

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 350 Fifth Avenue

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: New York

Vicinity: N/A

State: NY

County: New York

Code: 061

Zip Code: xxxxx

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

1 buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic:      COMMERCIAL                      Sub:   Office Building  
Current:      COMMERCIAL                      Sub:   Office Building

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:      Art Deco Style

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation: Granite  
Walls:        Steel, Aluminum and Glass  
Roof:         Metal  
Other:

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form **Page 4****Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The building description is taken almost in its entirety from New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, *Empire State Building* (LP-2000), May 1981, by Anthony W. Robins.

The Empire State Building rises 1250 feet and is 102 stories high (observatory level). It is 1472 to the top of the TV tower. There are 2 basement levels, 80 stories of commercial office space, 5 stories of executive offices, an 86th floor observatory, and a 14-story tall mooring mast. The building occupies a half-block between 5th and 6th Avenues and West 33rd and West 34th Streets. It is surrounded by unrelated commercial structures.

The building's tower sits on a five-story base, with elevations on West 33rd Street, Fifth Avenue, and West 34th Street. The base is a monumental modernistic version of a classical scheme: basement, colonnade, and attic. The basement is formed by the first floor shops and entrances; the colonnade is approximated by a giant order of molded stone piers flanking vertical window strips; and the attic consists of small windows alternating with molded stone panels.

The Fifth Avenue facade centers on the building's main entrance, a central pair of doors flanked by revolving doors; a three-story-high, three-bay-wide set of windows set in modernistically designed patterns; and an attic story of a pair of windows, all set off from the rest of the facade by two giant molded-stone piers topped by stylized stone eagles above which are inscribed the words EMPIRE STATE. The rest of this facade is comprised of monumental bays, three on either side, each consisting of a storefront of chrome-metal and glass at the first floor level, two three-story vertical window strips separated by a narrow stone mullion and flanked by a wide stone pier with a modernistic top in place of a capital, and two windows at the fifth-floor level separated by a narrow squat molded-stone mullion and flanked by wide squat stone piers.

The nearly identical 33rd and 34th Street elevations each consist of three sections of monumental bays, similar to those on the Fifth Avenue facade, separated by two entrance bays. The three sections consist of six, seven, and six bays, slightly emphasizing the central section. The two entrance bays on W. 34th Street which project slightly outward, are less elaborate versions of the main Fifth Avenue entrance bay. The two West 33rd Street entrances, however, are recessed; these Entrances have sets of side doors perpendicular to the building front and front revolving doors; the doors are set in marble walls. Modern light fixtures hang in the center of the recesses. Streamlined banded metal marquee-type canopies with curving corners project over the entrances on West 33rd and West 34th Streets.

The original storefronts are almost entirely glass-fronted. Each has a black granite base, a cornice of horizontal molded-aluminum bands framing a black granite panel, and a central recessed entrance. The individual stores are separated by narrow molded aluminum mullions topped by modernistic finials. The storefronts form a glass wall which projects three feet beyond the base and forms a banding around it. The continuous black granite cornices are at the same level as the metal canopies over the 33rd and 34th Street entrances and form a black band course at that level. Several of the storefronts have been unsympathetically altered.

The design scheme above the five-story base is determined simply by massing and fenestration. The tower is dramatically set back above its base and rises, with shallow setbacks at the 21st, 25th, 30th and 72nd floors, to the 81st floor, where a somewhat more pronounced setback marks the top of the commercial office portion of the building and the beginning of the five-story executive suites a final setback at the 85th floor marks the observatory. The north (34th Street) and south (33rd Street) sides are wider and from the

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30th floor up are divided into three sections of three bays each with a central section enframed by two projecting side sections. The various setbacks on all sides produce a symmetrical massing that emphasizes the verticality of the building and creates the effect of a tower rising from a layer of surrounding tapered masses.

The fenestration, long vertical strips of windows separated by dull aluminum spandrels with modernistic moldings, further emphasizes the building's verticality. Each window is enframed by a strip of nickel-chrome-steel and protrudes slightly from the limestone tower. The alternation of paired, triple and single strips creates a horizontal rhythm that accentuates the center of each facade.

