

Seagram Building, New York, NY

Minimum Documentation Fiche

composed by national/regional working party of: USA — New York/Tri-State

0.1 Picture of building/site

depicted item:

source:

date:

1. Identity of building/group of building/urban scheme/landscape/garden

- | | | |
|------|---------------------------|--|
| 1.1 | current name of building: | Seagram Building |
| 1.2 | variant or former name | |
| 1.3 | number & name of street: | 375 Park Avenue, aka 99-127 E. 52nd Street,
100-120 E. 53rd Street |
| 1.4 | town: | New York |
| 1.5 | province/state: | New York |
| 1.6 | zip code: | 10022 |
| 1.7 | country: | USA |
| 1.8 | national grid reference | |
| 1.9 | classification/typology: | COM |
| 1.10 | protection status: | Individual Landmark, New York City Landmarks
Preservation Commission, 1989. DL 221. LP-1664 |

2. History of building

- 2.1 original brief/purpose
In 1954 the Canadian distillers Joseph E. Seagram's & Sons announced they would erect an office building intended to coincide with the centennial of the House of Seagram. Credit for the creation of the Seagram Building goes to Phyllis Lambert, the daughter of Samuel Bronfman, the head of Seagram's. She was assisted by Philip Johnson. Bronfman had selected Charles Luckman, of Pereira & Luckman, to design his proposed tower at the site. Luckman had worked in the design of Lever House in the early 50s. Lambert, who had studied architecture, convinced her father to switch architects and upgrade the project and recommended Mies van der Rohe, who was internationally recognized but without a signature building in New York. Bronfman approved the choice and appointed Lambert as director of planning.
The plot acquired for the building was on the block earmarked in 1954 for the new Metropolitan Opera development, but eventually that building was built as part of Lincoln Center on the Upper West Side. The building permit was granted on March 1955 and the building was officially opened on May 22, 1958.
- 2.2 dates: commission/completion
Commission 1954; completion 1958

- 2.3 architectural and other designers
Architect: Mies van der Rohe; associate architects: Philip Johnson and Kahn & Jacobs
- 2.4 others associated with building
- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Mechanical engineers: | Jaros, Baum & Bolles |
| Structural engineers: | Severud-Elstad Krueger |
| Electrical engineers: | Clifton E. Smith |
| Lighting consultant: | Richard Kelly |
| Landscape architects: | Charles Middleleer & Karl Linn |
| General contractor: | George A. Fuller Company |
- 2.5 significant alterations with dates
- 2.6 current use
Continued use as offices
- 2.7 current condition
Excellent condition. RFR Realty, LLC purchased the building in December of 2000 at a cost of approximately \$375M.
In early 2006, the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission approved a plan by RFR Realty, LLC to transfer the unused air rights from the Seagram Building to the site behind it on 53rd Street to build a hotel and residential condominium tower designed by Sir Norman Foster on the southwest corner at Lexington Avenue. The new tower will be very slim and about 700 feet tall.

3. Description

3.1 general description

Much of the building's success comes from its elegant proportions and its relation to the overall site. The building is set back from the street by 100 feet, and in from the side by 30 feet. The first story lobby is recessed to reveal the outer most row of bronze-clad columns and is faced in clear glass with bronze mullions. This, along with a slab marquee and continuous paving, allow for unity between indoor and outdoor spaces. The plan of the building is based on a 4 ft. 7.5 in. module, pursued to unprecedented Miesian accuracy. Set on bronze-clad columns and rising to a height of 515 feet, the 38-story facade consists of alternating bands of bronze spandrels and topaz ("whisky brown") tinted glass with floor-to-ceiling windows, making the wall a true curtain of glass, as foreseen by the visionaries of Modern Movement, like Mies himself. Between the windows, there are vertical decorative 4 1/2 in. by 6 in. bronze I-beam extrusions attached to the mullions to emphasize the vertical rise of the facade. To accommodate program requirements, the slab rests on three subterranean levels and is backed by a 10-story bustle, full-height spine housing the elevator core, and 5-story wings. These three resemble the tower in their exterior articulation, except that in portions of the 10-story section the glass is replaced by serpentine marble panels. Elevated three risers above the Park Avenue sidewalk, the pink Vermont granite podium of the plaza is bound on the north and south by long parapets of verde marble containing twin rectangular pools, each with water jets. The grandeur of the plaza is extended to the adjacent sidewalks, likewise paved in pink granite.

