

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
March 8, 1988; Designation List 201  
LP-1518

MAJESTIC APARTMENTS, 115 Central Park West (at 72nd Street), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1930-31; architects Irwin S. Chanin, Chanin Construction Company.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1124, Lot 27.

On September 11, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Majestic Apartments, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing was continued to November 13, 1984 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Ten witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

The Majestic is one of five towered skyscraper apartment buildings which define the impressive skyline of Central Park West. Erected in 1930-31 by the Chanin Construction Company, headed by architect and developer Irwin S. Chanin, it is an excellent example of the Art Deco style in its streamlined later phase. Chanin had attended the highly influential 1925 Paris exposition of decorative arts, and returned a convert to the "modernistic" style. The Majestic was the Chanin organization's first "experiment" <sup>1</sup> in applying the Art Deco style to residential building. The Majestic successfully adjusts the city's housing laws to the new style; its soaring twin towers are a response to new regulations enacted in 1929. Although built during the Depression, it belongs to the luxury apartment building genre of the 1920s. While the Majestic's sparing use of ornament and simple materials reflect its date of construction, the resulting austerity is an integral part of the building's stylistic imagery.

##### Development of Central Park West

Central Park West, the northern continuation of Eight Avenue bordering on the park, is today one of New York's finest residential streets, but in the mid-nineteenth century it was a rural and inhospitable outpost, notable for its rocky terrain, browsing goats and ramshackle shanties. With the creation of Central Park in the 1860s, followed by Riverside Park (begun 1876), as well as a series of transportation improvements such as the Ninth Avenue Elevated Railroad (1879), the Upper West Side in general experienced a period of intense real estate speculation. The 1880s were the first decade of major development, and set the pattern for the Upper West Side, where rowhouses line the side streets, and multiple dwellings, commercial and institutional structures are sited on the avenues.

Not surprisingly, those avenues closest to the parks, Central Park West and Riverside Drive, were immediately considered the most desirable. The potential of the parkside avenues for development as prime locations

led to an anticipatory increase in land values; prices rose to such extravagant heights that many speculative builders shied away from row house and tenement construction, from which they would realized relatively meager returns, while the very wealthy, who could afford to build mansions for the most part remained on the more fashionable East Side. As a result the development of Central Park West lagged behind the general development of the Upper West Side. It was not until the turn of the century that Central Park West's construction boom began and it emerged as a boulevard of elegant tall apartments punctuated by impressive institutional buildings.

The stage had been set by two great monuments, the American Museum of Natural History between 77th and 81st Streets (begun 1874, architects Vaux & Mould, and a designated New York City Landmark), and the Dakota, the pioneering luxury apartments at 72nd Street (1880-84, architect Henry Hardenbergh, and a designated New York City Landmark). Yet a survey of roughly a decade later revealed that more than half the blockfronts along the park from 60th to 96th street remained vacant or contained only old modest frame houses.<sup>2</sup> A few relatively unprepossessing hotels were constructed in the 1890s, among them the Majestic at 72nd Street opposite the Dakota. Designed by Alfred Zucker, it was twelve stories in height and contained some 600 rooms. The San Remo at 75th Street, the Beresford at 81st, and the El Dorado at 90th also belong to this period, and like the original Majestic were replaced by their towered namesakes in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the early 1900s several grand apartment houses were constructed--such as the Prasada (1904) at 65th Street, the Langham (1905) at 73rd, and Kenilworth (1908) at 75th. With the advent of World War I, construction ground to a halt. The second major phase of development began with the prosperity of the 1920s, producing the towered buildings which today define the skyline.

The 1920s provided a generation of aspiring immigrants with the opportunity to move up in the world. Many Jewish immigrants viewed the Upper West Side as a cultural and architectural haven. By the mid-1930s more than half the residents of the Upper West Side from 72nd to 96th Streets were Jewish, and more than one third of these families were headed by a parent born in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Irwin S. Chanin was himself the son of Jewish immigrants, a West Sider, and a man of Horatio Algeresque achievement.

#### Irwin S. Chanin and the Chanin Construction Company

Irwin S. Chanin (1892-1988) was born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, but soon after his birth the family returned to the Ukraine, remaining there until 1907, when they moved back to Bensonhurst. Chanin attended Cooper Union, graduating in 1915 with a degree in architecture and engineering. After a three-year stint as an engineer in subway construction, he enlisted in the United States Army and during World War I participated in the construction of a poison gas factory. In 1919, upon his discharge, he made his first modest venture into the construction business, erecting two simple frame houses in Bensonhurst. Later that year, with his younger brother Henry I. Chanin (1893-1973), he formed the Chanin Construction Company. Together they erected numerous one and two-family houses and extended their activities to include apartment buildings and an office building in downtown Brooklyn.