Rising above the 86-story office building is the aluminum, chrome-nickel-steel and glass mast. Four progressively smaller rectangular levels form a base from which springs a cylindrical shaft rising to a conical top. At each of the four corners of the shaft is a set of three overlapping metal wings from which the shaft appears to grow; the four sides of the shaft are formed by continuous glass walls. The top is in three sections: a cylindrical enclosed observation level, a smaller cylindrical level surrounded by an open-air observation area, and a top section in the shape of a truncated cone (pierced by eight circular openings) housing the mooring mechanism and beacon lights, which is topped by a metal mooring pole. The mooring mast is now the base for a 200-foot-high television antenna, added in 1953, which completes the silhouette of the building as it has been known since that year.

The interior of the Empire State Building consists of two sections: the main entrance lobby off Fifth Avenue and the long corridors and elevator banks which, with the inner store windows and entrances, create the effect of a grand concourse.

The main lobby is a long, high, narrow hall. The major feature of the lobby is the western wall, which is ringed with a black marble frame and covered with a series of symbolic images and plaques relating to the building. The largest element is an aluminum silhouette of the Empire State Building, with the rays of an aluminum sun shining out behind it, which is superimposed on a slender aluminum outline map of New York State. A small medallion on the map marks the building's location. At the lower right is a modernistic clock face set in a compass and at the lower left is a medallion inscribed "March 17, 1930—March 1, 1931"—the construction dates—beneath which is a panel inscribed with the name of the people involved in the creation of the building.

In front of the wall is an information desk with a black marble base, a light marble body, and an aluminum-banded top. The north and south walls of the main lobby are lined with storefront windows and doors.

The upper portions of the two long corridors running the length of the building east to west consist of blocks of marble set to look like three horizontal bands stretching the length of the walls (Photo 5). The lower portion of the walls closest to the street contain storefronts, some of which have been altered. Where the original elements survive, the doors and windows are enframed by modernistic metal strips and are set off from each other by vertical panels of rounded marble. Along the inner walls are five openings leading to the elevator banks. Above the central opening at the mezzanine level on either corridor is a striking, modernistically designed aluminum bridge, giving access to the mezzanine offices from the second floor elevators. The original modernistically patterned ceilings are intact but have been obscured by the present suspended ceilings. The one-story entrance halls leading in from West 33rd and 34th Streets continue the marble walls and storefronts; each has a zigzag ribbed ceiling, and, where the ceiling meets the walls, there is a long horizontal lighting fixture with modernistic metal training. Along the walls are a series of modernistically designed medallions symbolizing various crafts and industries involved in the creation of the building.

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Along the inner wall of the northern long corridor a series of eight lighted glass panels of the Eight Wonders of the World has been added; they are not part of the original design and do not add to the qualities of the interior.

The openings along the long corridors lead to one-story halls with four or five elevators on either side. The door of each elevator is designed with a modernistic aluminum silhouette somewhat suggestive of a skyscraper. The original cabs do not survive.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C X D \_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D \_\_\_ E \_\_\_ F \_\_\_ G \_\_\_

NHL Criteria:

4

NHL Theme [1987]:

XVI. Architecture  
T. Moderne-Art Deco (1920-1945)

NHL Theme [1994]:

3. Architecture

Areas of Significance:

Architecture

Period(s) of Significance:

1930-Present

Significant Dates:

1930

Significant Person(s):

Alfred Emanuel Smith (1873-1944)  
John Jacob Raskob (1879-1950)

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

Shreve, Lamb, & Harmon, Architects  
Starrett and Eken, Contractors

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form **Page 8****State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The Empire State Building is the symbol of New York, just as the Eiffel Tower is to Paris and Big Ben is to London. It is still the biggest tourist attraction in the biggest tourist city in the world. Beautifully finished in the Art Deco style, the vertical lines of the structure give it the appearance of a soaring spire that rises one-fifth of a mile high. This famous skyscraper is also an engineering masterpiece supported by an elastic steel skeleton.

The design was the finest work of architect William Lamb, Chief designer for the firm of Shreve, Laub, and Harmon. The "tallest building" when it was finished in April 1931, it lost its title in the 1970's to both Chicago's Sear's Tower and the World Trade Center in New York. It remains, however, New York city's most widely recognized architectural symbol.

The history of the site is typical of the development of an urban area in New York city from open farm land purchased in 1827 by William B. Astor, second son of John Jacob Astor, to its eventual purchase in 1929 by Empire State Building interests. Over a 50 year period, 34th Street and Fifth Avenue became the city's most fashionable residential area where palatial houses were built for the Vanderbilts, A.T. Stewart, August Belmont and the Hamilton Fishes.

