

# Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)



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## LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan  
730 Fifth Avenue, aka 728-734 Fifth Avenue,  
2-4 West 57th Street

## LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

## SIGNIFICANCE

Designed in the French Renaissance Revival style by Warren & Wetmore in 1920-22, the 25-story Heckscher Building was one of the first skyscrapers in this section of Fifth Avenue and one of the earliest buildings to conform to the groundbreaking 1916 Building Zone Resolution, which transformed Manhattan's skyline.



**Heckscher Building, looking south on Fifth Avenue from 63rd Street**  
Museum of the City of New York  
c. 1920

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# Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)

730 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan

## Designation List 539 LP-2678

**Built:** 1920-22

**Architect:** Warren & Wetmore

**Landmark Site:** Borough of Manhattan  
Block 1272, Lot 7503 (previously 39) in part,  
consisting of the footprint of the Heckscher Building  
at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and West  
57th Street, not including the annex building on West  
56th Street, as illustrated in the attached map.  
BIN 1035053

**Calendared:** December 12, 2023

**Public Hearing:** April 9, 2024

On April 9, 2024, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building) as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Three people testified in support of designation, including representatives of the owner of the retail spaces, who also noted the need for future flexibility at the storefronts; the New York Landmarks Conservancy; and the Historic Districts Council. Manhattan Community Board No. 5 also sent a letter expressing support.

## Summary

### Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)

At the southwest corner of West 57th Street, the Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building) is one of Fifth Avenue's best-known and most visible early skyscrapers. Topped by a striking tower, this ornate setback structure was designed by Warren & Wetmore, architect of the New York Yacht Club, Grand Central Terminal, and the New York Central Building – all New York City Landmarks. The Heckscher Building was commissioned by the Anahma Realty Corporation, a syndicate backed by developer August Heckscher, builder George Backer, and Warren & Wetmore partner, Charles D. Wetmore. Construction began in 1920 and was completed in 1922.

The Heckscher Building is one of the earliest surviving skyscrapers to conform to the 1916 Building Zone Resolution—the nation's first—which shaped New York City's distinctive skyline, requiring tall buildings to taper as they rise, increasing the amount of light and air that reaches the street. Twenty-five stories tall, the primary massing elements are the nine-story base, a mounted 12-story tower, and an octagonal crown with a pyramidal roof. Faced with limestone, buff brick and bands of cream-colored terracotta, the style is French Renaissance Revival. Classical ornament embellishes the window spandrels, setbacks, and balustrades. The four-story pyramidal roof incorporates large dormer windows on each side, bull's eye windows, as well as an elaborate multi-story chimney stack and a crown-like finial.

Planned as retail stores, showrooms, and offices, the Heckscher Building was one of the first

tall buildings in this part of Fifth Avenue, anticipating the area's subsequent commercial redevelopment in the 1920s. For several years, six rooms on the 12th floor were rented to the newly established Museum of Modern Art, which in November 1929 opened its inaugural exhibition there, devoted to Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh. In 1932 the museum held its famously influential *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, curated by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, which introduced the International Style to the United States and attracted 33,000 people during its six-week run.

The Heckscher Building was renamed the Crown Building in 1983. At this time most of the architectural elements were painted gold and the facade was illuminated at night. The upper stories of this prominent and richly decorated structure were converted to a hotel and residences in 2022.

## Building Description

Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)

The Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building) stands at 730 Fifth Avenue, at the southwest corner of West 57th Street. On Fifth Avenue, the 11-bay (east) facade is 100 feet long, while the 57th Street (north) facade has 18 bays and extends 162 feet. The primary massing elements are the base, a mounted tower, and an octagonal crown with a pyramidal roof.

### Base

From the sidewalk to the first setback, the nine-story limestone base is divided by various cornices into four sections: the first and second story, third story, fourth through eighth story, and ninth story. The double-height storefronts, as well as third-story windows are framed by flat arches with small brackets around the top. Where the two street facades meet, starting at the third story, is a thin spiraling column that rises to a rounded pedestal, flanked by pilasters, at the ninth story. Above the ninth story is an elaborate cornice and terracotta (or cast stone) balustrade, with reliefs that depict crowned salamanders. Many of the windows centered on the Fifth Avenue and West 57th Street facades have decorative spandrels. These panels incorporate three types of embellishment: fleur-de-lys, open-mouth faces encircled by snakes set against fleur-de-lys, and leaf-like patterns. The sides of the panels have spiral moldings, and the lower edges have brackets.