By 1924, they had expanded to Manhattan, erecting the Fur Center Building and entering the theater business. Chanin employed a specialist in theater architecture, Herbert J. Krapp, and built six Broadway playhouses.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1926 Chanin undertook an interconnecting development of three theaters--the Majestic, the Theatre Masque and the Royale--together with the 1400-room Lincoln Hotel (now the Milford Plaza), which gave final form to what has become the traditional heart of the theater district. Chanin also built three movie palaces including the vast 6000-seat Roxy of 1927 (architect Walter Ahlschlager). Yet despite Chanin's enormous success in the theater business, he abandoned the field barely four years after entering it.

In 1925 Chanin spent four weeks in Paris visiting the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes. This decorative arts exhibition had a deep influence on him as it did on other American architects such as Ely Jacques Kahn, and led to their adoption of what is now termed the Art Deco style. Chanin's first Art Deco motifs appear in the Lincoln Hotel where they are restricted to the lobby and dining room. These interiors were followed by the Art Deco Chanin Building of 1927-29, an office building on East 42nd Street, and a designated New York City Landmark. At the time of its design, Chanin was not a registered architect and so commissioned the rather conservative architectural firm of Sloan & Robertson to examine plans prepared by his company. Sloan & Robertson were responsible for the exterior form of the building, while Chanin personally supervised the interior decoration and exterior detailing, much of it executed by the French-trained sculptor Rene Chambellan.

In 1930 Chanin became a registered architect and it was at this time that the two Art Deco apartment houses on Central Park West were constructed -- the Majestic, and the Century of 1930-31, a designated New York City Landmark.

Extensive suburban building activity, such as Green Acres in Valley Stream, Long Island, occupied much of the firm's time during the 1930s and 1940s. During World War II the firm built two thousand prefabricated houses in Newport News, Virginia, five hangars at National Airport in Washington, D.C., the Naval Ordnance Laboratory in White Oak, Maryland, and five Navy powder magazine buildings in Indian Head, Maryland. The firm also built numerous manufacturing buildings in the New York City area and the impressive Coney Island Pumping Station for the City of New York. By 1952, the Chanin organization was composed of approximately twenty-five firms and corporations engaged in architecture, engineering and construction, and in the ownership and operation of real estate.

Irwin Chanin continued to maintain his office in the Chanin Building until his death at ninety-six.<sup>5</sup>

#### Construction and Style of the Majestic

In April of 1929, Chanin purchased the old Hotel Majestic for \$16,000,000 and in a front page headline the New York Times announced his plans for a forty-five story hotel heralded as "a new departure in hotel construction on the Upper West Side."<sup>6</sup> To be designed in the Art Deco style, it was also to be a full service apartment hotel with apartments

ranging in size from studios to fifteen rooms. A few months later Chanin also planned an even larger project, a sixty-five story Art Deco skyscraper to be called the Palais de France. This was to be erected on the site of the old Century Theater on Central Park West at 62nd Street and was to be a multi-use structure housing the French consulate and tourist board, exhibition space, shops, offices and a hotel, all to be financed with French backing.

Both these ambitious conceptions had to be abandoned after the crash of 1929. By the summer of 1930, Chanin had gone ahead with the demolition of the old Majestic and had begun construction of the current building. (Soon after, he also began to build the revamped Century site project.) In interviews, while indirectly conceding the effects of the Depression, Chanin maintained an essentially sanguine outlook, stating that the Majestic reflected a year and a half long study both in New York and Chicago of the housing market. He cited this study and the 1929 changes in the building code as the "chief factors" for his change in plans.<sup>7</sup>

The 1929 new multiple dwelling law had been passed by the New York State Legislature and mandated an increase in yard and court area, but permitted taller residential buildings, legalizing setbacks and towers for the first time for this building type. The law limited the height of street walls to one and a half times the width of the street, but on large plots allowed towers of up to three times the width of the street. Like the other three twin-towered apartment buildings on Central Park West which create its distinctive skyline, the design of the Majestic is in direct response to this new enactment.

The Majestic was Chanin's first Art Deco residential design, one which he considered "experimental."<sup>8</sup> It is a sophisticated exercise in the later Art Deco style, relying almost exclusively for its dramatic impact on profile, tower terminations, and the interplay of soaring vertical and anchoring horizontal elements. Ornament is minimal confined primarily to texture and patterning. This simplicity of detail and materials reflects its Depression date of construction, but the resulting austerity is integral to this streamlined version of the Art Deco style. The tower terminations are especially noteworthy and unusual, with square-headed massive brick piers on the facade, visually buttressed by dramatically rounded piers at the rear. The original fenestration (much of which has been altered) is characteristic of the Art Deco period; the corner windows on Central Park West which wrap around the building are especially handsome, and emphasize the nature of curtain wall construction. Chanin, an advocate of the healthful properties of sunlight, termed them solararia. The Majestic also includes a large roof-top solarium, resembling a green house.

