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Landmarks Preservation Commission
April 12, 1983; Designation List 164
LP-1273

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WOOLWORTH BUILDING, 233 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1911-1913; architect, Cass Gilbert

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

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LAND USE REVIEW
DEPT. OF CITY PLANNING

On February 9, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Woolworth Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was continued to April 13, 1982 (Item No. 3), and again to June 8, 1982 (Item No. 1). All three hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Woolworth Building, one of New York's best known tall buildings, is among the most famous skyscrapers in the United States. The tallest building in the world on its completion in 1913, Cass Gilbert's graceful, Gothic-style, terra-cotta clad, sixty-story tower became the prototype for the tall romantic skyscraper that permanently transformed the skyline of New York and become the most potent image of twentieth-century urban America.

Built as the headquarters of F.W. Woolworth's "five-and-ten" empire, the Woolworth Building became a symbol not just of Woolworth's personal success, but also of the new twentieth-century phenomenon of mass commerce. At its grand opening, during which President Wilson in Washington pushed a button to signal the lighting of the structure in New York, the Rev. S. Parkes Cadman christened the Woolworth Building the "Cathedral of Commerce."

The Woolworth Building stands as a watershed in the history of the American skyscraper. It is both the culmination of the early development of the tall office building that began before 1880, and the model -- in terms of height, profile, corporate symbolism, and romantic presence -- for the skyscrapers of the great building boom of the post-World War I era that culminated in the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings. Although long since stripped of its "world's tallest" title, the Woolworth Building remains one of the great symbols of twentieth-century America, and one of New York's and the country's outstanding landmarks.

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

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

Frank Woolworth grew up in his family's farm near Great Bend in Jefferson County, New York; the Woolworths had been farmers since the 17th century. Frank Woolworth did not like farm life, and in 1873, encouraged by his mother, found a job with Augsbury & Moore, a leading drygoods store in nearby Watertown, N.Y., where he worked sporadically over the next five years. In 1878, a visitor to the store told Woolworth and Moore a story about a five-cent counter which seems to have been the

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direct inspiration for the "5 and 10": a salesman named Bennet had bought a discount lot of handkerchiefs from an overstocked New York supplier, and convinced Michigan storekeepers that they could be sold for a nickel -- the goods moved quickly and in volume. The success of that venture led to several stores setting up five-cent counters. Moore himself was skeptical, but later that year bought \$100 worth of nickel goods from the same New York supplier, Spelman Brothers, and sold them all in one day. The five-cent counter soon caught on in upstate New York.

Woolworth, impressed with the possibilities of the counter, left Moore to start a business dealing only in nickel goods. His first venture, "The Great Five Cent Store" in Utica, New York, met with little success; he therefore moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which seemed to him a livelier town, increased the scope of his goods by including items for ten cents, and on June 6th, 1879, opened the first "Woolworth's 5 and 10 Cent Store."² Woolworth's basic operation was to find articles which could be sold for either a nickel or a dime, display them on counters, and let customers choose their own merchandise, eliminating the cost of paying salespeople. Attributing his success in Lancaster in part to the "thriftiness of the Pennsylvania Dutch," Woolworth began to open similar stores elsewhere in the state. Stores in Harrisburg and York did not succeed, but one in Scranton, opened in 1880, did; Woolworth brought in his brother Charles to run it, and the business became "Woolworth Bros. 5 and 10 Cent Store."

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

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

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

Over the next ten years Woolworth undertook three major operations which completed the spectacular growth of the company under his direction: in 1904 he took his stores to the Midwest; in 1909 he expanded to England; and in 1910 he merged his company with those of four competitors to create the F.W. Woolworth Company, a corporation controlling 611 stores. With no effective competition left, Wool-

worth's potential for expansion was virtually unlimited; the 1000th store (now demolished) was erected in 1918 on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 40th Street. The press criticised such an "invasion" of the luxury avenue by the dime store, but in fact Woolworth's location there was not much different from the location of his first Manhattan store on Sixth Avenue in the "Ladies' Mile" the late-nineteenth century equivalent of Fifth Avenue.

Woolworth began planning his new headquarters in 1910, the year of the major consolidation with his competitors. From the start, the building was also intended to be a headquarters for the Irving National Bank, today the Irving Trust Company. Lewis Pierson, president of the bank and a friend of Woolworth, was attempting in 1910 to engineer a merger between the Irving National Bank and the New York Exchange Bank, but meeting resistance on the part of several bankers. Woolworth saw an opportunity to acquire a partner and proposed to take out "the additional stock necessary to make the consolidation of the two banks a success if the bank would move up to Broadway and take headquarters" in the proposed Woolworth Building.⁵ The banks agreed, Woolworth acquired a lot on the corner of Broadway and Park Place, and Cass Gilbert was hired as architect.

Woolworth originally intended to build a standard twelve- to sixteen-story office building on a corner site at Broadway and Park Place, which comprised only a portion of the eventual site. The idea of surpassing neighboring tall buildings, however, pushed his project to increasingly greater heights. At first the building was increased to twenty stories in order to be taller than the Pulitzer Building on the other side of City Hall Park.⁶ By September of 1910, the proposed design called for a twenty-five story base supporting a forty-story tower on its east front, rising about 550 feet from a site which extended 105 feet along Broadway and 197 feet 9 inches along Park Place. The exact height was left flexible at Gilbert's request.

Soon thereafter, Woolworth resolved to go still higher. The Singer Building, completed by architect Ernest Flag in 1907, rose 612 feet on a site just a few blocks south of Woolworth's project. According to Gilbert's notes of November 1910:

I called Mr. Woolworth's attention to the height of the (Woolworth) tower as being somewhat higher than previously sketched. He inquired as to its comparative height with the Singer tower and instructed me to increase the height so as to make its 620 ft. above the sidewalk.⁷

Reminiscing in a 1913 interview, Woolworth explained his thinking:

While in Europe a few years ago, wherever I went the men with whom I came in contact asked me about the Singer Building and its famous tower. That gave me an idea. I decided to erect a building that would advertise the Woolworth five and ten cent stores all over the world. I kept thinking about it, and finally, when the opportunity seemed to be right, I went ahead with my plans.⁸

The building was announced publicly in November 1910 as a forty-five story tower rising 625 feet, on the corner site.⁹

There still remained, however, the Metropolitan Life Insurance tower on Madison Square, which, when completed by architects Napoleon LeBrun & Sons in 1909, had become the successor to the title of world's tallest building. Woolworth began to think he had not gone high enough. In early December, according to Gilbert's notes

Woolworth remarked...that there was no use in making the tower ft. unless it went up high enough to be the highest tower in the world and he spoke of 710 ft. or 712 ft. as being the alternative.¹⁰

It was not an easy decision for Woolworth. According to Gilbert, he vacillated for some time, uncertain whether to risk the delays and extra costs:

He continued to advocate the higher tower on the ground that it would be the greatest tower in the world and yet he was not finally determined upon doing it. He seemed unable to make up his mind.¹¹

In late December, Woolworth had a civil engineer measure the Metropolitan's height which was found to be 700 feet and 2 inches.¹² Finally,

...to have the advertising value that would come with the highest structure in Manhattan...Mr. Woolworth instructed his architect to prepare plans for a tower that would overtop the Metropolitan.¹³

According to Woolworth's interviewer:

"How high do you want the tower now?" asked Mr. Gilbert.