Two Astor houses were built at 33rd Street and Fifth Avenue—one for John Jacob Astor, Jr. and the other for William Backhouse Astor. They became the meeting center of New York society's "four hundred." In 1890, William B. Astor sold his house, had it razed and built the Waldorf Hotel followed in 1897 by the Astoria Hotel on the site of the John J. Astor, Jr. house. Hotel construction gave way to commercial development (Altman's, Bonwit Teller, Tiffany's) which in turn was displaced by tall office buildings (Flatiron, New York Trust, Squibb, etc.). The culmination of this activity came in 1930 when the old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel was demolished and the Empire State rose on the site.

The history of the American skyscraper in New York is exemplified by the early high-rise structures that still bore traces of "historicism." Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building (1913) has terra cotta cladding with Gothic ornament and gargoyles and was called the "Cathedral of Commerce." In the 1920s, "modernism" predominated and characteristic examples included the Chrysler, Daily News, McGraw Hill, Chanin, RCA, and the Empire State. As buildings grew progressively taller competition arose until the Bank of Manhattan and the Chrysler Building's famous challenge of 1929. The Chrysler won at the last moment when its secretly constructed spire was jacked up through the roof. The triumph was short—the Empire State replaced them all in 1931.

The Empire State Building was a speculative office building planned by John J. Raskob, who hired former New York State Governor Al Smith to be president of the Empire State Company. As an executive of General Motors, Raskob no doubt considered himself a rival in many ways of Walter Chrysler.

According to rental manager Hamilton Weber, the originally planned 86 stories of the Empire State Building were only four feet higher than Chrysler Building, and "Raskob was worried that Walter Chrysler would pull a trick—like hiding a rod in the spire and then sticking it up at the last minute." Hence, according to Weber, the idea for the 14-story dirigible mast which raised the building's height to 1250 feet but proved, in the end, to be unusable for its intended purpose. Passengers were supposed to descend from the dirigible to an open landing observatory deck 100 stories above midtown. Despite all the



calculations, apparently no one realized that at 1250 feet there would be tremendous updrafts making such a descent dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

The financial genius behind the world's tallest speculative office building was a self-made multi-millionaire, John J. Raskob. Raskob's early affiliation with Pierre Du Pont was very profitable. Their investment in General Motors stock made Raskob a rich man and Chairman of GM's Finance Committee. He also invented the installment plan for buying automobiles.

Like many businessmen of the time, Raskob was interested in politics, and like most millionaires he was a Republican. His entry into politics, however, was as a contributor to the gubernatorial campaign of populist Democratic governor Al Smith. Raskob was introduced to Smith in New York City in 1926. The two men came from similar backgrounds—poor Irish Catholic families—and shared a dislike of the Prohibition amendment, an issue in Smith's later campaign for the presidency. They became friendly, and Raskob volunteered generous contributions to Smith's 1926 gubernatorial re-election campaign. Although many of Smith's closest aides distrusted Raskob, they were unable to prevent his appointment two years later as campaign manager for Smith's unsuccessful 1928 race with Hoover for the Presidency, an appointment which resulted in the anomaly of a conservative Republican millionaire becoming Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. (One of Raskob's first actions as Chairman was to move the committee to offices in the General Motors Building on West 57th Street.) Although Raskob was blamed by some Smith aides for the loss of the 1928 election, and by others for Smith's gradual shift towards a more conservative political philosophy, the relationship between the two men remained strong. When Raskob decided to get into the real estate business, and to build the tallest building in the world, he offered Smith the \$50,000 a year job of President of the Empire State Corporation.<sup>2</sup>

There was a great deal of advertising that identified the Empire State with Al Smith and that touted the structure's extraordinary height making it the "eighth wonder of the world."

Ironically, the saturation advertising may have kept the building in business. Two weeks after the project was announced the stock market crashed and the Empire State was probably saved from bankruptcy by the millions of visitors to the observation tower who paid one dollar admission.