### Description

The Majestic is a thirty-one story apartment building with a massive nineteen-story base which conforms to the lot line, extending from 71st to 72nd streets along Central Park West, and 225 feet westward along 72nd Street, 187.6 feet along 71st Street, with an interior courtyard. Setbacks begin at the fourteenth story and continue to the nineteenth, above which rise the large twin towers. The three main entrances appear on each facade and are enframed by rose and black polished granite which also forms the

watertable. These enframements are simply detailed with grooves. Office doors also appear at the first story. The first three stories of the building are faced with light gray cast stone. Where the piers appear this stone has been ornamented with notches above the third story. The building from the fourth story up is faced in yellow brick. At the corners of the building, including the towers, the brick has been laid in a striated pattern between the windows. Uninterrupted piers articulate the base of the building on all three facades directly beneath the towers, and also appear on the side elevations surrounding the entrance bays. These piers also continue in the towers, creating a strong vertical element in the elevations. Beneath the windows which are flanked by these brick piers are panels of simple rectangular tiles, which form a slight convex curve, animating the wall surface. At the setbacks terraces are surrounded by simple metal railings. The original windows contain metal casements with upper and lower transoms. The windows are varied in size, but the majority are bi- and tripartite. Some tripartite windows have sidelights. Single-paned windows appear beneath and in the towers, emphasizing their verticality, while windows with three panes, appear elsewhere and provide a horizontal counterbalance. The corner wrap-around windows contain three sections, with three panes on the north and south sides and eight sections with three panes on the east. The square-headed tower terminations on the east elevation above the piers are ornamented with simple abstract sculpture, typical of the Art Deco style. The rounded terminations on the wings at the west sides of the towers are faced in stone and are again typically Art Deco.

#### NOTES

1. Irwin Chanin in an interview with Andrew Dolkart, June 6, 1985.
2. Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide, 51 (February 11, 1893), Supplement, 20.
3. James Trager, West of Fifth, The Rise and Fall of Manhattan's West Side (New York: Atheneum, 1987), p.5.
4. These theaters are the 46th Street Theater (1925), the Biltmore Theater (1925), the Mansfield Theater (1926), the Theatre Masque (1927), the Royale Theater (1927) and the Majestic Theater (1927), all designated New York City Landmarks.
5. This biography is based on text prepared by Andrew Dolkart in Century Apartments Designation Report (LP-1507) (New York: City of New York, 1985). See also New York Times, February, 26, 1988 (obituary).
6. New York Times, April 26, 1929, p.1.
7. New York Times, June 8, 1930, XII, p. 1.
8. See footnote 1.

## 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 Majestic Apartments has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Majestic is one of five towered apartment buildings which define the impressive skyline of Central Park West; that its soaring profile is of great architectural distinction; that it was designed by the prominent New York architect and developer, Irwin S. Chanin, of the Chanin Construction Company; that it was his first use of the Art Deco style for a residential building; that the Majestic's twin towers are a highly successful response to the new housing laws of 1929; that the building displays a sophisticated design using the Art Deco style, relying on profile, tower terminations, patterning and texture for its dramatic impact; that the simplicity of its detailing is reflective of its Depression date of construction and is also an integral part of the streamlined phase of the Art Deco style.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Article 25, Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Majestic Apartments, 115 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1124, Lot 27, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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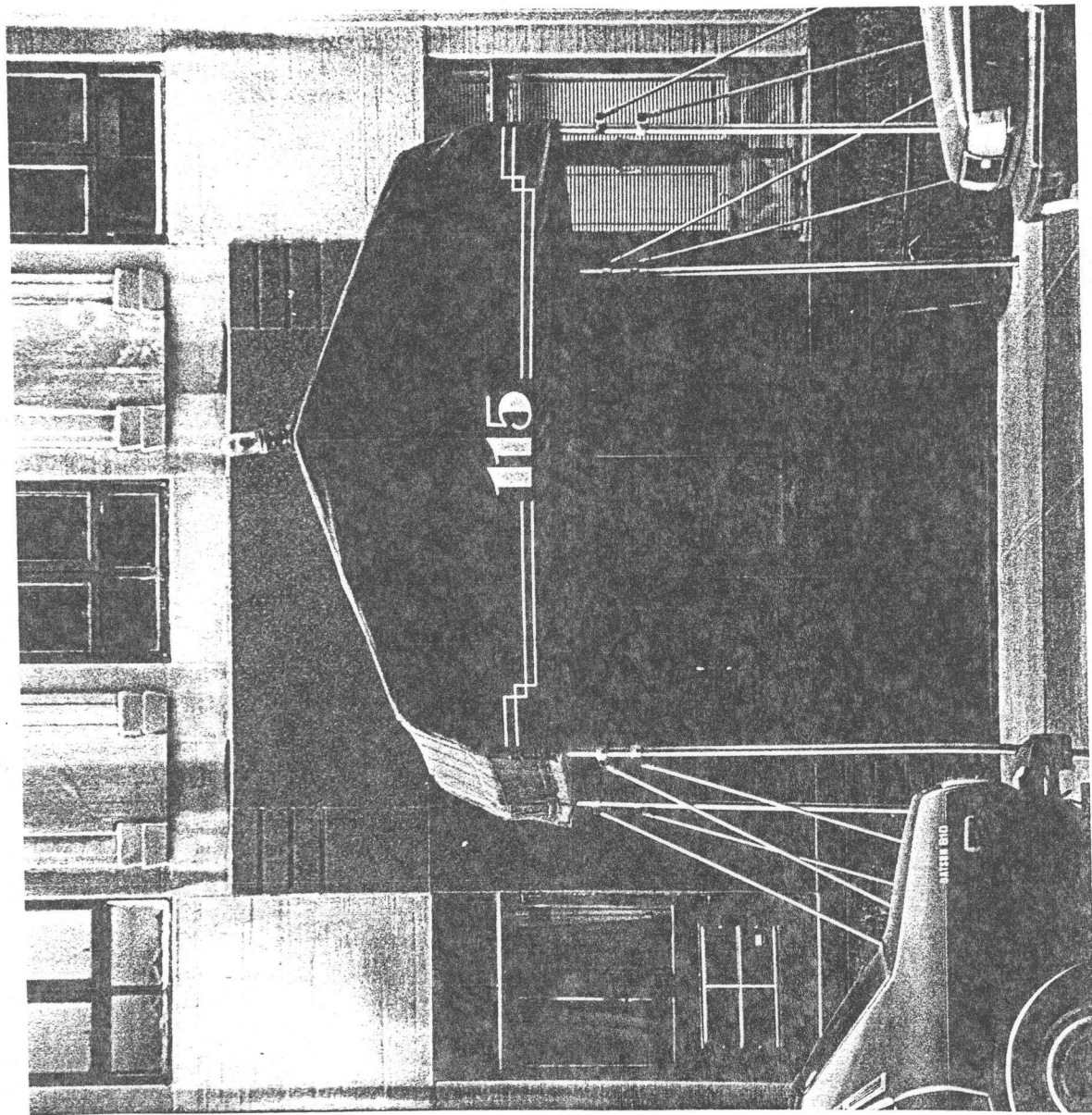