"How high can you make it?" Mr. Woolworth asked in reply.

"It is for you to make the limit," said Mr. Gilbert.

"Then make it fifty feet higher than the Metropolitan Tower."¹⁴

Woolworth acquired the necessary remainder of the blockfront on Broadway between Park Place and Barclay Street, and the Woolworth Building as completed took the title of world's tallest building.

The "5 and 10" offices hardly required such an enormous office building; nor could the Woolworth Building be considered a symbol of the frugality which Woolworth hoped for his customers. Its creation has to be seen, rather, in light of Woolworth's changing conceptions of himself and his company. As F.W. Woolworth & Company emerged as a commercial empire, Woolworth made certain changes. In 1900, he ordered that all of his 59 stores should be given identical facades, creating the familiar look of "carmine red" fronts and store windows. The same year he opened his first "Woolworth Building" in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home of the first "5 and 10."¹⁵ No longer were his stores just individual ventures in the 5 cent principle; each was now a constituent part of a publicly visible institution. Likewise, Woolworth was no longer just a merchant; he was becoming a recognized member of New York's wealthy elite. He had already left his middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood to live in the Hotel Savoy on Fifth Avenue at Grand Army Plaza, but in 1901 he built a mansion at 990 Fifth Avenue, on Manhattan's gold coast.¹⁶ Later he built an entire compound of town houses for his family along East 80th Street, and bought a Glen Cove estate which he renamed "Winfield Hall." These changes in Woolworth's personal image and the company's image found their most dramatic statement in the building of the world's tallest skyscraper as Woolworth's corporate symbol.

The Skyscraper in New York

The skyscraper is universally acknowledged to be the pre-eminent American contribution to world architecture. Within the United States, the tall office building was developed first in Chicago and New York City, and those two cities derive much of their physical identity from their skyscrapers.

The skyscraper type has developed gradually over the past hundred years, starting from the first office buildings exceeding six stories in height in the 1870s and proceeding through a series of progressively taller structures to a group claiming in succession to be the "tallest in the world." The exact nature of the development, and the exact definition of what constitutes a skyscraper, have been the subject of debate, and there is no concensus as to which was the first, or whether the skyscraper was both in Chicago or New York. The stylistic development of the skyscraper in both cities has, however, been well documented, and it is generally agreed that the skyscraper was the product of the development of steel-cage construction, the perfection of the elevator, and increasing land costs.¹⁷

The earliest New York buildings displaying some of the characteristics of the skyscraper date from before 1870. At least one cast-iron building, the A.T. Stewart department store at Broadway and West 9th Street (John Kellum, 1865; demolished), was constructed as an iron cage, anticipating the steel-cage construction which made tall buildings possible. The first known elevator was in the five-story high Haughwout Store at Broadway and Broome Street (John Gaynor, 1859; extant). As building heights began to respond to the potential of technological advances in the 1870s and 1880s, architects started to grapple with the implications for style and design. A varied group of stylistic responses to tall buildings during these decades was characterized by Montgomery Schuyler in 1909 as "wild work."¹⁸

By the late 1880s, designers of tall buildings had turned to a tripartite scheme that was flexible enough to remain useful and popular for several decades. The concept of the scheme was an analogy between a building's elevation and a classical column, in which the bottom stories corresponded to the column's base, the tall central section to its shaft, and the upper floors to its capital. Schuyler, who first identified the type, considered the Union Trust Building (George B. Post, 1889-1890; demolished) an early example; others were Post's Havemeyer Building (1891-1892; demolished), and Bruce Price's American Surety Building (1894-1895; demolished). The tripartite type soon spread to other major American urban centers. Most were from ten to twenty stories high. Schuyler considered the finest example to be Cass Gilbert's Broadway-Chambers Building (1899-1900; extant).

Even as the base-shaft-capital tripartite type continued to dominate office-building design, a new type emphasizing the tower aspect of tall buildings began to develop, as a response to the design requirements of still taller structures. After a number of unbuilt proposals of the early 1890s, a series of romantically designed tower buildings were created in lower Manhattan, culminating in a group of three, each successively claiming the title of tallest building in the world: the Singer Building (Ernest Flagg, 1906-08; demolished), a Beaux-Arts style office building with a tower addition; the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower (Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, 1909; extant), modeled on an Italian campanile; and the Gothic-style Woolworth Building.

The Woolworth Building was the last major skyscraper undertaken in New York City before World War I. Skyscraper construction did not begin again until the mid-1920s, when a major series of office buildings transformed the skylines of both lower and midtown Manhattan. Modernistic towers like the Chrysler Building (William Van Alen, 1928-29) and the Empire State Building (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, 1921-31) stripped the Woolworth Building of its status as world's tallest building, but also essentially confirmed the tower model exemplified by the Woolworth Building as the new skyscraper image of New York. The type was not substantially altered until the wave of International Style slab buildings that reshaped New York's image in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Lever House (a designated New York

City Landmark). In many ways, Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building was the epitome of the New York romantic skyscraper from which the twentieth-century city derives so much of its visual identity.

Cass Gilbert (1859-1934)¹⁹

Cass Gilbert, although not a native of the city or the designer of more than a dozen of its buildings, was one of the most important architects to work in New York. Among his commissions are several of the city's major landmarks; the two most important of these, the U.S. Customs House and the Woolworth Building, are of national significance.²⁰

Gilbert was a Midwesterner who trained and later practiced in the East. His career falls roughly into two parts: a local practice in St. Paul, Minnesota in the 1880s and 1890s, and a national practice, based in New York, from 1900 until his death in 1934. His work has been described as a synthesis of architectural trends in the two regions,²¹ and both his buildings and the language in which he discussed them seem to combine a Midwestern belief in structural expression with an Eastern respect for tradition.

Gilbert was born the son of an engineer in Zanesville, Ohio, a town in part laid out by his grandfather. While still a child, he and his family moved to St. Paul, where he completed his secondary education. In 1876 he entered the office of A.M. Radcliffe, a local architect. Two years later he went east to study at the architecture school of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then headed by William R. Ware; his teacher was a Frenchman, Eugene Letang.²² After two years of study, Gilbert went to Europe; he had hoped to work for an English architect -- G.E. Street, Alfred Waterhouse, Norman Shaw, or William Burges -- but was unable to find employment. After traveling briefly through France and Italy, chiefly to see Gothic cathedrals, he was obliged to return to the United States later the same year. In New York he joined the firm of McKim, Mead & White, which had been formed barely a year earlier in September 1879.

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

During Gilbert's two-year stay with McKim, Mead & White in 1880-1882, the firm's work consisted largely of Shingle Style houses.²³ Among the other buildings designed or constructed during that period were the Newport Casino, the Charles Whittier residence in Boston, the Tiffany residence in New York, and the Ross Winans residence in Baltimore, for which project Gilbert was made superintendent.²⁴ The Villard Houses in New York, first of the firm's commissions to reflect the influence of the Italian Renaissance, was designed in 1882, at the end of Gilbert's term.

Returning to St. Paul in 1882, Gilbert set up his own practice. Mead had suggested he open a St. Paul branch of McKim, Mead & White,²⁵ but instead Gilbert formed a partnership with fellow M.I.T. graduate James Knox Taylor, which lasted eight years. During the last two decades of the century he built a solid reputation in St. Paul designing residences, churches, and office buildings; most of

his designs were in the Shingle Style or the Richardsonian Romanesque.²⁶ When John Welborn Root died in 1891, Mead wrote to Gilbert from New York urging him to go to Chicago to become Daniel Bunnham's new partner; Gilbert, however, chose to remain in St. Paul. He became president of the Minnesota chapter of the A.I.A., and was invited to sit on various juries -- he was the only Westerner on the jury for the New York Public Library competition.

In 1895, Gilbert won the competition for the new Minnesota state capitol, a commission that established a national reputation for him.²⁷ Clearly reflecting the impact of the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, Gilbert's design was an elegant Beaux-Arts building, which, in its monumental composition, classical style, and elaborate decoration, laid the groundwork for his 1899 winning entry in the New York Customs House competition.²⁸ In 1900, Gilbert moved permanently to New York.

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

Gilbert believed that public buildings belonged to the public, and deserved whatever expenditure necessary to make them beautiful.²⁹ He also recognized that the decorative arts were beginning to flourish in America, especially mural painting and also sculpture, and believed that they should be encouraged; in accordance with these beliefs, his own public buildings were lavishly decorated. In a 1934 address honoring artist Edwin H. Blashfield, Gilbert traced the history of the arts in America, and credited much of their growth to architects. The Minnesota Capitol decorations included much programmatic work, murals representing History, a statue by Daniel Chester French of Jurisprudence, and so on. The U.S. Customs House was intended from the start to have a similarly elaborate program of decoration, although it was not carried out until the 1930s.³⁰ Ultimately, Gilbert brought this same kind of programmatic interior design to the publicly accessible interiors of the Woolworth Building.

Cass Gilbert's other major contribution to architecture was in the field of skyscraper design. As a Midwestern architect working during the last two decades of the 19th century, he was familiar with the technological developments in skyscraper construction in Chicago. His training in Eastern schools, on the other hand, enabled him to develop a style along the conservative lines current in New York when he moved to the city at the turn of the century. The unique combination of Midwestern technology, Eastern training, and Gilbert's personal design talents and beliefs helped him move away from the tripartite "base-shaft-capital" formula of early office buildings to the full-blown romantic skyscraper conception of the Woolworth Building.³¹

Gilbert designed three office buildings in the Northeast before receiving the Woolworth commission: the Brazer Building (1896) in Boston, the Broadway-Chambers Building (1899-1900) in New York, and the West Street Building (1906-1907), also in New York.

The Brazer Building was a simply-designed office building of the "base-shaft-capital" type. The Broadway-Chambers Building, a project in which Gilbert himself also acted as developer,³² was similarly a tripartite design which was widely admired at the time of its completion as one of the finest examples of the "base-shaft-capital" type yet produced. Montgomery Schuyler, the most prominent architectural critic

of the day, wrote later that it "was the summation of that type of the design of a tall building, the 'last word' in the prosecution of the analogy of the classical column. It was promptly so recognized, not only at home but equally abroad...."33 Schuyler observed that Gilbert's building was a notable advance upon Bruce Price's American Surety Building, till then the prime example of the type, and that the building's major "architectural novelty and distinction" was "the distinction of the parts by color, since they could not be effectively distinguished by form." The three-story base was "warm granite," the ten-story shaft "rough red brick," and above, the three-story capital was treated "with a decorative inlay of tiling in the pilasters of the arches," and surmounted by green copper cresting.³⁴ Gilbert's use of color in his adaptation of the tripartite scheme foreshadowed his more extensive polychromatic schemes in the Woolworth Building.

The West Street Building was also to some extent organized along a tripartite scheme, but represented a major advance in office building design. Although arranged as a base-shaft-capital, the building's design downplayed the "base," emphasized the verticality of the "shaft" with tall uninterrupted piers, and made the "capital" an elaborate Gothic fantasy with a mansard roof. To Montgomery Schuyler, the shaft treatment of piers expressed the structural frame within, "for the first time."³⁵ Its vertical expression and Gothic skin were the direct predecessors of the Woolworth Building.

Gilbert's skyscraper designs reflected his clear belief in the value of studying the architecture of the past, not to copy it, but certainly to adapt it. Speaking on the occasion of the presentation to him of the Gold Medal of Architecture by the Society of Arts and Sciences in honor of the Woolworth Building design, he said:

...as in language new words are coined to express new meanings and old words become obsolete, as old uses are abandoned so new forms to meet new needs are developed (I almost said invented) as the necessity requires. This does not mean that one should ignore the culture, the knowledge and experience of the past to wilfully and pridefully discard all that has gone before and start all over at the beginning. It is not progress to go backward....Why not then pick up the threads where we find them and weave into the pattern of our own civilization the beauty that is our inheritance? My plea therefore is for beauty and sincerity, for the solution of our own problems in the spirit of our own age illuminated by the light of the past; to carry on, to shape new thoughts, new hopes, and new desires in new forms of beauty as we may and can; but to disregard nothing of the past that may guide us in doing so....It is in this spirit that the building you have chosen was designed.³⁶

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

He explained this theory in a 1912 discussion of the Woolworth Building:

...we have endeavored to "express" the plan and to so design it that it will be frankly a masonry and terra-cotta covering of a

steel frame instead of pretending to be a masonry building. There are three elements which are commonly counted upon for architectural expression -- length, breadth, and thickness. In a business building we may have length and breadth, but our wall surfaces cannot have thickness. In short, we cannot waste space for arches or colonnades or other architectural features, without sacrificing the rentable area, and we cannot project beyond the property line, therefore we have to deal with a perfectly flat surface without "relief" which would give light and shade. We have also to provide windows at frequent and regular intervals both horizontal and vertical. It is these conditions that make the skyscraper problem so difficult of solution. I have endeavored to meet them by the use of detail in the treatment of wall surface and by the careful adjustment of polychromatic decoration.³⁷

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

It goes without saying that sound construction, good planning, adaptability to needs and proper economy are all essentials of a properly organized and well managed building -- but, speaking purely from the standpoint of design, the greatest element of monumental architecture is good proportion.³⁸

In 1910, when Frank Woolworth commissioned Cass Gilbert to be the architect of his building, he expected an excellent skyscraper design. The Broadway-Chambers Building must have been familiar to him as it was across the street from his office in the Sun Building, and the West Street Building was only a few blocks to the south. Woolworth's commission gave Gilbert the opportunity to develop his principles and ideas on a monumental scale. The resulting Woolworth Building was soon recognized as the most important New York skyscraper of its era as well as the tallest building in the world.