The architects of the building were Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, the contractors were Starrett and Eken. The building program was clear and concise:

a fixed budget, no space more than 28 feet from window to corridor, as many stories of such space as possible, an Exterior of limestone, and completion by May 1, 1931, which meant a year and six months from the beginning of sketches. The first three of these requirements produced the mass of the building and the latter two the characteristics of its design. Planning of the building's layout—involving the placement of elevators, utilities, ventilation, and pipe shafts in such a way as to obtain the maximum amount of rentable

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, Jonathan. *The Empire State Building Book*, St. Martins Press, New York, 1980. pp 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> Josephson, Matthew and Hannah. *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities*. Houghton Mifflin, 1969. p. 354.

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office space—centered on a prototypical plan for the 30th floor, at which point the tower legally began to rise with a zoning—mandated floor-area of one-quarter the lot size.<sup>3</sup>

The plan that evolved was simple and logical:

A certain amount of space in the center, arranged as compactly as possible, contains the vertical circulation, toilets, shafts and corridors. Surrounding this is a perimeter of office space 28 feet deep. The sizes of the floors diminish as the elevators decrease in number. In essence there is a pyramid of non-rentable space surrounded by a greater pyramid of rentable space.<sup>4</sup>

The Exterior is austere compared to its neighbor, the Chrysler. The emphasis was on verticality—on a tall mass with a smooth stone, metal and glass skin with subdued "Moderne" details.

Today the Empire State is a successful, fully tenanted building with "the best view of New York" from its Observation Tower. It has survived an airplane disaster on July 28, 1945 when an Army bomber hit the 79th floor in the fog and mist. It tore a hole in the facade 18 x 20 feet wide and as the upper levels caught fire from burning fuel the construction of the skyscraper was given the most severe test—and it passed. It shook twice on impact and settled—fire and smoke did the most damage. Since 1961, the Empire State has been centrally air conditioned. Moving stairs to the lower concourse have been installed and the facade has been cleaned and painted. It is still a premier office address in New York City and one of the world's most famous buildings.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamb, William F. "The Empire State Building VII, The General Design," *Architectural Forum*, 52 (June 1930), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

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## **9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Chase, W. Parker. *New York: The Wonder City*. New York: Wonder City Publishing Co., Inc., 1932.

*Empire State: A History*. New York: Empire State Inc., May 1, 1931.

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"I: "The Empire State Building Organization," by R.H. Shreve, Vol. LII No. 6, June 1930, pp. 771-788;

"II: The Window-Spandrel-Wall Detail and its Relation to Building Progress," by R.H. Shreve, Vol. LIII No. 1, July 1930, pp. 99-104;

"III: The Structural Frame," by J.L. Edwards, Vol. LIII No. 2, August 1930, pp. 241-246;

"IV: Heating and Ventilating," by Henry C. Meyer, Jr., Vol. LIII, No. 4, October 1930, pp. 517-521;

"V: Electrical Equipment," by H.F. Richardson, Vol. LIII, No. 5, November 1930, pp. 639-643;

"VI: Plumbing," by Fred Brutschy, Vol. LIII, No. 5, November 1930, pp. 645-646;

"VII: The General Design," by William F. Lamb, Vol. LIV, No. 1, January 1931, pp. 1-7;

"VIII: Elevators," by Bassett Jones, Vol. LIV, No. 1, January 1931, pp. 95-99;

"IX: The Mooring Mast," by Irwin Clavan, Vol. LIV, No. 2, February 1931, pp. 229-234;

"X: Field Organization and Methods," by John P. Carmody, Vol. LIV, No. 4, April 1931, pp. 495-506;

"XI: Materials of Construction," by H.R. Dowswell, Vol. LIV, No. 5, May 1931, pp. 625-632;

"XII: The Ground Floor Lobbies and Shops," by William F. Lamb, Vol. LV, No. 1, July 1931, pp. 42-46.

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*New York Times*: May 11, 1946 7:1 (Shreve obituary), September 9, 1952 31:1 (Lamb obituary), October 18, 1958 21:3 (Harmon obituary).

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

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**Primary Location of Additional Data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State Agency  
 Federal Agency  
 Local Government  
 University  
 Other (Specify Repository):

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Approximately two (2) acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
A 8 585590 4511080**Verbal Boundary Description:**

Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 835, Lot 41.

**Boundary Justification:**

Building is 500 feet on West 33rd Street, 197.8 feet on Fifth Avenue, and 475 feet on West 34th Street and 197.8 on West facade.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian  
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Date: April 26, 1985

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National Park Service/Washington Office