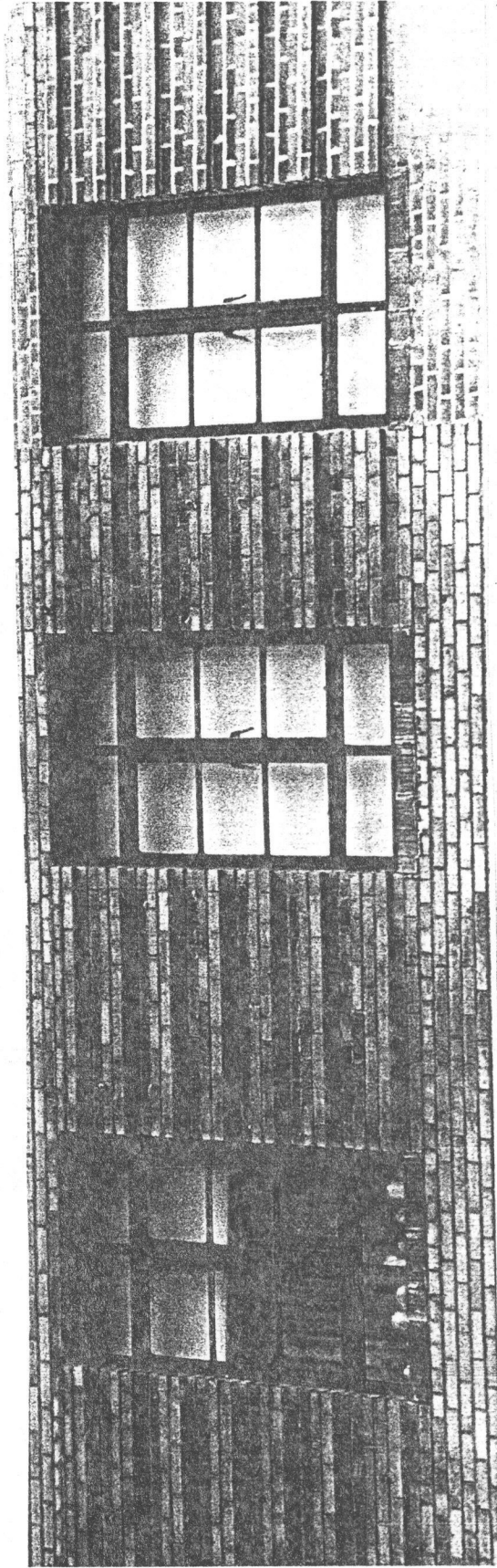
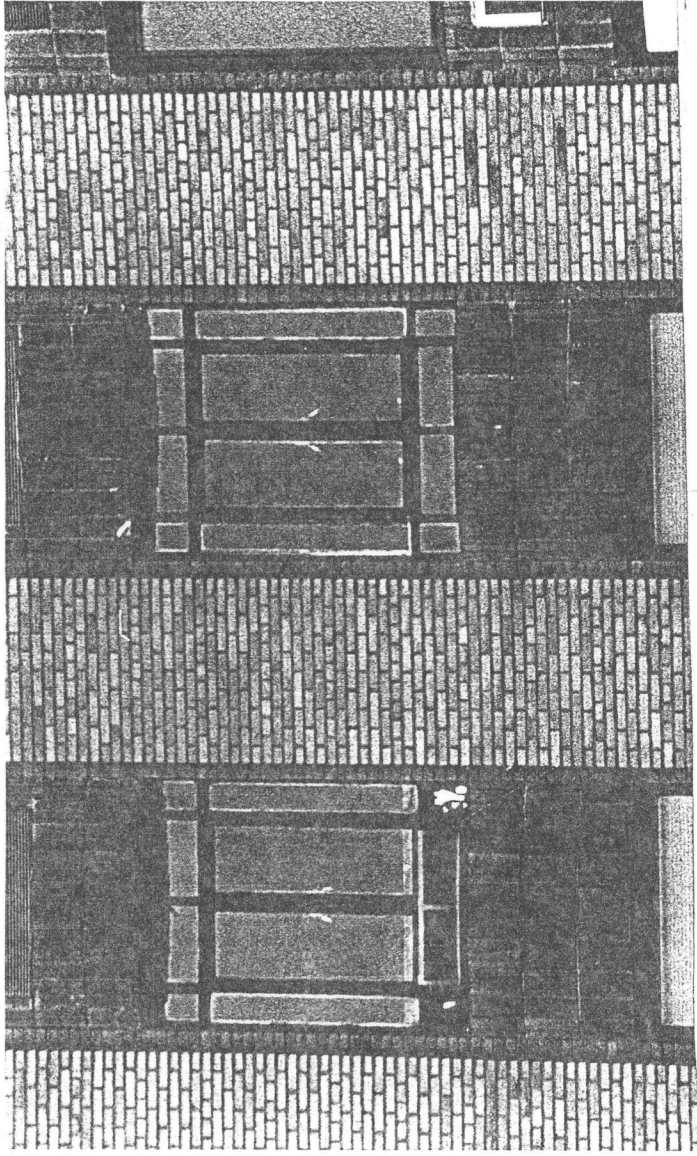
Majestic Apartments  
115 Central Park West

