

PERSHING SQUARE BUILDING

125 Park Avenue (AKA 101-105 East 41st Street, 100-108 East 42nd Street, 117-123 Park Avenue, 127-131 Park Avenue), Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1296, Lot 1

Built: 1921-23

Architect: John Sloan and York & Sawyer

Style: Romanesque Revival

Actions: Calendared September 17, 2013

The Romanesque Revival style Pershing Square Building anchors a prominent corner directly across 42nd Street from Grand Central Terminal at Park Avenue. Designed by a talented team of architects, John Sloan, working with York & Sawyer, the building is remarkable for the important role it played in the development of the city's mass transit system, its transitional role in the history of the city's building development, and its exceptional terra-cotta cladding. The Pershing Square Building is also noteworthy as an integral element of the redevelopment of the Grand Central Terminal area.

The Pershing Square Building and the Bowery Savings Bank (1921-23, and 1931-33, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), adjacent to the east (also designed by York & Sawyer), replaced the well-known Grand Union Hotel, which was acquired in 1914 by the Public Services Commission to create a new diagonal station linking the older portions of the IRT line running beneath Park Avenue with the new extension of the line beneath Lexington Avenue. In constructing the new station the Commission's engineers provided exceptionally strong foundations that could support the weight of a 25-story building so that the site could be marketed as a development parcel once the station was complete. Due to wartime shortages that slowed subway construction the site was not ready for development until 1920. At that time it was acquired by a syndicate headed by developer Henry Mandel who obtained financing from the Bowery Savings Bank in exchange for releasing a portion of the site to the bank for a new branch.

John Sloan, working for Mandel and the Pershing Square Building Corporation, and William Louis Ayres of York and Sawyer, working for Bowery Savings Bank, developed their plans almost simultaneously employing a party wall (thought to be the tallest in the city), interlocking framing, and related designs. Later York & Sawyer was also brought into the project. Because the Pershing Square Building utilized subway footings that were in place when the zoning ordinance was adopted in 1916 and was sold by the city as developable with a 25-story building, it received a variance from the setback requirements of the law and thus became the last tall building in New York erected without setbacks. Instead it had a large light court facing Park Avenue with tall slabs that rise straight up from the eighth story.



Faced with granite, multi-hued brick and colorful terra cotta, it features Northern Italian motifs including round-arched windows and tiled hipped roofs, suggesting old Lombardy. The bricks and terra cotta, fabricated by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, were designed to appear old and weathered, in order to create a more “artistic” design. This was the first tall office building to use textured brickwork and colored terra cotta, setting a precedent for the colorful designs of Ely Jacques Kahn and Ralph Walker later in the decade.

The Pershing Square Building has several subway entrances and direct access to Grand Central Terminal. With its multiple connections and access points, and its fine design and unique facade treatment, it continues to make a significant contribution to the visual variety and richness of East Midtown.