3.2 construction

The Seagram Building contains a 520-foot steel frame that comprises a skeleton of columns on 27 ft. 9 in. centers. This accommodates a 4 ft. 7.5 in. module used to furnish the interior with standardized parts such as floor-to-ceiling doors and partitions and low profile perimeter diffusers that permit mostly unobstructed views through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Exterior columns

and all beams are encased in concrete; interior columns are fireproofed with gypsum block. 4 in.-thick concrete floors contain utility ducts, including closed circuit television cables. The 38-story tower has a curtain wall composed of 153,000 sq. ft. of bronze cladding and 122,000 sq.ft. of topaz-tinted glass.

One of the van Mies' aims was to express or articulate the structure of buildings externally. A building's structural elements should be visible, he thought. The Seagram building was built of a steel frame, from which non-structural glass walls were hung. Mies' would have preferred the steel frame to be visible to all; however, American building codes required that all structural steel be covered in a fireproof material, usually concrete, because improperly protected steel columns or beams may soften and fail in confined fires. Mies wanted to avoid this at all costs. So he used non-structural bronze-toned I-beams to suggest structure instead. These are visible from the outside of the building, and run vertically, like mullions, surrounding the large glass windows. Now, observers look up and see a "tinted-bronze" structure covering a real steel structure. This method of construction using an interior reinforced concrete shell to support a larger non-structural edifice used by Mies has since become commonplace. As designed, the building used 3.2 million pounds of bronze in its construction.

3.3 context

The 1916 zoning resolution designated the portion of Park Avenue North of East 50th Street as residential. By 1929 major property owners on the avenue succeeded in having the area between East 50th and 59th Streets rezoned to permit commercial use. That year saw the construction of the New York Central Building by Warren & Wetmore and the concept of the great "Terminal City" complex of hotels and commercial buildings envisioned around Grand Central Terminal. Not until the building boom that followed WWII did any of it come to fruition. The complete transformation of Park Avenue as a commercial corridor came with the construction of quintessential 1950s glass towers like Lever House (1952), Colgate-Palmolive (1954), and the Seagram Building.

4. Evaluation

4.1 technical

Structural and mechanical innovations abounded in the design of the Seagram Building. The 520 ft. steel frame was the tallest office building so far ever erected with high-strength bolts and was unusual for its vertical truss wind bracing.

The Seagram Building is considered to be the first fully modular modern office tower due to the modular planning grid which integrates the partition system designed by Hauserman (the company's first), the lighting (the first fully modular low-brightness system by Richard Kelly), and the modular high- and low- tension electrical services.

The choice of bronze for the exterior cladding was the project's most unusual feature. The material, which had never before been used so extensively, was selected principally for its color, but also because it could be extruded with great precision to produce the crisp edges and high tolerances required for the exposed T-shaped mullions of the curtain wall. For the first time in curtain wall design, the metal played a role as great as that of the glass, if not greater. Mies liked bronze, he said, because "it is a very noble material and lasts forever if used in the right way", a point elaborated on by historian William Jordy, who observed that Seagram's was "the first major metal-and-glass skyscraper consciously designed to age as masonry buildings age - an architectural property as appropriate for Seagrams' whisky as sheen for Lever's soap."

To maintain a uniform appearance, Mies specified window blinds which could only operate in three positions - fully open, halfway open/closed, or fully closed. Adding to this uniform look along the windows, a mylar ceiling panel system in a grid pattern was designed. It

is visible from the sidewalks illuminating the window-wall spaces. An automatic time clock control permits nighttime display lighting thus guaranteeing a consistent low-intensity glow around the building.

4.2 social

Mies did not intend the open granite plaza in front of his building to become a gathering area, but it developed as such, and became very popular as a result. In 1961, when the City of New York enacted a major revision of its 1916 Zoning Resolution, it offered incentives for developers to install “privately owned public spaces” that were meant to emulate that of the Seagram Building.

4.3 cultural & aesthetic

On completion, the construction costs of Seagram (\$36M) made it the world’s most expensive skyscraper at the time, due to the use of expensive quality materials and lavish decoration including bronze, travertine, and marble. The interior was designed to assure cohesion with the external features, repeated in the glass and bronze furnishings and decorative scheme. The juxtaposition of the structural members, articulated on the exterior by extruded bronze, with the transparent glass surfaces of the elegant curtain wall creates the balance between solid and void which typifies International Style design. All details, including square serif lettering and special door hardware, were painstakingly designed to harmonize.