Architect: Irwin S. Chanin  
Built 1930-1931

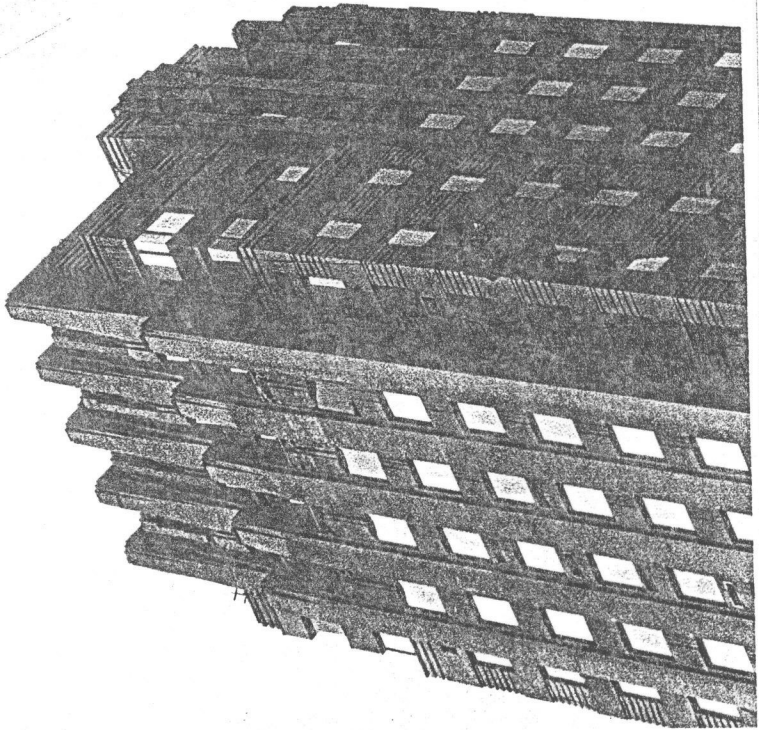
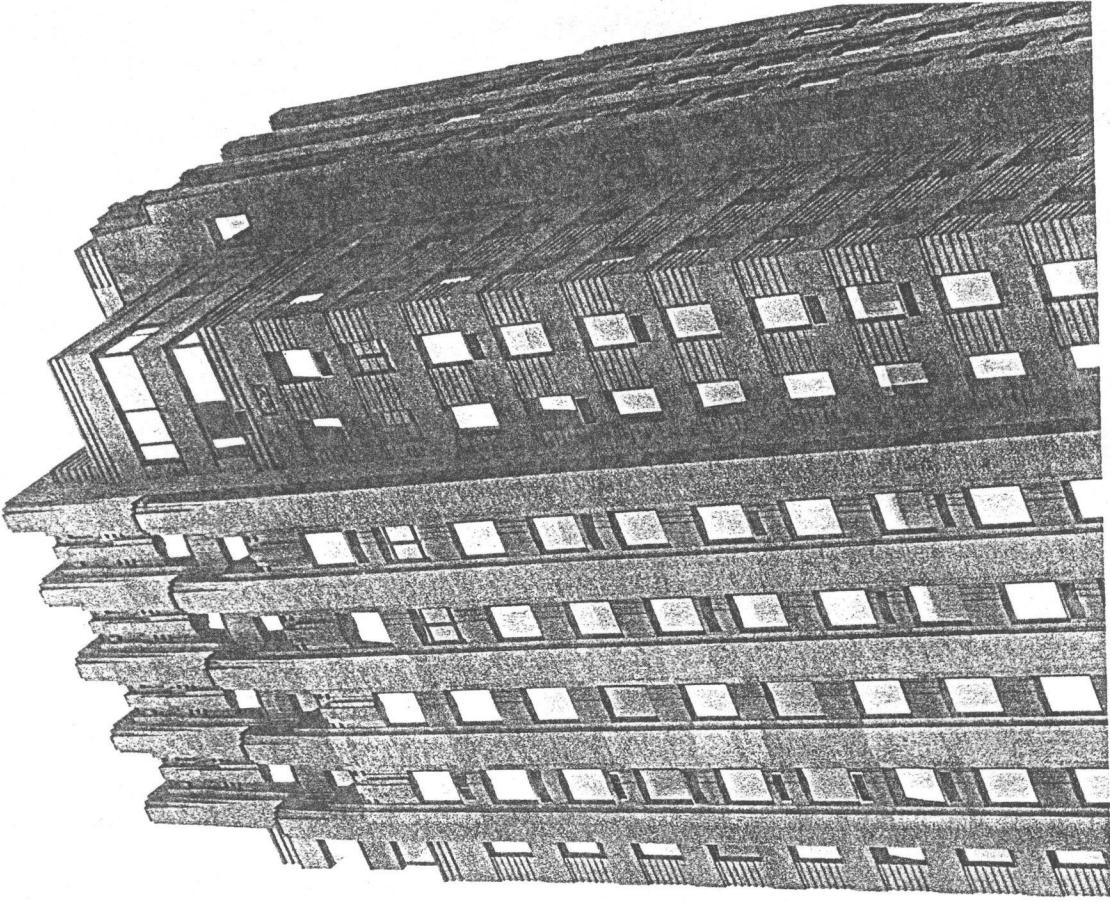