Gilbert's conception for the Woolworth Building

Cass Gilbert's Beaux-Arts schooling, his experience in designing grand and highly ornamental public buildings, his exposure to Midwestern architectural developments, and his experience designing the Broadway-Chambers and West Street office buildings in New York City, made him the ideal architect for New York's premier skyscraper commission.

Gilbert was faced with specific practical problems. He had to design the world's tallest building and make it suitable to business use. From an economic standpoint it was necessary to fill up as much of the building lot as possible:

It is very difficult to make a business building picturesque.... the architect has to utilize all of the space on the lot, therefore there can be no projections giving light and shade and no important recesses giving that effect of depth and mass so impressive in any of the old buildings in Europe.

Woolworth also insisted on having

many windows so divided that all of the offices should be well

lighted and so that partitions might be placed at almost any location, sub-dividing the spaces into larger or smaller offices as tenants might require. Such a requirement naturally prevented any broad wall space...⁴⁰

Within such technical limitations, however, both Gilbert and Woolworth were committed to creating a beautiful building. Gilbert always credited Woolworth's insistence on the subject:

Mr. Woolworth loved beautiful architecture and earnestly desired that his building should be noted for its beauty as well as for its practical convenience and substantial construction. He realized that beauty is an asset and has a business value, and was himself the strongest advocate thereof.⁴¹

He was passionately fond of beauty in architecture and it was his great desire that the building which bears his name should add to the beauty of New York.⁴²

Beyond general notions of "beauty," Gilbert believed it necessary also

to express in exterior form the function of the building and the fact that it was a steel structure, not a masonry building.⁴³

Gilbert's problem, then, as he perceived it, was to design the world's tallest office tower, to make this tower responsive to practical and economic considerations, to make visual sense of its immense elevations, to express its steel-cage construction through the design, and, implicitly, to create a design that would satisfy Woolworth's ambitions. His solution was a massive but, as far as practicable, slender tower rising above a wider and deeper base, carefully modulated according to his sense of proper proportion, with its steel-cage structure wrapped in a polychromatic terra-cotta skin with Gothic-style detail. Each element of the solution satisfied a particular part of the building's requirements.

Gilbert considered proportion to be of primary importance in creating a successful design of any kind. He had earlier written of public buildings that "the greatest element of monumental architecture is good proportion,"⁴⁴ and he clearly felt the same need, perhaps more urgently, with a skyscraper. When Woolworth discussed the building's potential height with Gilbert, he gave his architect only general figures; when Woolworth asked him what the exact height should be, Gilbert replied he would "make it what seemed to be a good proportion."⁴⁵ Gilbert's daughter later recalled that her father

did once say the study he gave to the Woolworth Building destroyed his sense of scale for several years, because of the unprecedented attuning of detail to, for those days, such an excessive height.⁴⁶

The silhouette of the tower set center forward on the base, and the relationship of height, breadth, and depth of the component parts, make the building recognizable from distances which obscure its surface detail. Gilbert wrote later:

I have been asked if the building does not embody to some extent some of the requirements of the present Building Zone Resolution and was a sort of forerunner of "set-back" buildings, and my answer to this question is no, that I had no thought of the "set-back" building type but that the tower was simply a response to

Mr. Woolworth's desire for a high structure of commanding proportions.⁴⁷

Gilbert's choice of Gothic detail has been misunderstood almost since the building's completion. He chose Gothic as an expression of the verticality of the tower form, with no thought of imitating ecclesiastic models. References to the Woolworth Building as a "Cathedral of Commerce" (originating from the Rev. S. Parkes Cadman's dedication of the building on its opening) invariably irritated him. The use of Gothic elements for a tall building did not originate with the Woolworth Building; Gilbert himself had used it earlier in his West Street Building, for similar purposes, and Henry Ives Cobb had adopted it in 1909 for his Liberty Tower.⁴⁸ Gilbert's writings explain his intentions, and how they matched those of his client:

From the very start [Woolworth] wanted to erect a building that should have a great tower, an inspiring upward movement, and... he asked me if it would be possible to design such a building in the "Gothic" style. I was obliged to tell him that we might use Gothic details but that under the conditions it would be impracticable to make a building that was really Gothic in its structural characteristics.⁴⁹

The building's elevations were to be largely composed of windows, thus preventing

any broad wall space and the obvious solution of the problem was to accept as its main factor the idea that as it was to be a building of piers and windows and without broad wall surfaces, that it was to be a high building and that its height should be recognized, insisted upon and expressed by vertical lines. [This] would create a practically new type of office building and an architecture which might have Gothic detail but which had no real precedent.⁵⁰

The version of Gothic he chose was

the flamboyant Gothic tracery and ornament of the latter part of the 15th and 16th centuries, light, graceful, delicate and flame-like, as its name implies, and capable of infinite subdivision...⁵¹

Its purpose was to express verticality:

The height was emphasized not only by the dominance of the vertical lines but by repeated insistence upon them by minor verticals and resolving these again into minor subdivisions of a decorative sort as was done in the architecture of the 15th century...⁵²

It had no bearing on ecclesiastical architecture; its sources, if any, were civic:

The building has sometimes been called "The Cathedral of Commerce." I take this opportunity to say that there was no intention of making it anything like a cathedral and in fact it bears no resemblance to a cathedral in the plan or exterior design or in any other respect. There are many medieval civic buildings to which it might be likened such as the Halls at Middleburg and Alkmaar in Holland, the City Hall in Brussels, the Hotel de Ville in Compiegne, the Cloth Hall at Ypres (destroyed in the great war) and many others all of which have towers

of proportionately great height although of course very much smaller than the Woolworth tower. All of them were studied, none were copied, and in fact Mr. Woolworth's first suggestion, by the way, referred to the Victoria Tower on the Parliament Buildings in London... It was my thought...that I must express the idea of a civic or commercial building rather than of an ecclesiastical one....At any rate, in the final development of the design the Woolworth tower stands on its merits; for I know of no prototype.⁵³

The material of Gilbert's Gothic-style exterior was not masonry by architectural terra cotta. Terra cotta used in facades appeared in the New York area at least as early as 1878, when George B. Post incorporated the material in his design for the Long Island Historical Society headquarters on Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn. By the early decades of the twentieth century architectural terra cotta had become a major building material, used both for ornamental detail and also for the cladding of entire buildings. Cobb's Gothic-style Liberty Tower was clad on three elevations in terra cotta. The Woolworth Building, however, became by far the largest and most dramatic example of its use.

