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MAS Statement regarding the Landmarks Preservation Commission's Greater East Midtown Initiative.

July 19, 2016

The Municipal Art Society of New York is a non-profit committed to advocating for intelligent urban planning, design, and preservation policy. MAS has a particularly long and celebrated history in East Midtown, successfully leading the fight to preserve Grand Central Terminal.

When the Department of City Planning first released their plans to rezone a large portion of East Midtown Manhattan in 2012, MAS worked with area stakeholders and a variety of planning experts to help ensure the future vitality of this important neighborhood. Much of this effort culminated in a report, [*East Midtown: A Bold Vision for the Future*](#), which laid out recommendations for an improved planning framework for the City.

In 2013, the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and MAS identified 16 buildings worthy of landmark designation and presented this list to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). In response, the LPC has calendared 12 buildings, and has held hearings for five items today:

- Pershing Square Building*
- Graybar Building
- Shelton Hotel*
- Beverly Hotel
- Hotel Lexington*

We are grateful to the LPC for taking action on this selection of important historic resources. However, several of the buildings that we recommended for designation, and were identified as eligible by LPC, remain unprotected. In addition, many were identified as projected or potential development sites in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the East Midtown Rezoning (denoted by an asterisk), virtually guaranteeing that these remarkable buildings would be demolished. LPC should immediately calendar the remaining six buildings it considered eligible for designation:

- Chemist Club
- Lincoln Building
- Roosevelt Hotel*
- Postum Building*
- Union Carbide
- Girl Scout Building*

We would also urge that LPC reconsider the remaining two buildings on the joint list:

- Vanderbilt Avenue Building*

- Barclay Hotel*

In sum, we strenuously ask the LPC to broaden their efforts to preserve the architectural legacy of East Midtown as embodied by these eight historic sites.

MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the proposed designation of the Pershing Square Building, located at 125 Park Avenue, Block 1296, Lot 1.

Erected on the site of the former Grand Union Hotel, the Pershing Square Building was designed by John Sloan and completed in 1923. The 25-story Romanesque structure is clad in brick and terra cotta supplied by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company. To help bring about the rugged hand-made texture of the façade, Sloan instructed the supplier to roughen the clay for kiln burning. At the fifth-floor level, the façade also features helmeted figures called war angels alluding to peace, among other aspirational concepts. The brickwork cladding is further ornamented by “guilloche patterns and cross-banded columns with inner band of leaf work,” as described by Christopher Gray in his Streetscapes column for the *New York Times*.

In 1924, Sloan partnered with Robertson to open their architectural practice and lease a space in the Pershing Square Building. Together they are renowned for their early skyscraper designs, including the landmark Chanin Building and the soon-to-be-heard Graybar building.

The Pershing Square Building makes a significant contribution to the East Midtown office district first established by Terminal City, and deserves individual landmark status.

MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the proposed designation of the Graybar Building, located at 420 Lexington Avenue, Block 1280, Lot 60.

The Graybar Building was constructed along Lexington Avenue on the lot immediately to the south of the Grand Central Post Office. It is integrated into the surrounding properties, adjoined by Grand Central Terminal to the west, the former Commodore Hotel (now Grand Hyatt) to the south, and the post office to the north. When it opened, the Graybar was the largest office building in the world, housing 12,000 workers in 1.2 million square feet of office space, and featured direct access to Grand Central Terminal.

Designed by Sloan & Robertson, the U-shaped plan consists of thirty setback stories faced in buff-colored brick above a limestone base. A wide light court faces Lexington Avenue, allowing for light and air to reach most offices. The building's three limestone entrance façades are decorated to the north and south with Deco-Assyrian bas-reliefs, and in the center with an allegorical relief representing Transportation & Electricity. The southern entrance features a canopy above each of three doors. The central marquee is held in place by three poles that mimic the mooring lines of a ship with conical vermin baffles and rats depicted climbing the lines. Where anchored to the building, the steel bars emanate from decorative rosettes formed by rat heads. The side canopies are supported by rods anchored in the mouths of gargoyles.

Above the limestone base, decorative elements are few. Developer John R. Todd built high quality buildings that, while well-made, met only a minimum standard to compete in the marketplace. At Graybar, Todd accepted ornamentation at the ground level "to impress prospective tenants" while forcing Sloan & Robertson to eliminate decoration from the top of the building – a location where Todd felt no one would appreciate the detail, and was therefore not worth the cost.