4.4 historical

The Seagram Building is the realization, some three decades late, of Mies van der Rohe’s dream of a glass-covered, high rise office tower that would provide a stunning monument to the International Style’s faith in simplicity and clarity.

Mies began to experiment with designs for glass towers in the early 1920’s. An admirer of the philosopher Oswald Spengler, Mies shared Spengler’s pessimistic view that the 20th century would be a time of Western cultural breakdown. The architect’s response was to cultivate an esthetic of refined austerity; the phrase “less is more” originated with Mies. He often realized his plain forms in sumptuous materials, however; Italian marbles, bronze, chromium-plated steel, thick, tinted glass, and he rendered them with an exquisite sense of proportion and detail.

Because it fuses elements of two aesthetic poles, the Gothic and the Classical in a supremely elegant whole, critic Herbert Muschamp considers the Seagram Building as the millennium’s most important building.

The gothic cathedral was the prelude to the whole of modern glass architecture, according to Muschamp. And Mies’ (unbuilt) Friedrichstrasse office project of 1921 can be seen as a precursor of the Seagram Building.

In the Seagram Building, the classical elements are more obvious, says Muschamp: the symmetry of its massing on the raised plaza; the tripartite division of the tower into base, shaft and capital; the rhythmic regularity of its columns and bays; and the antique associations borne by bronze. The building’s Gothicism is subtler. It is evident in the tower’s soaring 515 feet, the lightness and transparency of the curtain wall, the vertical emphasis conveyed by the I-beams attached to the glass skin and the cruciform plan of the tall shaft and the lower rear extension.

The Seagram’s open granite plaza uses reflecting pools and low boundary walls in green marble to set off the building, borrowing heavily from Mies’ own Barcelona Pavilion of 1929. Scholar Robert A.M. Stern cites this plaza as a rival to that which formed the forecourt of Raymond Hood’s RCA Building at Rockefeller Center of 1933. Mies’ plaza was not intended as a festive square, but rather as a sacred enclosure surrounding a holy place.

Mies had first used similar applied I-beams (but in steel) at his 1951 apartment towers at Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, welded to the outside of the structural columns. In New York seven years later he would use bronze to clad his structure. The Seagram Building was the first bronze colored skyscraper.

4.5 general assessment

Much copied but not matched, the Seagram Building is generally recognized as one of the finest example of skyscrapers in the International Style.

When the Seagram Building opened in May of 1958 it was hailed in the artistic and popular press and praised by everyday New Yorkers as well. Mies' design was a profound bid to recapture, with the technology-inspired vocabulary of the International Style, the authority of the best skyscraper designs of the 1920s and early 1930s, to create a monumental corporate architecture out of the modular techniques of factory production.

The work of Mies van der Rohe in general and the Seagram Building in particular had an extraordinary impact on office-building design during the 1960s. The architecture of Skidmore, Owens & Merrill, whose approach to Modernism had tended to be eclectic during the 1950s, shifted dramatically toward Mies after the publication of the early Seagram studies.

5. Documentation

5.1 principal references:

New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. Seagram Building, Including The Plaza, 375 Park Avenue, Manhattan. Designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with Philip Johnson; Kahn & Jacobs, associate architects. Report prepared by David M. Breiner, Research Department. New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1989, ill.

Stern, Robert A. M., Thomas Mellins, David Fishman. New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial. New York: Monacelli Press, 1995, ill.

World Wide Web

Anon. "New York Architecture Images-Upper East Side The Seagram Building", n.d., <<http://www.nyc-architecture.com/UES/UES002.htm>>, (July 17, 2008)

Anon., "Seagram Building New York Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson 1958", 2006, <<http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/seagram/index.htm>>, (July 17, 2008)

Anon. "The Seagram Building", n.d., <<http://www.greatgridlock.net/NYC/nyc3.html>>, (July 17, 2008)

Carter B. Horsley, "The Midtown Book - The Seagram Building", n.d., <<http://www.thecityreview.com/park375.html>>, (July 17, 2008)

Herbert Muschamp, "Opposites Attract", The Best of the Last 100 Years 1999, <<http://www.greatbuildings.com/cgi-bin/glk?http://www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/millennium/m1/muschamp.html>>, (July 17, 2008)

5.2 visual material attached:

5.3 rapporteur/date: Hansel Hernandez-Navarro/July 17, 2008

6. Fiche Report Examination by ISC/R

name of examining ISC member:

date of examination:

approval:

Wp/ref.no.

NAI ref. no.

comments: