

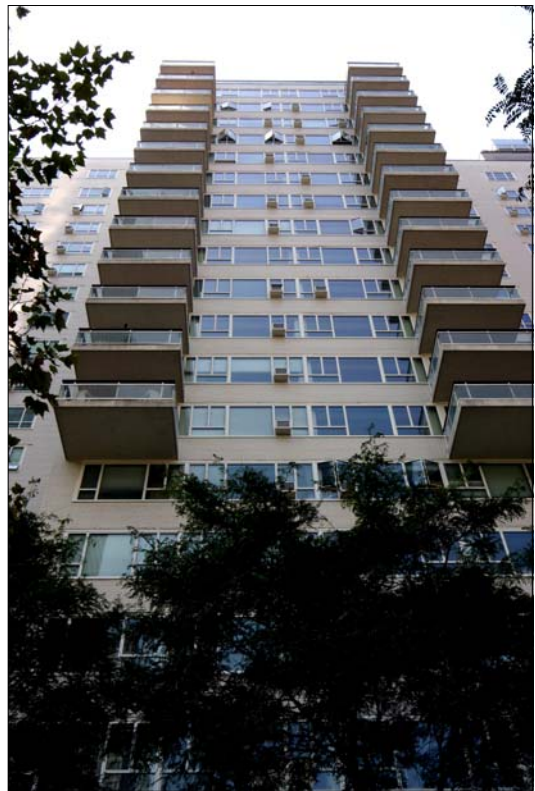
MANHATTAN HOUSE, 200 East 66th Street, Manhattan (aka 200-260 East 66th Street, 201-257 East 65th Street, 1241-1259 Second Avenue, 1111-1129 Third Avenue), Manhattan. Built 1947-51, Mayer & Whittlesey and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, associated architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1420, Lot 1.

On April 10, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of 200 East 66th Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Thirteen people spoke in favor of designation, including City Council member Daniel Garodnick, State Senator Liz Krueger, and representatives of State Assembly member Jonathan L. Bing, Docomomo US / New York Tri-State, the Historic Districts Council, Friends of the Upper East Side, Landmarks Conservancy, Modern Architecture Working Group, Municipal Art Society, as well as tenants in the building. The Commission has also received numerous letters in support of designation.

Summary

Manhattan House, an Upper East Side apartment and retail complex, was constructed between 1947 and 1951. Commissioned by the New York Life Insurance Company, it occupies an entire block, bounded by East 65th Street and East 66th Street, Second Avenue and Third Avenue. Designed by Mayer & Whittlesey and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, associated architects, this modern-style apartment house has as many as 21 floors and is notable for its impressive size, plan, massing and color. Considered by many writers to be the first white brick apartment building, it was also notable for being one of the first multiple dwellings in New York City to attempt “an indoor-outdoor synthesis” through the integration of large windows and deep projecting balconies, as well as landscaped driveways and a block-long rear garden enclosed by a low granite wall. Manhattan House generated considerable media attention and in 1952 received an award from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which described it as “extremely attractive in appearance and beautiful in detailing.” Future *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable also praised its design, commenting in 1960 that Manhattan House was “one of the best examples to date ... notable for its clean architectural shape, as well as for its superior execution in a highly competitive, speculative, building field.” Such accolades helped attract many prominent residents, including Benny Goodman, Grace Kelly, designer Florence Knoll and SOM architect Gordon Bunshaft, as well as a considerable number of architectural imitators. Few of the white brick buildings it inspired, however, could match the aesthetic standards set by Manhattan House and it remains, to this day, one of the most distinguished examples of housing built in New York City since the Second World War.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Manhattan House is an important early example of an apartment house shaped by the aesthetics of early twentieth-century European modernism. Though present in American circles by the 1930s, these ideas did not fully enter the mainstream until the late 1940s and 1950s. Considered by many writers to be the first white brick apartment building, it was also notable for being one of the first multiple dwellings in New York City to attempt “an indoor-outdoor synthesis” through the integration of large windows and projecting balconies, as well as landscaped driveways and a block-long rear garden. Built and managed by an important institutional client, the New York Life Insurance Company, Manhattan House changed the way apartment buildings were designed, influencing the plan and exterior treatment of subsequent structures throughout the metropolitan area, especially on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

New York Life Insurance Company¹

Manhattan House was built as an investment by the New York Life Insurance Company. Chartered in 1846 as the Nautilus Insurance Company, providing marine and fire insurance, the firm started to use its current name in 1849. Insurance companies have frequently used architecture to project an image of integrity and permanence to the public. Shortly after Equitable Life began construction of an impressive headquarters (demolished) on Broadway, between Pine Street and Cedar Street, New York Life built its headquarters at 346 Broadway, between Worth Street and Leonard Street. Later demolished when architects Stephen Decatur Hatch and McKim, Mead & White expanded the building during 1894-99, this structure was reportedly the first Manhattan office building to fill an entire block and served as the “home office” until 1928, when the company moved to 51 Madison Avenue, between East 26th Street and East 27th Street. Designed by Cass Gilbert, this neo-Renaissance style tower terminates in a memorable gilt pyramidal crown and is a designated New York City Landmark.

New York State first began to regulate the insurance business in 1859, placing restrictions on types of investments and what percentage of assets could be used. Real estate was perceived as risky and insurance companies were only allowed to build or purchase structures that were used to house their offices. In 1922, however, the law was modified and insurance companies were permitted to become real estate developers.² To limit risk and benefit low-income residents, maximum rents were controlled by the government and no more than ten per cent of each company’s assets could be invested. Though the law lapsed in 1926, it was renewed toward the end of the Depression, in 1938. At this time, rent controls were weakened and companies were allowed to own properties that were related to, or adjoined, their apartment buildings. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was the first firm to benefit from these changes, erecting 54 five-story walk-up apartment houses in Sunnyside, Queens, during 1922-24, and later, Parkchester, a 58-building complex in the Bronx, between 1938 and 1942.

During the 1940s and 1950s, thirteen American insurance companies built or purchased housing complexes. Most were located on the east coast of the United States, with the greatest number in New Jersey and highest amount of capital invested in New York State. These large-scale developments served the interests of both policy holders and the community. With generally an attractive rate of return, this type of investment also generated good will and positive publicity. Many were conceived for returning World War II veterans and most were rented to people of low or moderate means. Though only a small percentage of industry assets were used, by 1958 these properties were valued at \$500 million.

New York Life established a rental housing division in April 1946.³ Fresh Meadows, in eastern Queens, would be the first development, quickly followed by Stanworth, a smaller “home center” designed by Holden, McLaughlin & Associates in Princeton, New Jersey.