[Photos: Carl Forster]



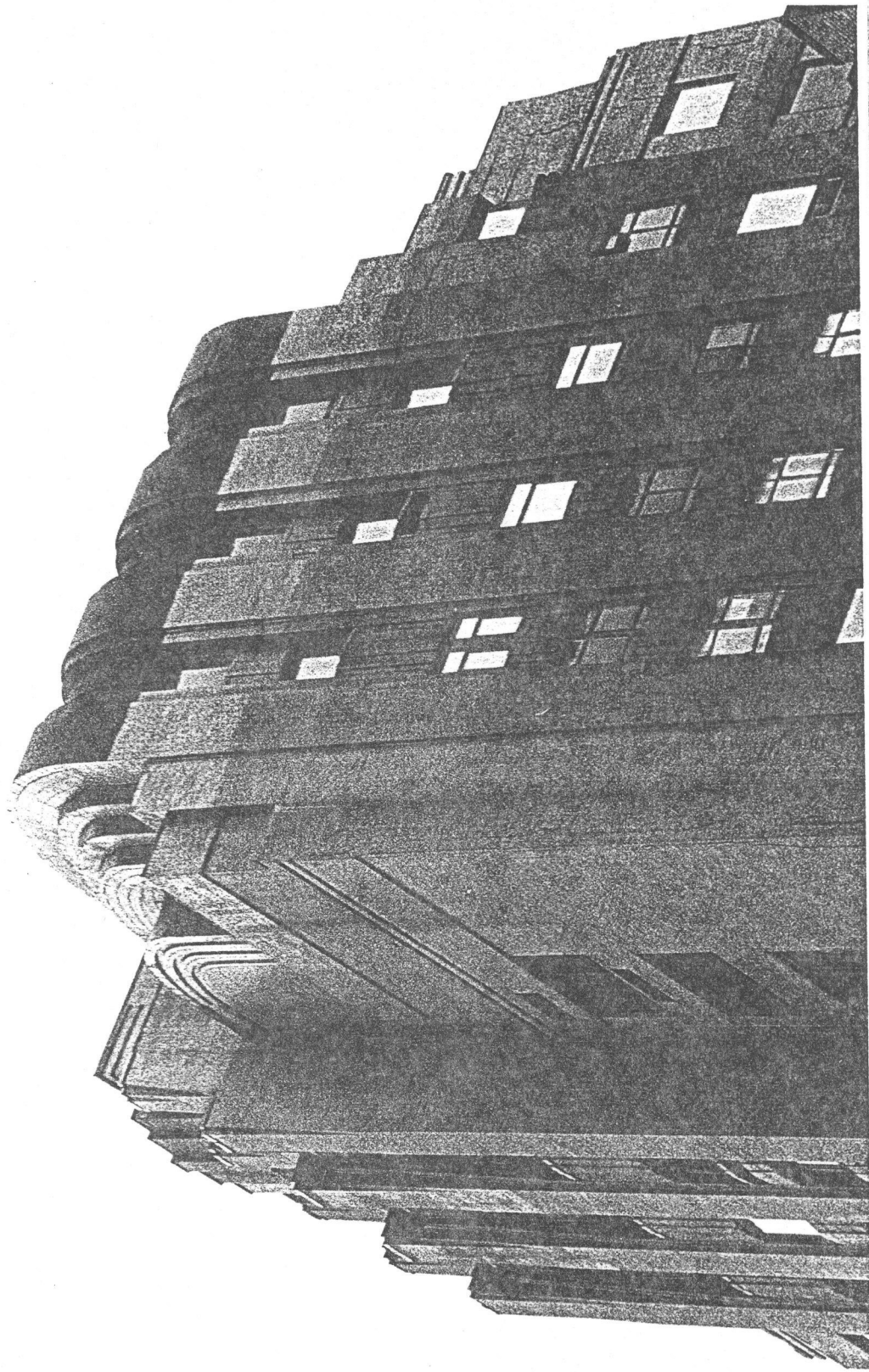
Majestic Apartments: North entrance.