### Mounted tower

Above the base is a 12-story mounted textured buff brick tower. The corners are rounded and marked by

smooth masonry quoins. The six bay Fifth Avenue facade sets back at the 14th story. It is capped by a denticulated cornice and has composite capitals at the corners. On West 57th Street, the first four stories have thirteen bays, while the floors above have ten bays, The end bays have no decorative spandrels. The windows on the uppermost story have off-white terracotta window enframements. At the south end of the Fifth Avenue facade is a six-story, two bay pavilion with an elaborate masonry pediment. Above the pavilion the facade is angled and split into two bays. One corner window has a freestanding decorative pediment, while others have spandrel panels or terracotta window enframements.

### Crown

The most ornate features are the octagonal crown and pyramidal roof. The spandrels between the 22nd and 23rd story are similar to those below, while the 24th story windows are flanked by panels with diamond-shaped forms and an arcaded corbel table above. At the corners are spiraling colonettes. At the recessed 25th story, windows are interrupted by large dormers and elaborate pediments with corner pilasters, small cartouches, and scallop shells. In the southwest corner is a freestanding chimney stack, embellished with crowned salamanders, chevrons, and diamond patterns. The green-colored roof has vertical seams and oval windows at two levels. The apex has strings of garlands, a crown-like ring, and a ball set on a base.

### South and west facades

The south facade is partly visible above neighboring buildings. Most of this facade is windowless, except for a single bay near the west end and a row of blind windows on the 21st story. The west facade is partly visible from West 57th Street, starting at the 13th story. Notable features include decorative cornices and spandrels, terracotta window enframements, and

a two-bay extension capped by terracotta panels.

### **Alterations**

Since 1983, the spandrels and many architectural features have been gilded. The storefronts have been enlarged vertically to include the first and second story, while the third story windows have been enlarged horizontally. All of the single pane windows are non-historic; windows have replaced historic metal grilles in seven openings on the Fifth Avenue facade. A flagpole that was originally above the Fifth Avenue entrance has been removed; pairs of flagpoles were added above storefronts on the Fifth Avenue and West 57th Street facades and subsequently removed. On Fifth Avenue, the former building entrance in the southernmost bay has been removed and converted to a storefront, while the two adjacent storefronts have been merged to form a single opening. At the corner of Fifth Avenue and West 57th Street, above the ninth story, a tiered hood and pedestal was modified in the 1980s to its rounded form and supports a non-historic female statue. On West 57th Street, the number of commercial bays has been reduced. From east to west, the fifth and sixth bays have been combined into a single storefront, the seventh bay has non-commercial infill, and the main building entrance has been moved from Fifth Avenue to the eighth, westernmost, bay. Small ventilation grilles have been installed in the north part of the west facade. Slender horizontal lighting fixtures are attached in various places on the upper facades. Some setbacks have non-historic glass railings. The mounted tower's west facade has been modified with a multi-story extension that steps up from the 10th story setback, obscuring the center window bays on most stories.

## History and Significance

Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)

### Fifth Avenue and West 57th Street

*King's Handbook of New York City* observed in 1892: "Fifth Avenue is celebrated the world over as the grand residence street of aristocratic and wealthy families of the metropolis."<sup>1</sup> Laid out by the Common Council in 1785, it was originally known as the "Middle Road" due to its position between the Bowery and Broadway. Starting at what is now Washington Square, above 42nd Street the first major structure of note was St. Patrick's Cathedral (1853-88, a New York City Landmark), located at 50th Street.

In the decades following the Civil War, the blocks between the cathedral and Central Park (designed in 1858, a New York Scenic Landmark) contained "the palaces of some of New York's millionaires."<sup>2</sup> Many of these buildings were shaped by French taste and architectural trends. For instance, two groups of early row houses, located on the east side of the avenue between 57th and 58th Streets (1867-69) and between 55th and 56th Streets (1869-70), were designed in the Second Empire style.