With the cessation of hostilities, the New York Life, in addition to making mortgage loans on real estate, was prepared to proceed with a long-range program of investing in housing developments which would be owned and managed directly by the Company. In embarking upon this new field of activity the Company believes that it can not only

render a real service to the public but also provide an investment for its funds which should prove both safe and remunerative.⁴

Otto L. Nelson, Jr. (1902-85), who served as a major general in the U. S. Army during the Second World War, was appointed vice president in charge of housing, with G. Harmon Gurney (1896-1985) as chief architect. Gurney, who began his career in the office of Warren & Wetmore, later worked on such projects as the Williamsburg Houses (a designated New York City Landmark) in Brooklyn. He joined New York Life in 1943 and planned Fresh Meadows, Queens, in association with Vorhees, Walker, Foley & Smith. Completed in 1949, this garden-type community provided housing for three thousand middle-income families.⁵

Site

New York Life acquired the land for Manhattan House at public auction in November 1946, about six months after establishing its rental housing division. Few complete blocks in midtown were available for development and the \$1.6 million paid in cash was described as modest.⁶ This part of the Upper East Side was a neighborhood in transition; though the Second Avenue elevated railway had been dismantled during the late 1930s, the Third Avenue elevated railway, running from South Ferry to the Bronx, continued to serve the area until 1955, five years after Manhattan House was completed.

Transportation, along with the creation of Central Park (begun 1857), played an important role in the development of the Upper East Side. Transit routes divided the area into distinct sections, separating the wealthy, who tended to live west of Park Avenue, from blocks of stables and working class tenement districts to the east. The blocks between Second and Third Avenues were particularly undesirable because since 1880 they had been sandwiched between two elevated railway lines. Manhattan House occupies a block where horse cars and trolleys had been stored since the 1860s. Designed in the Italianate style, this car barn was significantly expanded by the architect Henry J. Hardenbergh in the 1890s, adding additional stories, steep mansard roofs, and towers.⁷ Photographed by Berenice Abbott as part of her *Changing New York* series in 1936, the *New York Times* described it nostalgically, calling it an “East side transit landmark dating to Civil War days.”⁸ Demolition of this building began in August 1947 and was completed by summer 1948. Concerns about inflation and “acute” international unrest, however, caused New York Life officials to discuss delaying construction. Despite announcements that the vacant site was being prepared for use as a parking lot in August 1948, less than a year later, in April 1949, Manhattan House broke ground.⁹

Mayer & Whittlesey¹⁰

Two architectural firms, both experienced with large residential projects, collaborated on Manhattan House: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and Mayer & Whittlesey. According to SOM partner, Gordon Bunshaft (1909-1990), it was Mayer & Whittlesey that convinced New York Life to bid on the site, presenting officials with “some sketches conforming to the zoning in that part of the city.”¹¹ Albert Mayer (1898-1981) founded the firm in 1935, forming a partnership with Julian Hill Whittlesey (1905-1989). A graduate of Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Mayer studied civil engineering and came from a family of successful builders. He was a member of the Regional Planning Association and founded, with architect Henry Wright and critic Lewis Mumford, the Housing Study Guild, which led to the establishment of the United States Housing Authority in 1937. Whittlesey, a graduate of Yale University, worked as a consultant to the Resettlement Administration during the 1930s and later served as an advisor to the U. S. Public Housing Administration. In subsequent years, the firm was known under various names, including: Mayer, Whittlesey & (M. Milton) Glass; Whittlesey & (William J.) Conklin (1961); and after 1965, Whittlesey, Conklin & (James S.) Rossant. Notable residential commissions include Butterfield House (1959-62, part of the Greenwich Village Historic District), 37 West 12th Street, and the Premier (1960-63), close to Manhattan House, at 333 East 69th Street.

Mayer & Whittlesey were highly respected and the firm's work generated considerable praise, particularly the Thorneycroft Homes (1941) in Forest Hills, Queens, which won an award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and 240 Central Park South (1939-40, a designated New York City Landmark) in Manhattan, which Lewis Mumford described as the "finest in its class."¹² Mayer claimed that housing projects "were not just jobs, they represent a tremendous opportunity and challenge."¹³ Recognized as a leader in the planning field, as Manhattan House neared completion, he was invited to plan the capital of Punjab, named Chandigarh, in India. Writing about the project, which the firm did not ultimately execute, Mayer urged his colleagues to challenge tradition, so that "we are free to formulate ideas and objectives as clearly and boldly as our creative spirit permits."¹⁴

In August 1947, the *New York Times* reported that a contract had been awarded to both Mayer & Whittlesey and SOM. In later interviews, Bunshaft tried to diminish Mayer & Whittlesey's contribution, asserting they weren't housing experts and that *New York Life* wasn't "excited about their kind of architecture."¹⁵ This hardly seems possible; not only did they convince the client to acquire the site and play a key role in the project's gestation, but Manhattan House shares many features with 40 Central Park South, between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue, a 22-story reinforced concrete apartment building designed by Mayer & Whittlesey in 1940-41. As modern in appearance as any work built by SOM up until this time, it has a white (and grey) brick facade, a glass-walled lobby, and similar, though shallow, glazed balconies.

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Few firms have been as closely associated with the development and evolution of modern architecture as SOM. Founded in Chicago by Louis Skidmore, Sr. (1897-1962) and Nathaniel Owings (1903-1984) in 1930, Skidmore opened a New York office in 1937 and by 1939 was on a list of firms that were approved to design public housing. The first structures Skidmore and Owings (with John Moss) completed in New York City were part of the 1939 World's Fair in Queens: the Venezuelan Pavilion, the Gas Exhibits Building, and Continental Baking Company Building. Executed with walls of transparent glass, these temporary structures anticipated the minimalist aesthetic -- commonly known as the International Style -- which SOM would excel at during subsequent decades. Many of the firm's earliest works in New York City were commissioned by public agencies and institutions: the Abraham Lincoln Houses (with Vertner Tandy, 1945-48), a large red brick public housing complex in East Harlem; Veteran's Administration Hospital (1946-50) a slab-like tower in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn; and New York University Medical Center on First Avenue (begun 1946), a multi-building complex between East 30th Street and East 34th Street, in Manhattan.¹⁶ Though lacking the precision and elegance that characterize SOM's later work, these large projects, which are notable for their modern aesthetic, low site coverage, and landscaping, helped prepare the partners for on large commissions like Manhattan House.

Bunshaft joined SOM in 1937, after brief periods working with designer William Teague and architect Edward Durrell Stone. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he was awarded a Rotch Fellowship in 1935 and traveled extensively in Europe during 1935-37, viewing both historic and modern works. During the Second World War, he served in the Army Signal Corps and the Corps of Engineers. In Paris, he socialized with the prominent French architects Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier. Bunshaft rejoined the SOM office in 1946 and was promoted to full partner in 1949.