Woolworth's first inclination was towards granite as the exterior material. Gilbert suggested limestone as a cheaper alternative. Eventually, however, terra cotta was chosen for all but the first four stories of the building which were clad in limestone. Architectural terra cotta had gained popularity for being relatively inexpensive, fire-resistant, and, as a prefabricated material, a source of easily obtained ornamental effects. All these qualities were no doubt attractive to Woolworth and Gilbert, but Gilbert's interest went beyond just the technical advantages. He was interested in terra cotta because it was a thin, pliable material, with polychromatic possibilities, which, to his mind, could never be mistaken for a structural element. By wrapping the steel-cage structure in an ornamental, polychromatic, thin terra-cotta skin, Gilbert felt he was clarifying the building's structural nature. Dealing particularly with the polychromatic effects he wrote:

The use of color to enhance the shadows and to accent the main lines of the structure is an important element in the design of the Woolworth Building and very little notice has been taken of it, but if color were not there the design would be far less effective. ...It was at least an honest endeavor to express in exterior form the function of the building and the fact that it was a steel structure, not a masonry structure.⁵⁴

Again:

...color may be invoked to aid in the desperate need of thickness by an architect if he be an artist, and knows that it is not used for itself in this emergency, but for the effect it may produce in emphasizing form.⁵⁵

Gilbert was quite specific in which colors he chose and how they were used. According to a 1912 description:

The color is light cream, smooth in texture, warm and varying slightly in tone. Wherever modeled design occurs the ornament is accentuated by a background in soft faience, blue, golden yellow, or green.⁵⁶

The polychromatic scheme included the roof treatment:

The color of the roofs and especially of the apex of the tower with its delicate gilding was studied for many months before it was finally determined. To find the color that would apparently increase the height of the tower and would relate it to the color of the sky whether blue or grey was an exceedingly interesting subject.⁵⁷

Gilbert's writings make clear his notions about Gothic elements, proportion, color, and expression of structure, but they do not entirely describe all the effects used. The verticality of the tower is expressed not only through Gothic-style vertical elements, but also by the grouping of windows in unbroken rows of window-spandrel-window set off one from the other by projecting piers. Another important aspect, made clear by contemporary photographs and drawings but not mentioned by Gilbert, is the dramatic effect obtained by the building's siting at the edge of City Hall Park. Although out of the hands of the architect, the siting makes the building's entire bulk, not just its upper portions, visible across a distance adequate to its being appreciated in its entirety. A final gesture to ensure a dramatic effect was special lighting. Suggestions included lighting the building itself by means of "four expensive search light units placed on neighboring buildings," and placing at the tower's top "a very powerful search-light devised to revolve and to be operated continuously from dark to midnight every night."⁵⁸ It was assumed such lighting would be "at least equal to the ornamental lighting of the Singer Tower,"⁵⁹ and that "the light would...be visible for a long distance at sea." As finally completed, the building was lit "from the thirty-first to the sixtieth story... The Tower is illuminated by a gigantic flood of light directed upon it from specially designed nitrogen lamps of great candle-power set in mirrored glass reflectors to give maximum reflective value... The light, soft and mellow at its base, gradually increases in intensity as it reaches upward and, at the very top, the pinnacle, an immense ball of fire appears giving the effect of a gorgeous jewel resplendent in its setting of rich gold."⁶¹ The lighting has since been changed.

Description

The Woolworth Building is a 60-story skyscraper, rising 792 feet above street level. It occupies the entire blockfront along the western side of Broadway between Park Place and Barclay Street. The 30-story tower rises above a 30-story base. The base presents three unbroken elevations, on Barclay Street, Broadway, and Park Place, and divides into two wings on its western face. The tower meets the lot line on Broadway, but is narrower than and does not extend as far west as the base beneath it. The tower has two setbacks, creating three sections of progressively smaller dimensions, and culminates in a pyramidal roof and four tourelles.

The elevations of the base and tower are divided into continuous vertical bays of windows and spandrels. In the tower and the portion of the base directly beneath it, there are three bays comprising respectively two, three and two tiers of windows. The bays in the base, north and south of the tower, on Broadway comprise three tiers of windows; the base elevations on Barclay Street and Park Place west of the tower are divided into six two-window-wide bays, the bay furthest to the west being slightly narrower than the rest. This is the basic organizational pattern for the entire exterior.

The first four stories are set apart from the rest of the building base in design and material. Unlike the upper stories, they are faced in Redford limestone above a seven-foot water-table in polished Rockport (Me.) granite.⁶² The three facades of the base are divided into three-story entrance and window bays, with a

one-story attic level above. The width of these bays matches that of the window and spandrel bays in the base and tower above. Only the fourth story of the base of the western elevation is visible; it is plain.

The first four stories of the Broadway elevation focus on the three-story Tudor-arched entrance portal which is flanked on either side by two bays, one narrower and one wider and each divided into a storefront and two bands of windows. The entrance arch and flanking narrow bays are grouped into a triumphal arch designed by the elaborately carved stone balcony and related ornament projecting out over them. The motifs of the carving are Gothic in inspiration. The balcony includes narrow panels with shields separating wide panels of Gothic tracery over the entrance and wide panels with stylized flowers over the flanking bays; the center panel supports a large eagle holding a shield. From either side of the entrance arch descends an elaborately carved niche with Gothic tracery and at its base a carved coiled serpent. Similar deep relief Gothic tracery with fanciful grotesques link the balcony with the arches of the entrance and flanking bays.

The entrance is through a Tudor-arched portal set within a shallow depressed arch. The depressed arch is outlined by a course of trefoil tracery; within each of the two spandrels between the depressed and the Tudor arch is a carved reclining figure in high relief. The portal arch is a complex form, with a wide intrados flanked on either side, at a 45° angle, by archivolts. The intrados is adorned with Gothic tracery. The archivolt facing the street is comprised of a series of small connected niches; the bottom niche at either side frames a carved tree-trunk, the niche at the apex frames an owl with spread wings, and each of the twenty remaining niches frames a grotesque allegorical figure. The inner archivolt is similarly comprised of niches, with tree-trunks at the base and an owl at the apex, but with abstract foliage in the intervening niches. An identical archivolt frames the facing lobby entrance. The entrance itself consists of a large Tudor-arched window above a revolving door with flanking side doors. The revolving door is new, but retains its original configuration. Between the window and the archivolt is a flat band of strapwork and ornamental marble squares. The window frame, and the wide bandcourse separating the window from the doorway below, consists of highly ornamental Gothic tracery cast in bronze. The glass of the window is divided into three large vertical bays, each subdivided into nine panels of twenty-one panes each; this is its original configuration.

