

550 Madison Avenue

(former AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building
later Sony Building)

**Manhattan (aka 550-570 Madison Avenue, 13-29 East 55th Street
14-28 East 56th Street
Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 10**

Built: 1978-84

Architect: Philip Johnson and John Burgee, with Simmons Architects

Style: Postmodern

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendaring on November 28, 2017



550 Madison Avenue, photo: Matthew Postal, 2005

The former AT&T Corporate Headquarters Building is an icon of the Manhattan skyline and of Postmodern architecture. Located on the west side of Madison Avenue, between East 55th and 56th Streets, the top of the building is crowned by a split pediment, a feature that sets it dramatically apart from earlier glass skyscrapers in midtown. Built between 1978 and 1984, the AT&T Building was designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee. Johnson (1906-2005) had a long and influential career as an American tastemaker and architect. As a curator at the Museum of Modern Art he helped introduce European modernism to a wider American audience in the 1930s, and with this high-profile corporate commission he ushered in the era of Postmodernism.

Thirty-seven stories tall, the 647-foot elevations are clad with rough-finished, rose-colored Stony Creek granite, a material closely-associated with many of New York City's Beaux-Arts style landmarks. Johnson and Burgee's handsome yet playful design also drew on earlier classical sources, such as the 15th-century Pazzi Chapel in Florence, 18th-century Chippendale style clocks and cabinets, and the 19th-century Galleria in Milan.

Though *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable confessed to having "mixed feelings" about the design in 1978, calling it a "pedestrian pastiche pulled together by painstaking, polished details," the AT&T Building generated widespread media attention. In January 1979 Johnson appeared triumphant on the cover of *Time* magazine ("U.S. Architects: Doing Their Own Thing") raising a model of the projected structure in the air – the same year he became first recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

The Sony Corporation of America began leasing the building in 1991. With the approval of the City Planning Commission, the original covered public spaces were substantially modified in 1992-94. The twin loggias flanking the main entrance were converted into retail shops and the glass-covered arcade at the rear of the building was enclosed at both ends, encouraging year-round use. AT&T sold the building to Sony in 2002 and since 2016 it has been owned by the Olayan Group.

550 Madison Avenue is one of Philip Johnson's most-celebrated skyscrapers, appearing in numerous surveys devoted to the history of American architecture. While some design elements remain controversial and continue to be debated, the former AT&T Building is known internationally as an important Postmodern work and as a turning point in the history of 20th-century architecture.