Literally connected to Grand Central, the Graybar Building is a key feature of Terminal City and should be dually protected with the same care by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the proposed designation of the Shelton Hotel, located at 525 Lexington Avenue, Block 1303, Lot 53.

The Shelton Hotel, now the Marriot East Side, was built in 1923 and designed by Arthur Loomis Harmon. Aside from being the tallest building at the time, it is also the first hotel to fully implement the 1916 Zoning Resolution.

Prior to his work on the Shelton Hotel, architect Arthur Loomis Harmon (1878 – 1958) had designed the Allerton House at 145 E 39 Street, constructed from 1916-1918. Built just before the new zoning laws came into effect, Harmon emphasized the vertical by recessing the window bays, but the massing still prioritized bulk over height.

Harmon’s skyward vision was not fully realized until the construction of the Shelton Hotel, where the implementation of the 1916 zoning resolution allowed for further emphasis of vertical expression. The 34-story tower is supported by a limestone base, where the front entrance is defined by a shallow loggia supported by six Corinthian columns. Above the ground floor, the rusticated brick façade reflects Romanesque, Byzantine, and other Medieval styles, with limestone returning to clad each setback. Assorted gargoyles and other sculptural ornamentation playfully protrude above entrances and punctuate the facade.

Notable tenants of the Shelton were painter Georgia O’Keefe and her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, for whom the Shelton served as a vantage point to capture the city in paint and picture. O’Keefe crafted fifteen cityscapes from their balcony view, and Stieglitz’ photographs include “From the Shelton, Looking Northwest,” showing a partially built Waldorf-Astoria.

The Shelton Hotel is considered Harmon’s best-known individual work, receiving awards from the Architectural League of New York and the American Institute of Architects. It was lauded by critics including Lewis Mumford, who called it “buoyant, mobile, serene, like a Zeppelin under a clear sky.” In 1929, Harmon became a partner in the newly renamed Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, who were later responsible for the design of the Empire State Building.

In sum, the Shelton is one of the most prominent and innovative Terminal City hotels, designed by a distinguished architect, home to significant 20th century artists, and thus merits recognition by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the proposed designation of the Beverly Hotel (now The Benjamin Hotel), located at 125 East 50th Street, Block 1305, Lot 20.

Built in 1927, the Beverly Hotel was commissioned by Moses Ginsberg to host middle-income visitors to New York City. The 28-story hotel boasts an attractive two-story limestone base, ornamented by terra cotta relief. The upper stories, clad in brick, set back to culminate in an octagonal clock tower.

The neo-Romanesque design results from a limited partnership between Emery Roth and Sylvan Bien. Hungarian born, Roth was employed by America's finest Beaux-Arts architecture firms of the time, including Burnham & Root, Richard Morris Hunt, and Ogden Codman, before striking out on his own. His first major commission was the Hotel Belleclaire. He later solidified his reputation for luxury residential skyscrapers with the Ritz Tower, the San Remo Apartments, the Beresford, and the El Dorado Apartments (all individual New York City landmarks). Meanwhile, Sylvan Bien teamed up again with Ginsberg for his best-known project, the Hotel Carlyle, located in the heart of the Upper East Side Historic District.

An important contribution to Terminal City's "hotel alley," the Beverly Hotel warrants designation as an individual New York City landmark.

MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the proposed designation of the Hotel Lexington, located at 511 Lexington Avenue, Block 1302, Lot 51.

The Hotel Lexington was designed by Schultze & Weaver and completed in 1929 on the corner of East 48th Street and Lexington Avenue. The Art Deco/neo-Romanesque hotel stands 26 stories, clad in limestone and brick, and marked by tiered setbacks, a result of the 1916 zoning resolution.

Working with Warren & Wetmore, Leonard Schultze was the chief of design for Grand Central Terminal from 1903 to 1911. Together with Spencer Weaver, the firm was responsible for such notable luxury New York hotels as the Sherry-Netherland, the Pierre, the Park Lane, and the Waldorf-Astoria. Farther afield, the duo designed the Breakers in Palm Beach, the Atlanta Biltmore, the Los Angeles Biltmore and the Sevilla Biltmore in Havana.

Another substantial contributor to Terminal City's "hotel alley," the Hotel Lexington is deserving of individual landmark status.