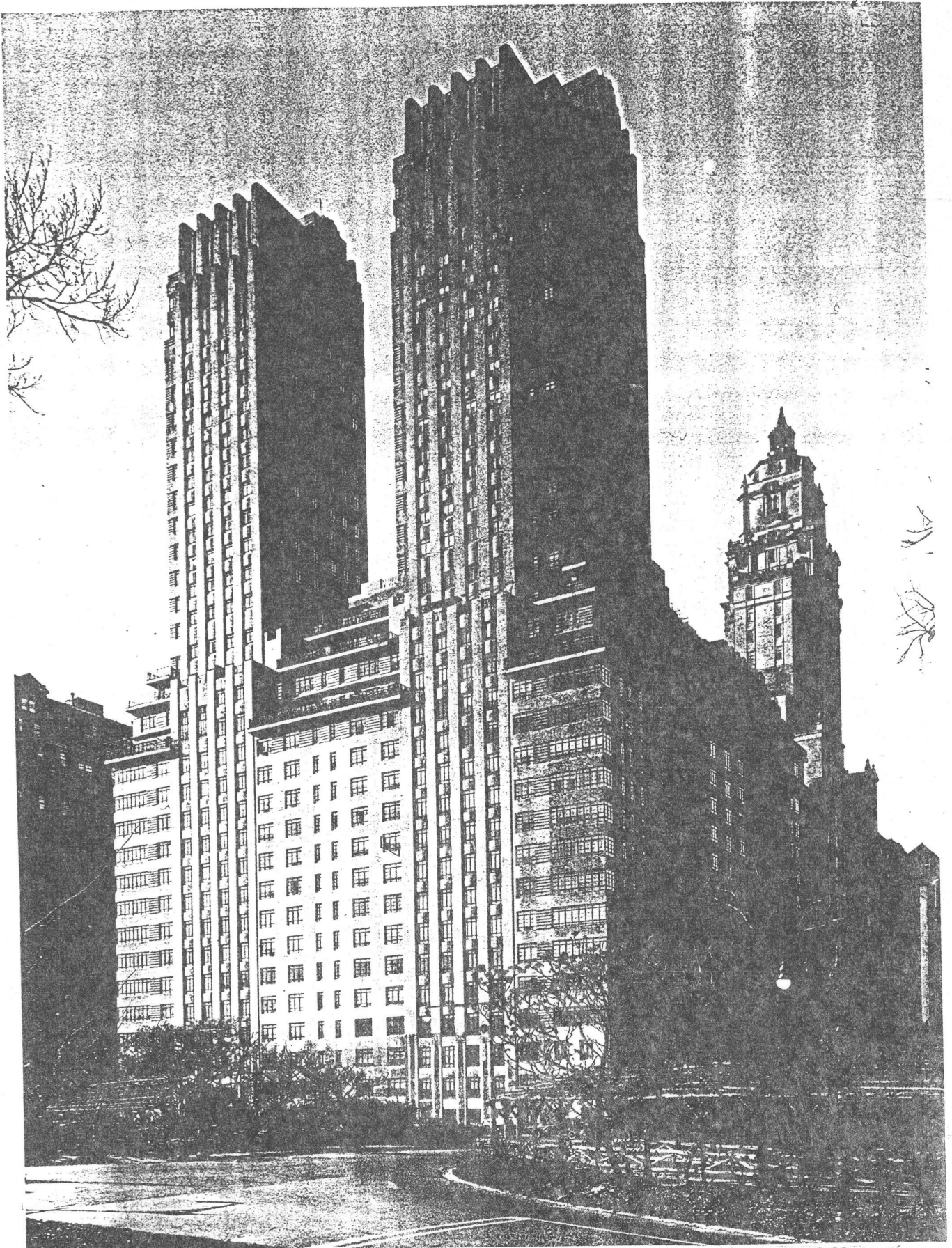
Majestic Apartments: Original window configurations. Above: With tile spandrels. Below: With brick paneling.