In 1950, SOM was described as the "largest group of modern architects in America," with nine partners and 322 employees.¹⁷ Office records identify Skidmore as the partner in charge of Manhattan House, working both with J. Walter Severinghaus (1905-87) and Bunshaft. *Architectural Forum*, however, identified Bunshaft as being "in charge of the design."¹⁸ His biographer, Carol Herselle Krinsky wrote that "SOM's staff, including Bunshaft and John M. Johansen"¹⁹ was responsible for the general scheme. In describing the firm's collaboration with Mayer & Whittlesey, he recalled:

We proceeded to work together. The first thing we did was start by working apart. We decided that we would like to develop a scheme of our own . . . I made the presentation . . . I gave other facts and what not and it was approved . . . It was obvious we had the right

scheme. After that we took over all the design and Mayer & Whittlesey did the working drawings.²⁰

SOM is also likely to have designed and decorated the public interiors (not part of the designation) which, in some ways, resemble the lobby at Lever House (1950-52, a designated New York City Landmark) at 390 Park Avenue.²¹

Bunshaft would play a central role in the SOM's success and he remained with the New York office the rest of his career, a total of forty-two years. He was an exceptional designer; major corporate buildings by him, or in which he was the partner in charge, include: Lever House, Chase Manhattan Plaza (1956-61), the Pepsi-Cola Building (1958-60, a designated New York City Landmark), and 9 West 57th Street (1974-75). Bunshaft was also responsible for the addition to the Albright Knox Art Gallery (1962) in Buffalo, the Beinecke Rare Book Library (1963) at Yale University in New Haven, and the Hirshhorn Museum (1969-74) on the Mall in Washington, D. C. In 1988, he was awarded the Pritzker Prize, one of the architecture field's highest honors.

Construction of Manhattan House

Construction began in April 1949. Cauldwell-Wingate Company served as the general contractor. Founded by W. S. Faddis and others in 1910, this firm erected many prominent buildings in New York City, including the Candler Building (1914), Temple Emanu-el (1927-29, part of the Upper East Side Historic District), and the Central Building of the Brooklyn Public Library (1940, a designated New York City Landmark). Charles Mayer (1880-1980), Albert's brother, was the structural engineer. Jaros, Baum & Bolles, who also worked on Lever House, served as mechanical engineer. Richard T. Geoghegan was chief construction engineer and the Otis Elevator Company manufactured and installed fifteen elevators. At the time, the estimated budget was between \$11 and \$14 million. The pouring of the slab concrete floors commenced in August 1949 and in May 1950 the "topping out ceremonies" took place. The following month, model apartments, decorated with 18th century furnishings chosen by the staff of the B. Altman department store, went on display.²² The first apartments were occupied in October 1950, and the rest were completed in early 1951.

The Plan

Manhattan House represented a new start for blocks east of Third Avenue in this section of the Upper East Side. Early photographs depict it in relative isolation, standing beside an aging Third Avenue elevated railway. The apartment tower, oriented east to west, rises at the center of the block, with the two main entrances facing north, toward East 66th Street. Low-rise retail structures adjoin the building on Second Avenue and Third Avenue. The complex covers approximately 40 per cent of the lot, an amount similar to that adopted by Mayer & Whittlesey for 240 Central Park South. The footprint takes the form of a crenellated slab or a modified H-plan, with short wings extending from a continuous spine. The five crossings, where the wings intersect with the spine, enclose elevators and stairs.

This arrangement, which eliminated the dark courtyards found in most tenements and even luxury housing, probably had its origins in public schools. Introduced in 1898 by superintendent of school buildings C. B. J. Snyder, the H-plan permitted more varied floor plans, as well as greater exposure to light and air. Though the goals were similar to the high-rise slab-blocks that were part of low-cost housing schemes promoted by the European architects Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius in the 1920s, in general, Americans favored more complicated footprints. This can be seen in the Williamsburg Houses (1935-38), a low-scale project built by the Federal Public Works Administration and the New York Housing Authority; Parkchester (1938-42) in the Bronx; and Stuyvesant Town (1943-49) in Manhattan – the latter two developments erected by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Situated in park-like settings, most buildings in these developments incorporate small projecting wings that intersect with longer, slab-like, spines.²³

New York Life also negotiated an agreement to widen East 66th Street. By conveying a 40-foot-wide strip of land along the north edge of the block to the city, two additional lanes of traffic were

created. The land between the lanes was then planted with trees and has a granite block wall similar to that which encloses the rear garden along East 65th Street. This gift not only allowed the separation of local and through traffic but because street width determined the height of buildings that adjoin it, Mayer & Whittlesey and SOM were able to design a taller, more uniform, structure. Without such an agreement it seems likely that Manhattan House would have had an irregular profile, like most apartment buildings constructed before 1960.

Restrictions on what insurance companies could invest in were relaxed in 1938, permitting New York Life to purchase sites that could be used as “accommodations for related service.”²⁴ This was important strategically and Otto L. Nelson later commented: “you have to have an area that is sufficiently large so that you can control your neighborhood.”²⁵ To accomplish this, they tried to purchase and develop all block fronts that adjoin Manhattan House. In 1950, architect Carlisle Johnson was hired to renovate ten small apartment buildings at 205-227 East 66th Street, between Second Avenue and Third Avenue, and in 1952 Fellheimer & Wagner built a low-rise commercial strip (demolished) on the east side of Second Avenue, between East 65th Street and East 66th Street. This block front catered to residents, with a branch of the Corn Exchange Bank and the Beekman Cinema. They also owned part of the block to the west, including tenements at 1116-1118 Third Avenue. The height of these properties were maintained or deliberately kept low, protecting the views from most apartments.²⁶

Design

Among various characteristics that made Manhattan House new was the reductive treatment of the façade. Clad with brick, laid with alternating stretchers and headers, the color chosen is closest to white, though a significant number of writers have described it as grey or light grey. The *Architectural Record* wrote “the structure will be finished in a light self-washing glazed brick which will reflect a maximum amount of sunlight to the benefit of the surrounding area.”²⁷ The palette, however, was not entirely new. At the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893, often called the “White City,” most pavilions were painted a whitish color, which encouraged the rise of the City Beautiful movement, the era when many prominent structures in New York City were clad with light-colored materials, such as limestone, white marble, and white brick. Early buildings that used white brick on the exterior include: the Plaza Hotel (1907, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior), the Equitable Insurance Company Building (1915, a designated New York City Landmark), the Chrysler Building (1930, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior), and New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center (1927-33).²⁸

What sets Manhattan House apart from these examples is the absence of traditional ornament. This kind of purity is often associated with the finest works of European modernism, particularly designs by Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, who strongly influenced Bunshaft and SOM.²⁹ The industrial revolution transformed how structures were built, but it was not until the early twentieth century that architectural aesthetics began to change. European architects maintained that buildings should express their historic moment. They produced elegant works that were strikingly minimal, with flat roofs, smooth walls, and large expanses of glass. Some of the earliest works in New York City to reflect these ideas were designed by the architect William Lescaze. Of particular note is the Edward and Dorothy Norman House (1940-41, part of the Upper East Side Historic District). Located several blocks from Manhattan House, at 124 East 70th Street, between Park Avenue and Madison Avenue, it was the city’s first modern style residence clad only in white brick.³⁰

Manhattan House has been compared to Le Corbusier’s *Unite d’Habitation* (1947-52), an apartment house that was celebrated in the late 1940s as a well-designed response to the European housing crisis. Though built on a similar scale with reinforced concrete, Manhattan House has a much simpler, smoother, and whiter appearance, in some ways closer to works by Mies than late Le Corbusier. His influence is strongly felt at the base, where the block-long glazed lobby has polished marble walls, stainless steel elevator banks, and originally, leather furniture designed by the German architect.

