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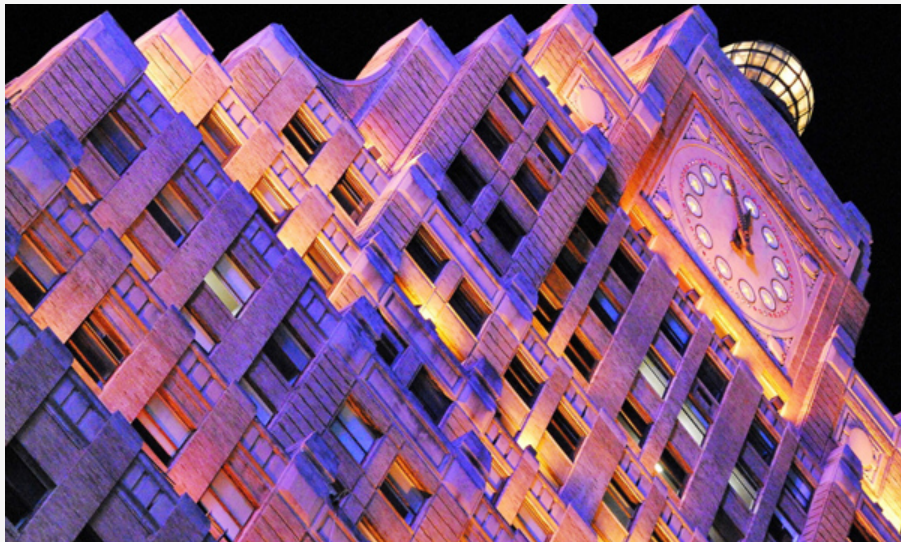
New York City Info

Forgotten Icon

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Written by Phil Roberts

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New York has more iconic buildings than most people could name. If you randomly asked New Yorkers on the street to list five iconic New York buildings, they would probably name the highest structures, the most famous ones and maybe even the most controversial. One certainty is that they will forget many icons that have been dwarfed by their neighbors. These buildings vanish into the Manhattan cityscape over time. The Paramount Building in Times Square at 1501 Broadway is a notable example. Constructed between 1925 to 1927, and designed by George Rapp, its original claim to fame was so long ago, that its reputation has been forgotten.

It is difficult to appreciate this 35 storey building up close, because the marquee and lower floors are quite visually pronounced. The building setbacks as it rises like a pyramid, topped off at the apex with a 20-foot glass globe that illuminates at night. Some who happen to notice this building quip that it looks like a wedding cake.

During the 1930's, the globe atop the Paramount Building was the glittering beacon of Broadway below and could be seen as far as New Jersey. The building was so tall when it was built people would go to its observation level to look out over Manhattan. However, its fame as a look out point was overshadowed soon after its construction by the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center and Empire State Building.

The lower levels of the building use to house the Paramount Theater, one of Times Square's most popular venues. It was a theater so luxurious that it set attendance records of over 30,000 spectators in its first two days. New Yorkers were enthused by the grand hall, which was lined with Breche Centella marble imported from Italy. In keeping with the notion of New York becoming the world metropolis of the 20th century, the grand hall of the Paramount Theatre was even larger than that of the famous Paris Opera House. The entertainment experience of the Paramount Theater was unparalleled by any other theater venue in the city.

There were spaces in the building with names such as the Elizabethan, Jade, Marie Antoinette, Chinoiserie, The Galleries, Rotunda, Hall of Nations, and the Peacock Alley. The names that entertained inside the Paramount Theater were Fred Astaire, Frank Sinatra, Ethel Merman, Beatrice Lillie, the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and Dolly Dawn.

As a space of spectacle, it showed various forms of entertainment such as movies, big band performances, organ concerts and vaudeville. However mighty it once was, its days as one of New York's premiere show business venues lasted only until 1965, when it was converted into office space. With television becoming a major player in the entertainment industry, the theater lost its audience.

The original marquee was taken down after the conversion to office space, but was restored with a replica of the original in 2001 by an unlikely fighter for architectural historicism known as the World Wrestling Federation.

The Paramount Building is still a marquee work of architecture, or so billionaire developer Arthur G. Cohen is expecting. He has hired the real estate firm of Newmark Knight Frank to market 17 floors of the Paramount Building in order to attract a hotel developer.

Still, despite its show business fame and Times Square location, few New Yorkers would remember to name the Paramount Building as an iconic work in the city's architecture.

Its location might have something to do with the lack of recognition. The lights, adverts and people in Times Square attract a lot of eye balls, leaving the architecture to act as a passive background. The only part of the Paramount Building that is probably identifiable to most passersby is the marquee. New Yorkers old enough to remember when the building was the tallest in Times Square, might be the only people capable of mentioning it in the same breathe as the Flatiron Building.

Another reason for the Paramount Building's lack of notoriety is that it has not been used as an entertainment venue since 1965, taking it out of the mind of most New Yorkers. Though the Paramount Building never left Broadway, Broadway, as in the theater business, left the Paramount Building decades ago.

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Finally, the building's explicit setback on the upper floors makes its top disappear from street view and does not allow you to admire the building's height from up close. Only when you cross the street to the other side of Times Square, or a few blocks to the north or south, can you appreciate its vertical scale.

Now, the building looks like it will become a mixed use property of offices, hotel and other occupancies. With luxury hotel spaces a rare commodity in Times Square, it would be a savvy decision to turn such an opulent building into a place for tourists, business persons and entertainers. Maybe then the Paramount Building can reintroduce itself as one of the city's top meeting places and iconic works of architecture to a majority of New Yorkers.

Caption: The Paramount Building in Times Square which is right in the center of Manhattan and in the heart of New York City. This is where TimesSquare.com has decided to make their official headquarters.

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