Both the narrow and the wide bays flanking the entrance on Broadway consist of a depressed-arch masonry opening with two stories of window bands above a storefront. The window bands on each story of the inner, narrow, bays contain three single-pane windows, while those in the outer bays contain five single-pane windows. Each depressed-arch masonry opening is adorned with an elaborate carved wreath surround, whose forms include swags and bunches of grapes. The upper and lower window bands are separated by a wide bronze band of Gothic tracery; the mullions separating each single-pane window from its neighbor has superimposed over it a slender bronze rod. This is their original configuration. The horizontal bronze bands at either end of the Broadway elevation are now obscured by a modern sign. The storefronts in each bay are separated from the windows above by a broad bronze panel adorned with trefoil tracery. All the storefronts have been replaced.

Six angled piers are carried down into the base; two end in the carved niches flanking the entrance, while four others end in corbels carved as allegorical human faces. The faces apparently represent, from south to north, the four continents of Africa, America, Europe, and Asia (similar to the four allegorical statues of the continents adorning Gilbert's earlier Custom House at Bowling Green).

The fourth floor "attic" level of the base comprises the first group of office windows; each is set within an ogee arch topped by Gothic tracery, and separated from its neighbor by a carved niche. The intrados of each arch is also adorned with Gothic tracery. A string course at the top of this story delineates the four-story base from the portions above.

The Park Place four-story base essentially duplicates the detail of the Broadway facade, but with a different bay arrangement. The three eastern most bays, corresponding to the tower above, are divided narrow-wide-narrow; the second bay is a storefront display window, as is the first, narrow, bay. The third narrow bay includes both a recessed, secondary lobby entrance and, to its west, an entrance to the Park Place subway station of the I.R.T. The lobby entrance is through a revolving door, surrounded by bronze panels with Gothic tracery; the top center panel is designed as a large letter "W" ("Woolworth"). As the lobby entrance is not recessed as deeply as the subway entrance, it has an additional north-south wall on the west, which is given a similar decorative treatment. Facing the subway staircase are original windows for the Irving Trust Company's offices. The ceiling created by the recessed entrance is treated with bronze coffers; several of these have been removed and replaced with downlights. The walls of the subway staircase and the recessed entranceway are faced with the same limestone as the rest of the four-story base.

The six bays west of the entrance are identical to the narrow bays of the Broadway elevation. The first is an entrance to the Irving Trust Company's offices, the second, third and fourth are windows for the company's space, and the fifth is a storefront. The last bay is a recessed service entrance with a utilitarian doorway topped by a decorative bronze panel with Gothic tracery and a large ornamental "W", and limestone-faced walls. All the storefronts on Park Place are new; the windows above are in their original configuration.

The Barclay Street elevation of the four-story base is identical to that of Park Place, with the exception of storefront treatment. The first through third of the western six bays are entrances and windows for a restaurant, and the fourth as well as the fifth has a storefront. Additionally, instead of a subway entrance adjoining the secondary building entrance, there is a staircase leading to the building's lower levels. The storefronts are new; the windows above are in their original configuration.

All the limestone of the four-story case has been painted gray; the bronze tracery in the windows has also been painted.

Above the four-story base, the building is faced in polychromatic terra cotta. The major base rises to the 30th story; the fifth to 24th stories are divided into groups of five stories each by four string courses. The windows at the top story of each five-story group are capped by ogee arches. Each window is separated from the one above by a terra-cotta spandrel adorned with Gothic tracery. The decorative design of the spandrel is different under each of the five windows; the pattern repeats in each set of five stories. Within paired window bays, each set of five spandrels has the same five ornamental patterns, but set in a different order to provide contrast. Horizontally, the columns of windows are divided into bays by continuous angled vertical piers and separated from each other by smaller, similar piers. On the Broadway elevation, the grouping from south to north is 4-2-3-2-4; the outer four-window bays though actually include two half-size windows at either end, and in width these four-window bays are equal to three-window bays. On the Barclay Street elevation, from east to west, the grouping of windows in bays is 3-3-3-2-2-2-2-2, and on Park Place it is 3-4-3-2-2-2; the

first and third bay from the east on each elevation actually includes two half-size windows at either end, making for a narrower bay.

Above the fourth string course below the 25th floor are two additional stories of windows and spandrels; the uppermost windows are capped by projecting terra-cotta ogee arches which function as a canopy and occupy the 27th floor; the ogee arches have rib vaults in their intrados. A 28th story above the canopy level is topped by elaborate Gothic tracery and a two-story sloping copper-clad roof with dormers; rising above it, an additional, higher group of windows caps the second bay of the Park Place and Barclay Street elevations. The western end of the 30-story base divides into two wings, corresponding in depth to the six narrow bays of the Barclay Street and Park Place elevations. The western end of each consists of five bays; each wing ends in a small three-bay tower. The ornamental detail on the wings is identical to that of the street elevations.

Above the 30th story rises the tower, 84' X 86' at its base; setbacks on all sides at the 45th floor reduce its dimensions to 69' X 71', and again at the 50th floor to 69' X 61'. The windows of the 30th to the 45th stories are arranged as bays of 2-3-2 on all four sides of the tower; above they are arranged 1-3-1. Two string courses divide the lower portion of the tower into two five-story sections above the 31st story. The three stories above terminate in ogee arches and a string course. Two stories above that end in a continuous canopy of projecting terra-cotta ogee arches, marking the first narrowing of the tower; the second narrowing is similarly marked. Above, at each of the four corners of the tower, is a tourelle, several stories high. These have been substantially altered from their original condition. Above the 53rd story, the tower is "surmounted by a pyramid 105 ft. high with an observation gallery above the 55th floor at a height of 730 ft. above the curb." This pyramid is pierced by large and small dormers. Above it is a smaller octagonal pyramid with round-arched windows beneath tall pointed arches, topped by a still smaller pyramid which ends in a spire; both pyramids are adorned with lacy tracery. These pyramids add 62 feet to the tower, and were considered the equivalent of five stories, bringing the building's total number of stories to 60.

The polychromatic treatment of the terra cotta is subdued, intended to aid in the effect of shadows. The hues become stronger higher up on the tower. The overall color of the terra cotta is cream; highlights are in buff, blue and gold.