Beyond the brick walls, it was glass that had the greatest impact on the building’s appearance. The lobby has floor-to-ceiling plate glass walls, permitting views inside and toward the rear garden.³¹ In

addition, when weather permitted, the walls could slide open, merging the two spaces into one. Various types of steel casement windows, painted white, were used on the residential floors. Said by one writer to be “40% larger than average,” some windows were of conventional shape, while others were arranged in ribbon-like groups, affording tenants wider, almost panoramic, views.³² The top floor was designed to be a roof garden/solarium, with a deep terrace (on both sides) that runs, like the lobby, the full length of the building. The exterior walls, unlike the floors below, were clad with yellow brick (similar to the rear wall of the elevator lobby in Lever House) and the interior rooms have large windows that face north and south.

The balconies, located above the sixth floor, are especially prominent. Arranged singly, or in pairs, they were an impressive feat of engineering and were among the first in New York City to project out without visible means of support. According to *Architectural Forum*, this amenity added \$750 to the cost of constructing each unit.³³ Like a private garden or patio, the balconies are accessed through glass doors and adjoin the living rooms or dining areas. They are unusually spacious and measure as large as ninety square feet.³⁴ Enclosed with wire glass and thin white metal framing, the transparent parapets were designed to minimize visual interference.

Manhattan House rises in open space; to the east and west it is flanked by low retail buildings, and to the north and south, gardens. Both Mayer & Whittlesey and SOM pioneered the integration of such amenities. For instance, both 240 Central Park South and 40 Central Park South have private courtyards, and New York University Medical Center was planned so that patients and visitors arrive along a curving driveway. Planted with trees, bushes and ivy, the approach to Manhattan House, as well as the rear garden, is credited to SOM landscape architect Joanna Diman.³⁵ These features enhance privacy, and along East 66th Street, unify and conceal the building’s sloping site. Though some earlier examples, like River House (Bottomley, Wagner & White, 1931), 435 East 52nd Street, had landscaped courtyards or driveways, Manhattan House is unusual because these features were placed in full view. Along East 65th Street, the granite wall was kept relatively low, permitting glimpses into the long and shallow garden, which could be entered from the building or street, and traversed along curving paths, possibly of crab orchard stone, like that used in the outdoor spaces of Rockefeller Center, or in the covered passages of 666 Fifth Avenue (now significantly altered). Such natural materials contrast sharply with white brick used to clad Manhattan House. The garden’s west end was originally leased to a branch of the Longchamps restaurant chain. Guests could view the landscape through a two-story glass wall, or “in fair weather,” dine outdoors.³⁶

Reception

The planning, construction, and completion of Manhattan House attracted considerable media attention. Much of what was written commented on the building’s modern appearance and the way that the design blurred distinctions between inside and out. In 1948 James L. Holton, editor of the *World Telegram*, excitedly described the building and the many “firsts” it would pioneer. He quoted real estate broker (and New York Life advisor) James Felt, who, in terms of importance, called it “the new Rockefeller Center.”³⁷ The *Architectural Record* was similarly enthusiastic. In February 1948, one writer commented that “seldom” had the apartment building “been approached with as fresh an eye” and an article published a month after construction began, in May 1949, described it as attempting “an indoor-outdoor synthesis hitherto found mostly in modern country homes.”³⁸ In 1952, *Architectural Forum* described Manhattan House as “a new concept in urban living . . . the biggest, whitest, and most interesting postwar mountain of cliff dwellings.”³⁹ Articles appeared in the *New York Times*, as well, from the ground breaking to the pouring of the concrete floors and the arrival of the first tenants. Though no critical analysis was published, various news pieces described the building as “luxurious” and “glamorous.”

Architecture critic Lewis Mumford published the longest and closest analysis of Manhattan House in November 1951.⁴⁰ Certain aspects were praised, such as the floor plans and inclusion of the parking garage, but more often than not, he expressed disappointment. Perhaps this was because of his long association with Mayer, who he knew from the Regional Planning Association and the Housing

Study Guild, but also because Mumford had been a great admirer of Mayer & Whittlesey's design for 240 Central Park South and New York Life's development in Fresh Meadows, Queens. Though he described Manhattan House as "handsome," he maintained the scale was too large and doubted the "facades, impeccable when the left the drawing boards of the architects" would retain their "purity and refinement." He also feared that the "generously proportioned" balconies would not be used and that over time the marvelous views would be lost. In comparison with other apartment buildings, he said it was "considerably better" but not nearly enough.

Joseph Henry Abel, a contributor to *Forms and Function of Twentieth Century Architecture*, edited by Talbot Hamlin and published in 1952, praised the general strategy adopted at Manhattan House.⁴¹ He admired the building's "clean, elegant and inviting design," as well as the use of projecting wings and balconies, which "cut down the scale of the structure to human proportions." Abel found red brick to be "depressing" and contended that light-colored brick could "greatly alleviate the feeling of overwhelming mass." Like many contemporary advocates for modern architecture, he discouraged architects from using applied ornament, suggesting that they, instead, achieve interest through "a careful study of fenestration and glass." Such characteristics were becoming increasingly common by the early 1950s, but Manhattan House stood out for incorporating so many of these ideas in a single project.

In May 1952 the New York Chapter of the AIA selected Manhattan House as the finest apartment building constructed in New York during the past two years. The awards committee described it as:

. . . imposing in size, extremely attractive in appearance and beautiful in detailing and materials . . . unlike most buildings inspected, Manhattan House, shares the outdoor space so often contained within interior courtyards with the surrounding neighborhoods.⁴²

Ada Louise Huxtable, who later served as architecture critic for the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, offered one of the most positive assessments in 1961. In a series of walking tours on modern architecture, prepared for the Museum of Modern Art and the Municipal Art Society, she lamented that "New York has set few standards in the field of apartment house design." Manhattan House was, however, a rare exception. She called it "one of the best examples to date . . . notable for its clean architectural shape, as well as for its superior execution in a highly competitive, speculative building field."⁴³

Tenants

At time of completion, Manhattan House was fully rented. The New York Life prospectus described the building as:

. . . located in the heart of the Upper East Side, introduces a new concept of modern living. Occupying an entire city block, this distinguished twenty-story residence is outstanding in plan, construction and equipment. Landscaped gardens, lawns and walks assure abundant light and air; private driveways lead to covered and protected lobby entrances.⁴⁴

There were originally 581 apartments and six medical suites. Approximately ninety per cent of the units had corner exposures or through ventilation. Monthly rents ranged from \$95 for two rooms, with a living room, kitchen, dressing room and bath, to \$625 for seven rooms, with three baths, three balconies, and a maid's room. Rents were described as in the "upper moderate brackets" and were considerably higher than those charged in New York Life's recently-completed project at Fresh Meadows.⁴⁵ Many tenants had servants; there were a total of 60 maid's rooms, including 50 in the apartments, and 10 grouped together in a central suite.