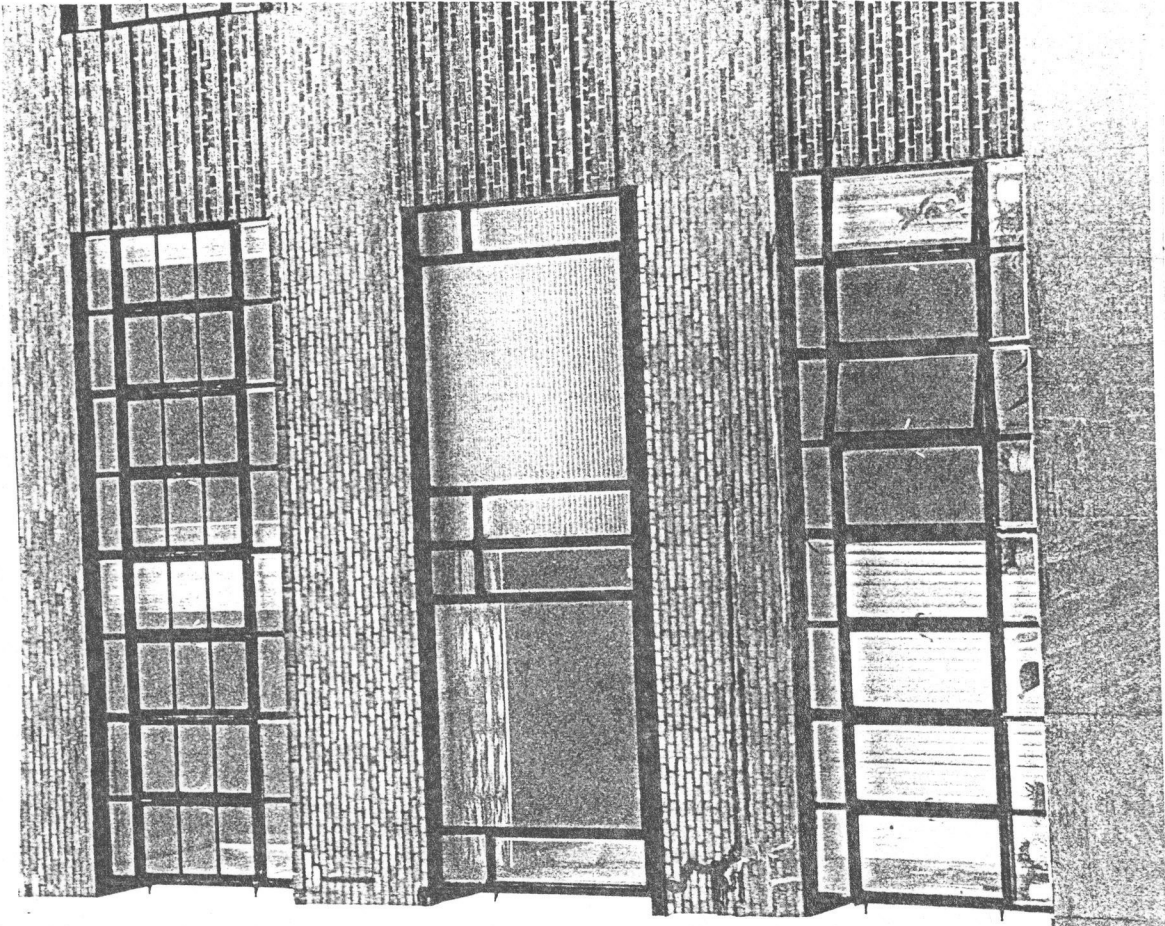
Majestic Apartments: View of the twin towers, with window alterations.



Majestic Apartments: View of the north tower termination from the west.



Majestic Apartments: Photo from the Irwin S. Chanin Collection, showing original fenestration. [Reproduced New York 1930, p.411.]



Majestic Apartments: Views of the corners of the building, with setbacks, brick paneling, and metal railings. The wrap-around windows with triple panes show the original configuration.