Almost all the spandrels on the building have their Gothic tracery in a golden hue, set off against a blue background. All string courses are in a buff color, setting them off slightly from the cream color of the facade as a whole. The groin vaults in the intrados of the large projecting ogee arch canopies on the upper floors are set off against blue fields; the hue is strong enough to be visible from the street even above the 30th story. The spandrels of the 25th, 39th, and 40th story windows are adorned with the lion, shield and unicorn of the British royal coat of arms; these figures are golden, set off against a blue background. The tracery above the 26th floor is also gold against a blue background, as is the ornament above the 27th story windows. The tracery over the uppermost of the five windows set off by the string courses is set off against a golden background. There is golden ornament against a blue background at the 42nd story, and strong blue hues in the ornament of the uppermost two stories of the windows in the tower. The tourelles, originally all lacy Gothic tracery, have been replaced with plainer versions; they are adorned sparingly with blue tiles. The tower pyramid was originally gilded.

The entire exterior has recently undergone extensive restoration work. Much terra cotta was cleaned and repaired; some was removed and replaced with other materials. The most visible changes took place on the tourelles, as described above. All windows above the third floor were replaced with aluminum double-hung one-over-one sash, reflecting the original configuration.

Conclusion

On April 24, 1913, Frank W. Woolworth held a grand opening celebration for the Woolworth Building in honor of Cass Gilbert. As reported in the New York Times the following day, the building was officially opened by the President of the United States:

President Wilson, from the White House in Washington, gave the signal for the formal opening of the new Woolworth Building last night, the tallest structure in the world, with the one exception of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. At 7:29, when 900 guests, who had been invited by the owner, Frank W. Woolworth, to a dinner in honor of the architect, Cass Gilbert, were seated at the tables...a telegrapher...notified the operator in the White House that all was ready for the President to press the button. One minute later President Wilson touched the instrument closing the circuit...and for the first time lights flashed from every floor of the fifty-five stories, from the sub-basement, 37 feet below the street, to the top of the tower, 792 feet above the street.⁶³

From that moment, Woolworth's skyscraper became one of the country's most famous buildings.

The building opened to great critical acclaim. Montgomery Schuyler, the most eminent architectural critic of the day, wrote the text for a 56-page brochure on the building printed privately by Woolworth:

How satisfactory that the latest and tallest of the skyscrapers should, "by consent of all," be so worthy of its conspicuousness and its preeminence, that it should be shapely and proportionate as well as over-topping... From up or down Broadway, at any point which enables the observer to get the silhouette or the demi-silhouette in its due outline and detachment, how satisfactory and eye-filling it is...a gracious and commanding shape, an overtopping peak in the jagged sierra which calls itself the skyline of lower Manhattan....It is an ornament of our city and a vindication of our artistic sensibility, of our use of the opportunities thrust upon us by the exigencies of our commercial building, and of the meeting of them by our strange new mechanical devices....⁶⁴

Besides a great deal of national acclaim,⁶⁵ the Woolworth Building also won international recognition. In England, Julian Huxley wrote "It is a fairy-story come gigantically and triumphantly to life, and can never be forgotten."⁶⁶ In France, art historian Andre Michel wrote: "Monument decisif, conquete impetueuse de l'espace. C'est une oeuvre qui a fait epoque, un des classiques du genre..." ("a decisive monument, an impetuous conquest of space. It is an epoch-making work, one of the classics of its kind...").⁶⁷ A 1913 New York Times article quoted Matusnosuke Moriyama, a Japanese architect, as suggesting that with more skyscrapers like the Woolworth Building, "the world's opinion of the American architecture will be entirely different from now."⁶⁸

The completion of the building marked the end, temporarily, of the skyscraper competition. In 1912, while the building was still under construction, a writer in the Real Estate Magazine noted:

In my opinion, at least so far as New York is concerned, it is doubtful if the palm for height is ever wrested from the Woolworth Building. It marks, to my mind, the end of the rivalry in skyscrapers which has received fresh impetus with the erection of the City Investigating, Singer, Metropolitan Life, and Bankers' Trust buildings in turn.⁶⁹

Not until the mid-1920s was the challenge of skyscraper building responded to again, and not until 1929 did the Chrysler Building take away the Woolworth's title of "world's highest building" -- only to lose it eighteen months later to the Empire State Building. For almost two decades, the Woolworth Building's observatory was the highest point in the city from which to contemplate the metropolis.

The architects of the post-World War I generation of skyscrapers eventually abandoned the historically derived forms used by Gilbert and his contemporaries, turning instead to modernistic styles. The dozen or so major New York skyscrapers of the 1920s superficially appear to bear little relation to the older Gothic fantasy at City Hall Park. Yet all the new skyscrapers in fact confirmed the basic principles set by the Woolworth Building: tall slender tower, vertically-emphasized design, romantic symbolic ornament. Although the vocabulary changed, the type of the romantic skyscraper tower had been solidly established by Gilbert. As late as 1931, almost two decades after its completion, the Woolworth Building was awarded a gold medal at the Panama-Pacific Exposition, while in the same year Cass Gilbert received a gold medal from the Society of Arts and Sciences for the building's design.⁷⁰ Stylistically the Woolworth Building is a key monument in the creation of New York as a twentieth-century skyscraper city.

Following World War II, and with the arrival of International Style office buildings in New York, many historians and critics inspired by functionalist or structuralist theories condemned the design of the Woolworth Building for its historically inspired style. The theoretical bias of the criticism is interesting in light of the evidence that Gilbert thought along functionalist and structuralist lines himself. In recent years, as such criticism in general has abated, the Woolworth Building, always a favorite of the public, has once again been recognized in the architectural press as a major architectural monument.

In the tradition of public service and display established by Frank Woolworth seven decades ago, the Woolworth Company has recently completed a major renovation of the Woolworth Building that is generally acknowledged to be one of the largest restoration projects in New York in recent times. In a project spanning several years, the building's terra-cotta cladding was repaired and cleaned, or where necessary replaced. The tower has been returned to its original glistening cream-colored appearance, and the effect is truly stunning.

Today, as it nears its 70th anniversary, the Woolworth Building remains one of New York's and the country's best-known skyscrapers. It still serves as national headquarters and symbol of the Woolworth Company which built it, and a monument not only to Woolworth but also to the gilded age of New York commerce, and the emergence of New York as a major world city. One of the first tall, towered romantic skyscrapers to dominate the New York skyline, the Woolworth stands as a model and exemplar of the building type for which New York is world renowned. Unprecedented in size, richness, and conception, it has rarely been equalled since, and

the Woolworth building, though no longer the "world's highest building," remains one of the handsomest skyscrapers in New York, and a major national monument.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The following account of the life and career of Frank W. Woolworth is based on John K. Winkler, Five and Ten: the Fabulous Life of F.W. Woolworth (New York: R.M. McBride & Co., 1940), except where otherwise noted.
2. Winkler, p. 51.
3. The Sun Building was built in 1846 to house the Stewart store, the country's first department store; forty years later, after Stewart's had moved uptown and the building had been turned into the offices of the Sun newspaper, Woolworth's offices continued the department store tradition of the building.
4. Winkler, p. 84.
5. Leo L. Redding, "Mr. F.W. Woolworth's story," interview with Woolworth published in World's Work (April 1913, pp. 659-665); clipping in Cass Gilbert papers, New-York Historical Society; p. 664.
6. Robert Allan Jones, Cass Gilbert, Midwestern Architect in New York (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1976), p. 111.
7. Cass Gilbert Papers, at the New-York Historical Society: "Reports 1910: November 2, 1910."
8. Redding.
9. Jones, p. 111, n. 22.
10. Gilbert Papers, "Reports 1910: December 13, 1910."
11. Ibid.
12. Letter from John G. Van Horne, Civil Engineer, to Cass Gilbert, December 20, 1910; Gilbert Papers.