The building's architect, Bunshaft, was one of the first tenants and he lived here for the rest of his life. He and his wife Nina Bunshaft relocated from an apartment in Greenwich Village, initially occupying a one-bedroom unit overlooking Second Avenue. In later years, they moved to the "middle" of the building and alterations to the unit were described by *Interiors* magazine. Other members of the design field who kept apartments in the building included Florence Knoll, of Knoll Associates, and

Elizabeth Potts, founder of the American Institute of Interior Designers. James Felt, who served as consultant to *New York Life* and later became chairman of the City Planning Commission, was a long-time tenant, as was Frank Hardart, co-founder of the Automat restaurant chain, and New York State Governor Hugh Carey. At least two major entertainers lived in Manhattan House: actress Grace Kelly during the early 1950s⁴⁶ and jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman. In 1960, the *New York Times* described a “private jam” for forty guests in the building’s solarium, featuring, among others, Goodman, drummer Gene Krupa, pianist Teddy Wilson, and saxophonist Phumiphol Aduldet, King of Thailand. Goodman died in his apartment in 1986.⁴⁷

Influence and Reputation

Manhattan House is often said to be the first white brick apartment house. It helped make white brick a fashionable material and balconies became a predictable, if not completely useful, amenity in subsequent buildings, especially on the Upper East Side. For the next decade and a half, numerous Manhattan apartment buildings would incorporate similar materials, private driveways, and landscaped gardens. A few notable examples include: 2 Fifth Avenue (Emery Roth & Sons, 1952); Washington Square Village (S. J. Kessler & Sons, 1956-58); Stewart House (Sylvan & Robert Bien, 1959-60) at 70 East 10th Street; Imperial House (Emery Roth & Sons, 1960) at 150 East 69th Street; 215 East 68th Street (Emery Roth & Sons, 1959-62); and 500 East 77th Street (1962). Like Manhattan House, many had underground garages and low-rise retail structures.

In terms of planning, Manhattan House was also influential. Henry S. Churchill, an architect and city planner, was a strong critic of the 1916 “setback” zoning code and the impact that economics had on aesthetics. As an advocate for change, he published “New York Rezoned” in 1951, an essay that urged public officials to study recent residential projects that placed people above profits. He praised the “sound” principles adopted by the architects at Manhattan House (and Fresh Meadows) and the way they were able to synthesize social, economic, and architectural values. Two photographs of the complex were reproduced on a single page, an aerial view, and a view of the garden. These images demonstrated the effect that a modified zoning code – years before the Seagram Building and the 1960 zoning resolution – might have on future structures.⁴⁸

Despite frequent criticism that Manhattan House was responsible for a general decline in apartment house design, it has always remained high on the list of significant pre- and post-war multiple dwellings in New York City. All editions of the *AIA Guide to New York City* have found it to be important; the authors compared it to work by Le Corbusier, saying that because of subtle aesthetic decisions, the architects “raised this block above its coarse new neighbors.”⁴⁹ In 1979, *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote that “in some ways it remains the best” among apartment houses built in New York City since the Second World War. He also wondered whether it should be held responsible for the lesser buildings that followed it.⁵⁰ That same year, John Tauranac included it in *Essential New York: A Guide to the History and Architecture of Manhattan’s Important Buildings, Parks and Bridges*. He maintained it was “more than just modern looking” but pioneered innovative construction techniques.⁵¹ Roger Starr, writing about lobbies in the *New York Times* in 1983, singled it out as an “exception in the postwar” period and as “one of the first that used glass walls on both sides to give views through the building to the private garden beyond.”⁵²

Recent History

New York Life began replacing the original casement windows in early 1982. In a *New York Times* article on their aesthetic value, Goldberger described them as “expansive and gracious . . . painted white to contrast subtly with soft grey brick of the façade.” He described the character of the 6,800 replacements as “appalling” and asked if Manhattan House might, in fact, deserve landmark status. The building, he wrote, was:

. . . now past 30 years of age, the point at which the Landmarks Preservation Commission is legally entitled to consider landmark designation. It is shocking to think of a building

erected as early as 1950 as being in need of official landmark protection, but that surely seems to be the case here.⁵³

Following the building's sale by New York Life to N. Richard Kalikow and Jeremiah O'Connor Jr. in 2005, the windows were once again replaced. Installed under the supervision of architect Roger Duffy, of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the new windows are now thinner and white, more closely resembling the originals.

Description

A mixed-use complex, Manhattan House consists of a 21-story apartment house, an underground parking garage, and two groups of stores. It occupies the entire block, bordered by East 66th Street, Second Avenue, East 65th Street, and Third Avenue. Oriented from east to west, the apartment tower is located near the center of the block. The two entrances are set back from 66th Street and are reached by sloping sidewalks and driveways. Along most of 65th Street is a walled, private garden. Single-story retail structures adjoin the building along Second Avenue and Third Avenue. Faced in glazed white brick, it takes the form of a modified H plan, resembling a crenellated slab. The north and south facades are divided into ten sections. The projecting sections, above the fifth story, incorporate pairs of glass balconies. Aligned with the glass walls of the lobby, the recessed sections feature continuous ribbon-like windows, as well as smaller windows. The east and west façades incorporate various types of windows, with a single row of glass balconies at the north end. None of the aluminum windows are historic and most date from 2006. The 20th story has a small setback that is used as a terrace, enclosed by continuous glass walls. The 21st story or roof garden, contains a long narrow structure that was originally called the solarium. Clad, in part, with glazed yellow bricks, it is flanked by doors and large windows, free-standing lally columns, and deep terraces with waist-high parapets that extend almost the full length of the building. Each of the ten wings has a rectangular chimney stack, clad with white brick. Many of these features are difficult to see from the street.

The two main entrances face north, toward **East 66th Street**. Concrete driveways and sidewalks curve toward and beneath the building. Opposite glass and aluminum framed doors, both driveways are illuminated by historic curving light boxes with aluminum sides. Additional recessed lights are between the cast concrete pillars, which rest on slim terrazzo bases. In front of the pillars, to the north, and on both sides of each entrance, are bushes, trees, ivy, and non-historic iron fencing. East of the east entrance is a doctor's office, reached by stairs, and a probably non-historic ramp. The tiered vinyl awning is also non-historic. At the east end of 66th Street is the north side of the northernmost Second Avenue storefront. Faced with glazed rectangular panels of concrete, it adjoins a low granite planting bed with non-historic ironwork. The aluminum cornice and neon sign are likely original. A similar planting bed and panels are located close to the corner of Third Avenue. Iron tube fencing, likely original, extends down from the rear of the Third Avenue storefront toward the west entrance. West of this entrance stands an aluminum flagpole.

