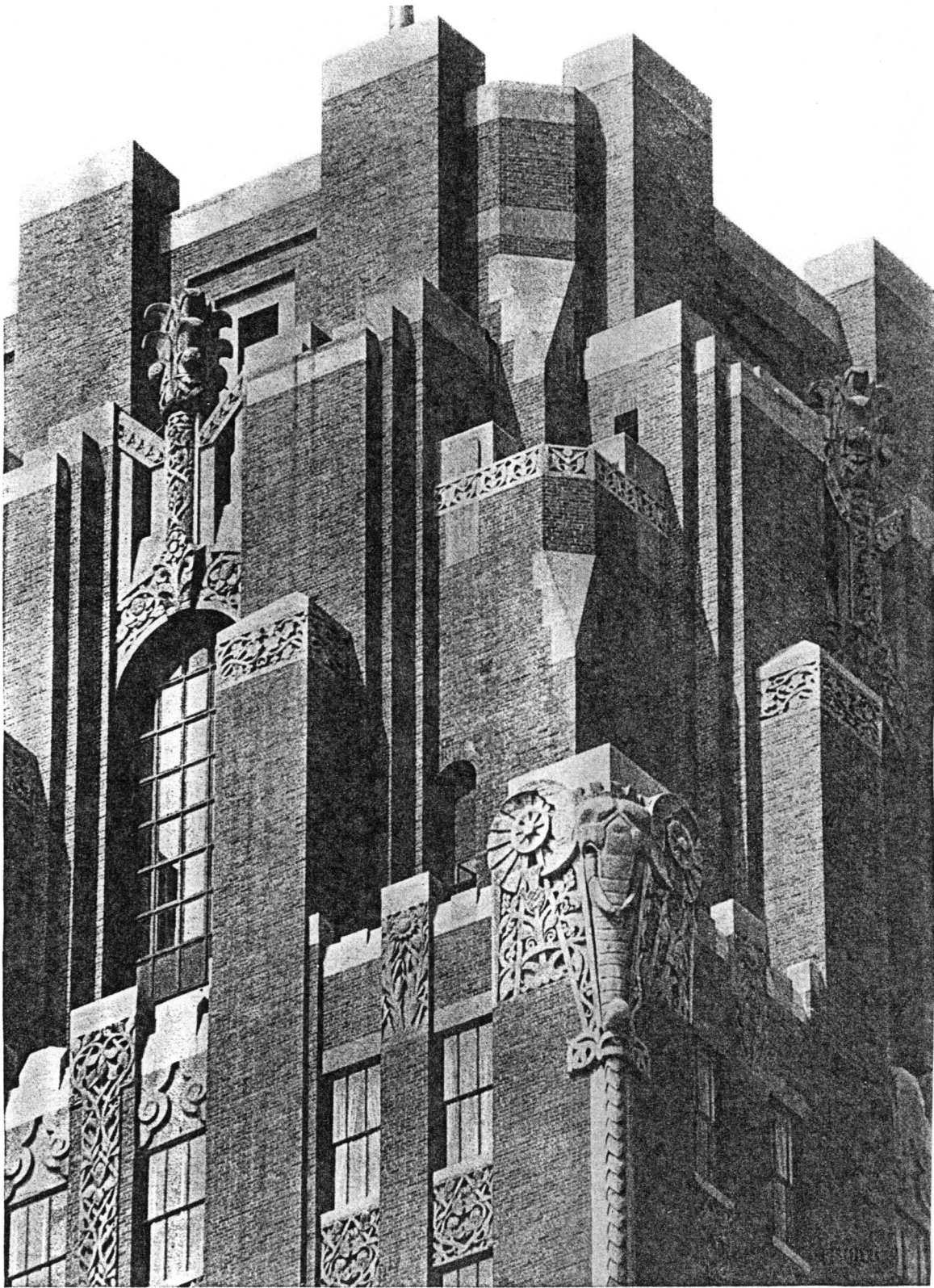


Fig. 16: View of upper stories of Barclay-Vesey Building. (Year Book of The Architectural League of New York.)