13. Redding.
14. Ibid.
15. Winkler, p. 129.
16. Ibid., p. 132.
17. Much of the following relies on Winston Weisman's analysis of New York skyscraper design in "A New View of Skyscraper History," The Rise of an American Architecture, ed. by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).
18. Cited by Weisman, p. 115; Montgomery Schuyler, "The Evolution of the Skyscraper," Scribner's Magazine, 46 (September 1909), 257-271.
19. The following account of Cass Gilbert's career is based on Jones, except where otherwise noted.
20. Both buildings are National Historic Landmarks.
21. This is Jones's main thesis, outlined p. viii.
22. Jones, pp. 10-11.
23. These works are described in A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915 (New York: Arno Press, 1977, reprint).
24. Jones, pp. 50-55.
25. Jones, p. 62.
26. Jones, p. 63 ff.
27. "The New Minnesota State Capitol at St. Paul," The Western Architect, 4 (Oct 1905), 3-32.
28. See United States Custom House Interior designation report (LP-1022 prepared by Ruth Selden Sturgill for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, New York: City of New York, 1979). The Custom House commission was hotly contested by local architects, who considered Gilbert an outsider with no claims to it and charged collusion between Gilbert and his former partner Taylor who sat on the jury.
29. This theory is explained in Cass Gilbert, "The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture," American Architect, 136 (August 5, 1929), 141-144.
30. "Cass Gilbert's New York Customhouse Design," The Inland Architect and News Record, 35 (February 1900), 7.
31. This is the major thesis of the Jones dissertation.
32. For a fuller treatment see the relevant chapter in Jones.
33. Montgomery Schuyler, "The Woolworth Building," in American Architecture and Other Writings, edited by William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 614-615.
34. Ibid.

35. Ibid. p. 615.
36. Cass Gilbert, "Response on the occasion of the presentation of The Gold Medal for Architecture of the Society of Arts and Sciences to Cass Gilbert, New York, January 16, 1931," an address reprinted in Julia Finch Gilbert, Cass Gilbert: Reminiscences and Addresses (New York: Privately printed, 1935), p. 115.
37. "The Woolworth Building, Most Modern Example of the Fireproof Skyscraper... How it Was Built," The Real Estate Magazine (July 1912), 56.
38. Gilbert, "The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture," pp. 141-144.
39. Cass Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday of a Notable Structure," in Real Estate Magazine of New York, (May 1923), 344-345.
40. Ibid., p. 344.
41. Ibid.
42. Gilbert, "Response...!"
43. Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday...", p. 345.
44. Gilbert, "The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture."
45. Gilbert papers, "Reports 1910: June 22, 1910," p. 2.
46. Julia Finch Gilbert, Cass Gilbert, Reminiscences..., p. 14.
47. Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday...", p. 344.
48. A designated New York City Landmark; see Liberty Tower designation report (LP-1243 prepared by Lydia Latchinova for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, New York: City of New York 1982).
49. Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday...", p. 344.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Gilbert, "Response...", p. 51.
53. Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday...", pp. 344-345.
54. Ibid., p. 345.
55. Gilbert, "Response ...," p. 51.
56. "The Woolworth Building...", The Real Estate Magazine, p. 62.
57. Gilbert, "The Tenth Birthday...", p. 345.
58. Gilbert papers, J.R. Rockart notes, June 5, 1912, p. 2; Gilbert's minutes, October 20, 1910, p. 6.

59. Ibid.
60. Gilbert Papers, letter from Cass Gilbert, #380, May 4, 1911, to the U.S. Light House Board in Washington, D.C.
61. Edwin A. Cochran, The Cathedral of Commerce, The Highest Building in the World, (Baltimore, 1918), p. 8.
62. Frank W. Woolworth, The Master Builders: A Record of the Construction of the World's Highest Commercial Structure (New York: 1913), p. 22.
63. New York Times, April 25, 1913, in Gilbert Scrapbook, p. 14, Gilbert Papers.
64. Schuyler, "The Woolworth Building," p. 606.
65. For additional citations see Jones, p. 137, note 64.
66. Julian S. Huxley, "America Revisited: VI. Architecture in America," Spectator, January 3, 1925, p. 8. Cited in Jones, p. 136, note 60.
67. Andre Michel, Histoire de l'art depuis les premiers temps chretiens jusqu'a nos jours (Paris: Colin, 1905-29), vol. 8, part 3, p. 1162. Cited in Jones, p. 137, note 65.
68. Matusnosuke Moriyama quoted in "No Architecture in the Skyscrapers," New York Times, February 16, 1913, sec. 2, p. 8. Cited in Jones, p. 137, note 65.
69. "The Woolworth Building...", The Real Estate Magazine, p. 52.
70. Jones, p. 128.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Woolworth Building 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 Woolworth Building is among the best-known skyscrapers in New York and the country; that it is the most famous design of Cass Gilbert, a nationally prominent architect; that Gilbert's design for a romantic, Gothic-inspired polychromatic terra-cotta exterior over a steel-cage tower joined Midwestern theories of structural expression with Eastern preferences for historical styles; that the Woolworth Building was the final monument in the first phase of skyscraper development that culminated in the romantic skyscraper-tower type; that its design embodied concepts elaborated in the post-World War I skyscrapers which permanently redefined the skyline of New York and the image of twentieth-century urban America; that as the tallest building in the world for sixteen years it gained an international reputation;

that it was built to be the headquarters and symbol of the F.W. Woolworth Company, a nationally known institution and among the most prominent of the mass-merchandizing chains typical of twentieth-century American retailing; and that the Woolworth Building today is recognized as one of the great symbols of twentieth-century America, and one of New York's and the country's outstanding landmarks.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Woolworth Building, 233 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 123, Lot 22, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Dinner Given to Cass Gilbert, Architect, by Frank W. Woolworth in the Woolworth Building, April 24, MCMXIII. New York, 1913.

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Woolworth Building
233 Broadway
Manhattan

Architect: Cass Gilbert
Built: 1911-1913

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