The **Second Avenue** storefronts are part of the podium from which the apartment tower rises. These storefronts contain some historic materials, mainly thin aluminum mullions and door frames. Glazed concrete panels, near the middle of block, appear to be original. At the east end of **East 65th Street**, set back below the roof, is the loading dock, a service entrance, and the entrance to the garage. The signage is not historic. A textured granite block wall (with non-historic ironwork) meets the left edge of the garage entrance and runs the full length of the block, diminishing in height as it nears the rear of the Third Avenue storefronts. From East 65th Street, the garden and much of the building's south façade is visible, allowing views of the plantings, the stone paving, as well as inside and through the lobby. At mid block, there is a break in the wall, with a non-historic metal gate, that leads to the garden. The black metal pole lighting fixtures are not historic, but are probably similar to the originals. Near the center of the garden, close to the wall, is a white brick ventilation tower. Beside the garage, at the east end, is a large metal air conditioning unit. At the west end of the block is a non-historic white stucco gate, with non-historic metalwork, that leads to stairs, flanked by stucco walls, that descend to the rear of the Third

Avenue storefronts, now a doctor's office. Originally a two-level restaurant, the outdoor terrace has been covered with non-historic materials, but the west wall (above it) appears original, except for some of the tinted glass. The west end of East 65th Street, near the corner, as well as the storefronts that adjoin it, are not historic.

Report researched and written by
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Research Department

NOTES

¹ LPC, *New York Life Insurance Company Building Designation Report*, prepared by Donald Presa (LP-2067), (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2000). According to records at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library, for a brief period in the 1840s Nautilus insured the lives of 339 negro slaves in Maryland and Virginia. It stopped issuing such policies in 1848. See "Editorial Observer; Slaves in the Family: One Generation's Shame is Another's Revelation," *New York Times* (June 13, 2003), viewed online.

² Robert E. Schultz, *Life Insurance Housing Projects* (S. S. Huebner Foundation for Insurance Education, 1956).

³ "New York Life Expands Housing Program; Buys in Princeton," *New York Times* (April 14, 1946), 151; "Forms Housing Division," *New York Times* (May 8, 1946), 51.

⁴ *New York Life Annual Report for 1946*, 12. Stanworth had 159 garden-type apartments on 17 acres. Fresh Meadows had 3,000 apartments.

⁵ Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (Columbia University Press, 1990), 282.

⁶ "Third Avenue Line Accepts All but One Bid On Nine Parcels in Car Barn Auction," *New York Times* (November 27, 1946), 39.

⁷ Information on the car barn is from a 1946 letter to Virginia Paige at SOM from T. J. Crocket, of Surface Transportation Systems, files, SOM. Also see "Bernice Abbott: Third Avenue Car Barns," last viewed at <http://www.mcny.org/collections/abbott>

⁸ "New York Life to Raze 3d Ave. Car barn," *New York Times*, (August 16, 1947), 2.

⁹ "Old Car-Barn Site To Be Parking Lot," *New York Times* (August 20, 1948), 19; "New York Life To Build 19-Story Housing," *New York Times* (April 5, 1949), 37.

¹⁰ This section is based mainly on LPC, *240 Central Park West Designation Report*, prepared by Jay Shockley (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2002). Also see Robert A. M. Stern et al, *New York 1960* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 840-842.

¹¹ Interview (1989) with Gordon Bunshaft, 152, last viewed at <http://www.artic.edu/aic/libraries/caohp/bunshaft.html>.

¹² Quoted in *240 Central Park West Designation Report*, 6.

¹³ Albert Mayer, "What Does the Architect Know of Housing?" *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (June 1950), 276

¹⁴ Albert Mayer, "The New Capital of the Punjab," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (October 1950), 166. Also see "Architect's Dream," *Time* (June 19, 1950), last viewed at <http://time.com>. The complex was later designed by Le Corbusier.

¹⁵ Interview with Gordon Bunshaft (1989), last viewed at <http://www.artic.edu/aic/libraries/caohp/bunshaft.html>

¹⁶ Designed by Robert W. Cutler (1905-93) and Bunshaft, the 11-acre hospital complex was quite similar to Manhattan House, with 16 and 20-story slab-like towers, brick facades, concrete floors, and off-street landscaped drives. "NYU Bellevue Hospital," *Architectural Forum* (May 1949), 59.

¹⁷ Aline B. Louchheim, "Architecture Of and For Our Day," *New York Times* (September 24, 1950), X9.

¹⁸ Severinghaus worked at SOM from 1938 to 1975. He became a partner in 1949 and managed construction of Chase Manhattan Plaza, completed 1961. "J. Walter Severinghaus, 88, Former Architect," *New York Times*, (October 20, 1987), viewed online; *Architectural Forum*, (July 1952), 148.

¹⁹ Johansen, trained at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, worked briefly for SOM in the mid-1940s, establishing his own firm in 1948. Major works by the architect include his own house (1950) in New Canaan, Connecticut, and the Morris Mechanical Theater (1967), later known as the Mummer's Theater, in Oklahoma City.

²⁰ Bunshaft Interview, 154.

²¹ Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill* (New York and London: Architectural History Foundation/MIT Press, 1988), 14.

²² "Top Out" Manhattan House," *New York Times* (May 26, 1950), 47; "2 Model Apartments Go on Display Today," *New York Times* (June 16, 1950), 30.

²³ Plunz, 182-192.

²⁴ *Life Insurance Housing*, 8.

²⁵ "Apartment Roundtable: What Price Urban Living," *Architectural Forum*, (March 1964), 85.

²⁶ Christopher Gray, "Apartment Block That Towered Over Its Neighbors," *New York Times* (April 12, 1998), RE5,

²⁷ *Architectural Record*, 107.

²⁸ In 1901 the *New York Observer* reported that the "New Atlantic Insurance Building" at 49-51 Wall Street (demolished) had an 11-story shaft of white brick. *New York Observer and Chronicle* (August 8, 1901), 184.

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- ²⁹ Le Corbusier was a prominent figure in New York City after the Second World War. There was an exhibition of his work at Rockefeller Center in 1945 and he was a member of the international team that designed the United Nations. At least two of his books were translated into English during this period: *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1947) and *New World of Space* (1948).
- ³⁰ The Marianne Boesky Gallery at 535 West 24th Street is a recent building with a white brick façade. It was designed by architect Deborah Berke in 2005-6. Also see James Collins, "The White Problem," *New Yorker* (February 15, 1999), 39-42.
- ³¹ "Lobbies," *Progressive Architecture* (November 1952), 124.
- ³² Rufus Jarman, "The Curious Ways of Manhattan Cliff Dwellers," *Saturday Evening Post*, clipping, no date, possibly April 1952, 114, files, SOM.
- ³³ *Architectural Forum* (July 1952), 148.
- ³⁴ The balconies were built in three sizes, measuring 6-9" by 10-3", 6-9" by 13-8", and 6-8" by 9 feet.
- ³⁵ Krinsky, 14.
- ³⁶ *New York Times* (August 6, 1950), viewed online.
- ³⁷ *World Telegram*, no date, 29, files, SOM.
- ³⁸ "Apartments" *Architectural Record* (February 1948); "Manhattan House Replaces Old Car Barns" *Architectural Record* (May 1949), 106.
- ³⁹ *Architectural Forum* (July 1952), 141.
- ⁴⁰ Lewis Mumford, "High, White, and Handsome," *New Yorker* (November 17, 1951), 165.
- ⁴¹ Joseph Henry Abel, "The Apartment House," *Forms and Function in Twentieth Century Architecture*, edited by Talbot Hamlin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 3: 73-90.
- ⁴² "Manhattan House Called Outstanding," *New York Times*, (May 14, 1952), 46. At the ceremony, Albert Mayer accepted the award, representing SOM.
- ⁴³ Ada Louise Huxtable, *Four Walking Tours of Modern Architecture in New York City* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art and the Municipal Art Society of New York, 1961), 62-63.
- ⁴⁴ *Prospectus for Manhattan House*, c. 1949, files, SOM.
- ⁴⁵ "New York Life to Build 19-Story Housing," *New York Times* (April 5, 1949), 37.
- ⁴⁶ Kelly's father, John B. Kelly, of Philadelphia, manufactured bricks and reportedly was "hired [by New York Life] as a construction contractor to do the brickwork and put up the distinctive white walls." See "The Kelly Connection," *New York Times* (October 28, 2007), viewed online.
- ⁴⁷ "The King Plays For Two Hours," *New York Times* (July 6, 1960), 12.
- ⁴⁸ Henry S. Churchill, "New York Rezoned," *Magazine of Art* (December 1951), 326-331. The photos are on page 329.

⁴⁹ Norval White and Elliot Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000, 4th edition), 439.

⁵⁰ Paul Goldberger, "Top Postwar Apartment Buildings," *New York Times* (September 20, 1979), C1. As recently as 2006, he said that Manhattan House was "first of that breed and still the finest." See "At Home in the Crystal Palace," *Business Week*, April 4, 2006, viewed online.

⁵¹ John Tauranac, *Essential New York: A Guide to the History and Architecture of Manhattan's Important Buildings, Parks and Bridges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 193

⁵² Roger Starr, "Apartment Lobbies: A Chronicle of Taste," *New York Times* (January 6, 1983), c1.

⁵³ Paul Goldberger, "Design Notebook: Windows are crucial to the urban façade," *New York Times* (January 14, 1982), c6. In 1996, the Landmarks Conservancy sponsored a lecture in which architect/historian Robert A. M. Stern included Manhattan House on a list (also known as the "Stern 35") of modern buildings that he deemed worthy of designation. The Friends of the Upper East Side also included Manhattan House in the 2001 exhibition and catalogue of "Modern Architecture and the Upper East Side: Landmarks of the Future" at the New York School of Interior Design.

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 Manhattan House 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, Manhattan House was built between 1947 and 1951; that it was commissioned and managed by the New York Life Insurance Company and occupies an entire block on Manhattan's Upper East Side; that it was designed by Mayer & Whittlesey and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, associated architects; that this modern-style apartment building has as many as 21 floors and is notable for its impressive size, plan, massing, and color; that it is considered by many writers to be the first white brick apartment building; that it was also one of the first multiple dwellings in New York City to attempt an "indoor-outdoor synthesis" through the integration of large windows and projecting balconies, as well as landscaped driveways and a block-long rear garden; that Manhattan House generated considerable media attention and received an award from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; that the prominent architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called it "one of the best examples to date . . . notable for its clean architectural shape, as well as for its superior execution in a highly competitive, speculative, building field"; that such accolades helped attract many well-known residents, including Benny Goodman, Grace Kelly, designer Florence Knoll and SOM architect Gordon Bunshaft, as well as numerous architectural imitators; and that it remains one of the most distinguished examples of housing built in New York City since the mid-20th century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of 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 Manhattan House, 200 East 66th Street (aka 200-260 East 66th Street, 201-257 East 65th Street, 1241-1259 Second Avenue, 1111-1129 Third Avenue), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1420, Lot 1, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Diana Chapin, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore,

Magery H. Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



Manhattan House
Third Avenue, view east along East 66th Street
Photo: Carl Forster



East 66th Street, west entrance, view east
Photo: Carl Forster



Entrance, Professional office, 232 East 66th Street
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



Entrance, East 66th Street
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



East 66th Street, east entrance, view west
Photo: Carl Forster



Second Avenue, view west along East 66th Street
Photo: Carl Forster



Storefront, corner of Second Avenue and East 66th Street, view south
Photo: Carl Forster



Second Avenue storefronts, view south
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



Second Avenue, view west along East 65th Street
Photo: Carl Forster



Storefront, corner of Second Avenue and East 65th Street
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



Garden, view east
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



Garden, view from East 65th Street sidewalk
Photo: Carl Forster



Wall, East 65th Street, view northwest
Photo: Carl Forster



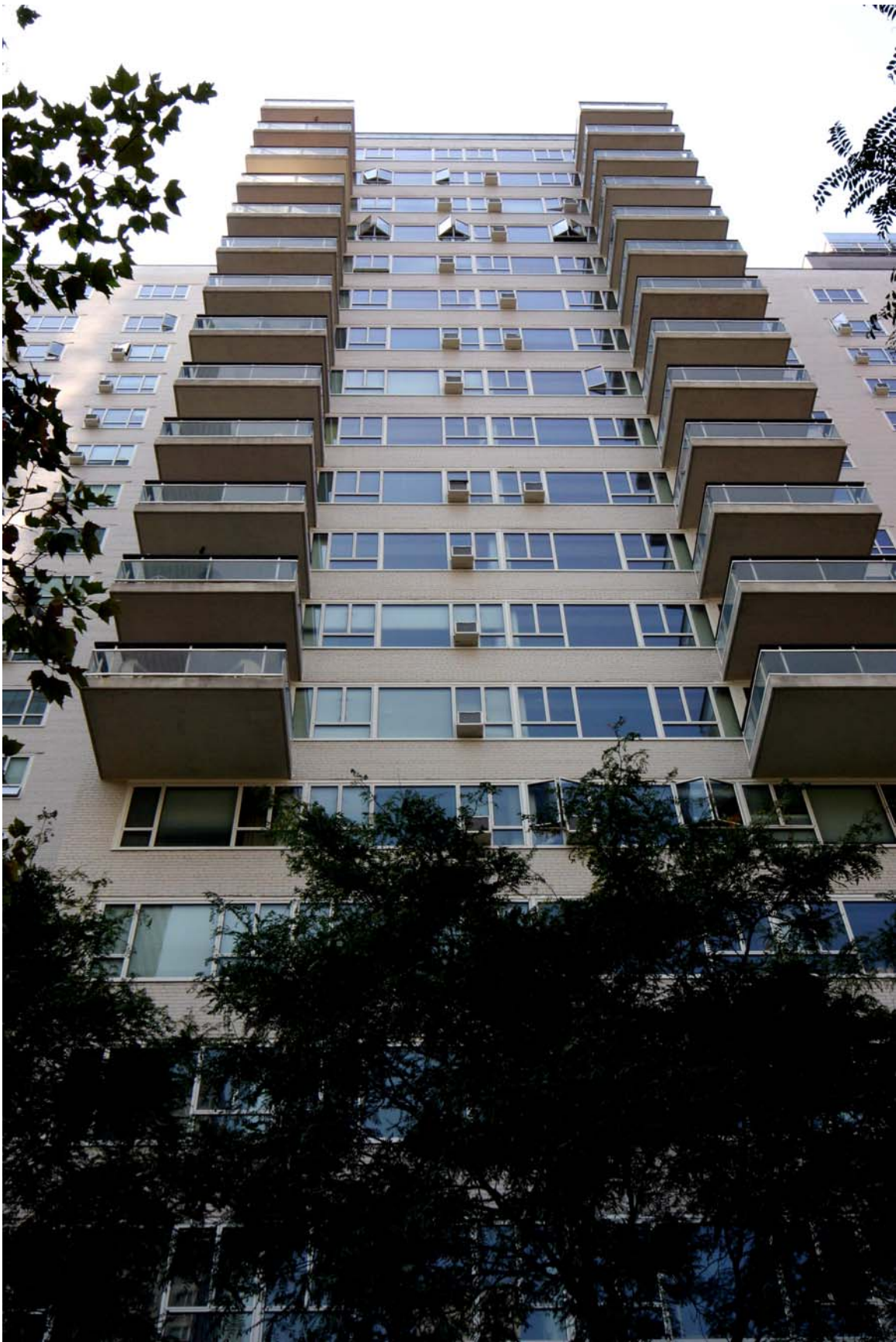
Gate, 201 East 65th Street, west end of garden
Photo: Carl Forster



Third Avenue, view east along East 65th Street
Photo: Carl Forster



Storefronts, Third Avenue
Photo: Carl Forster



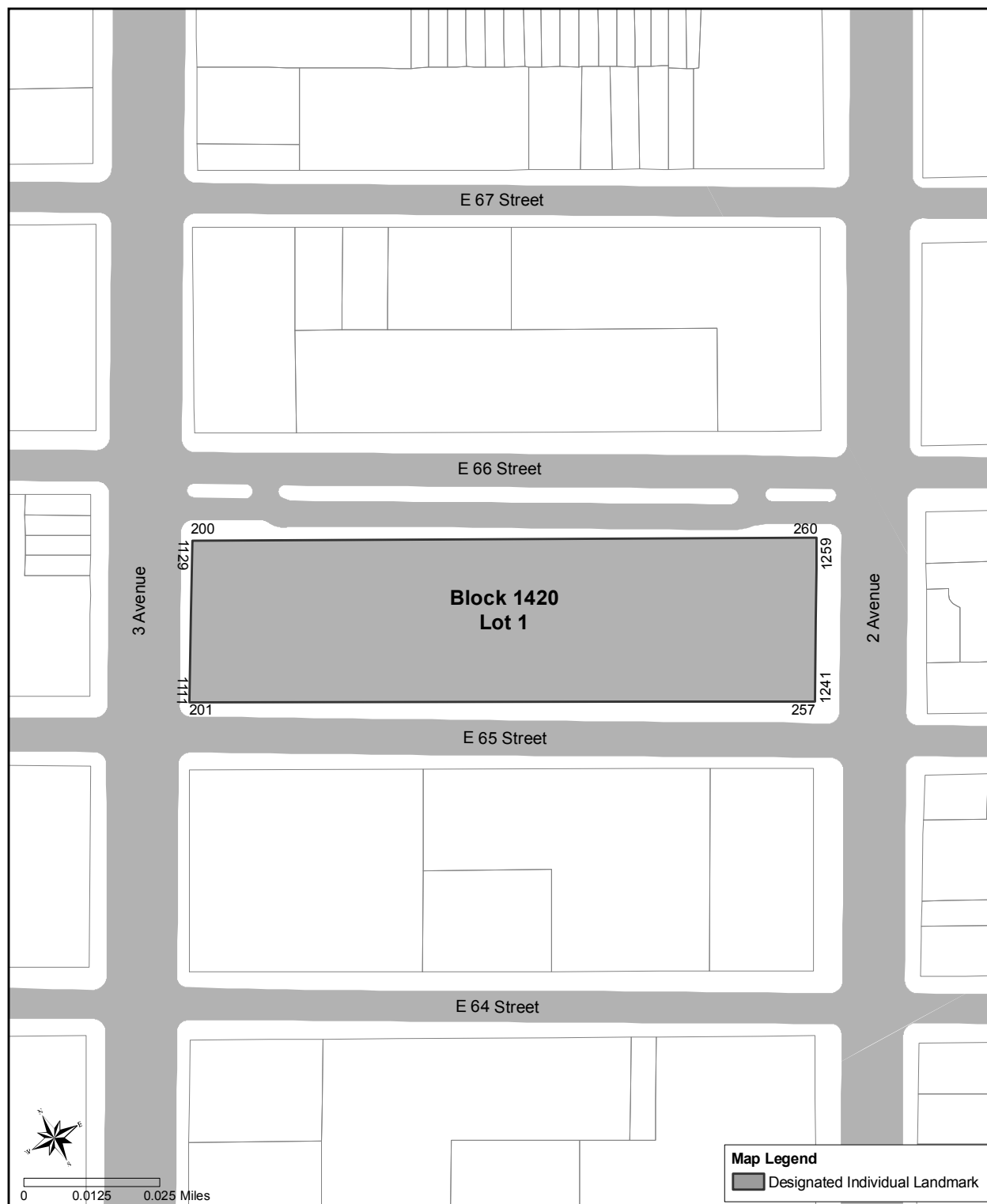
Balconies, view from East 65th Street sidewalk
Photo: Carl Forster



Balconies, view of East 66th Street elevation
Photo: Carl Forster



Solarium-Roof Garden, view east
Photo: Matthew A. Postal



MANHATTAN HOUSE (LP-2246), 200 East 66th Street (aka 200-260 East 66th Street, 201-257 East 65th Street, 1241-1259 Second Avenue, 1111-1129 Third Avenue).

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1420, Lot 1.

Designated: October 30, 2007

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 06C, 2006.
 Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.