During the next decade, two Chateausque-style residences, drawing on French Renaissance and Gothic sources, were built on the southwest and northwest corners of 57th Street: the Frederick and Adele Stevens house (1875-76), on the future site of the Heckscher Building, and the Cornelius II and Alice Vanderbilt House (1879-82, expanded 1892), one of New York's largest residences.<sup>3</sup>

Fifty-Seventh Street, particularly between Madison and Sixth Avenues, attracted many residences in the late 19th century. Most of these

houses were attached structures, including 4 West 57th Street (1872-73), part of a group of three residences designed by architect-historian Russell Sturgis. Once home to businessman James Alfred Roosevelt, uncle to President Theodore Roosevelt, it was later demolished and integrated into the west part of the site where the Heckscher Building stands.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest high-rise structures in this part of Fifth Avenue were hotels. Dating to the first decade of the 20th century, they include the St. Regis (1901-04, 1927) and Gotham (1902-05), on opposite corners of the south side of 55th Street, as well as the Plaza (1905-07, 1921) at 768 Fifth Avenue, all New York City Landmarks.<sup>5</sup>

Another change that anticipated commercial development was the widening of Fifth Avenue north of 42nd Street, begun 1909, creating two additional lanes. The width of each sidewalk was reduced by 7½ feet, requiring removal of some residential encroachments, such as entrance stoops and landscaping.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-Seventh Street was later widened, adding two lanes in 1922-23, making it one of the widest roadways in Manhattan.<sup>7</sup>

In September 1912, *The New York Times* reported a "business invasion" had begun and many houses had "been given over to trade," including Nos. 10 and 12 West 57th Street, where an eight-story neoclassical style store and loft building – the tallest structure east of Broadway – was erected.<sup>8</sup> Set between four-story townhouses, it was designed with large display windows for the fashionable women's clothing retailer Henri Bendel.

### August Heckscher

Businessman August Heckscher (1848-1941) began assembling the site for a high-rise commercial building in 1913. Born in Hamburg, Germany, he immigrated to the United States in 1867, where he was active for several decades mining coal, zinc, and



copper in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Heckscher's career took a significant turn after 1910, when he entered the real estate field. He owned many buildings in Manhattan, including a sizable number in the vicinity of Grand Central Terminal. In July 1923, following completion of the Heckscher Building, the *New-York Tribune* described him as "probably the largest individual holder of office buildings in the city."<sup>9</sup>

Heckscher was also active in philanthropy during the early 1920s, establishing the Heckscher Art Museum (1919-20) in Huntington, Long Island, where he had an estate until 1923, and the Heckscher Foundation for Children (now El Museo del Barrio, 1921-22), at Fifth Avenue and 104th Street. He sponsored Central Park's first playground near 62nd Street, in 1925-26. His grandson, also named August Heckscher (1913-97), shared similar interests and served as New York City Parks Commissioner from 1967 to 1972.

Heckscher acquired the former Stevens residence at 2 West 57th Street from Harry Payne and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1912, as well as 728 Fifth Avenue, a townhouse that had been remodeled for businessman Charles W. Morse.<sup>10</sup> These houses were temporarily replaced by a three-story office-and-gallery structure to "defray the heavy taxes."<sup>11</sup> A *New-York Tribune* reporter speculated that the foundations were planned to "carry a building of a dozen or more floors."<sup>12</sup>

Towards the end of the 1914, Heckscher acquired a third parcel at 4 West 57th Street.<sup>13</sup> He completed the assemblage in 1918, purchasing two houses at Nos. 7 and 9 West 56th Street.<sup>14</sup> Located on the north side of the street, directly behind the Duveen Brothers gallery at 720 Fifth Avenue, this lot would become the site of the West 56th Street annex (not part of the landmark site).

The Heckscher Building was developed by August Heckscher through his stock holding

company, the Anahma (or Anahama) Realty Corporation, with investors including the builder George Backer, and architect Charles D. Wetmore. The company was named for Heckscher's private yacht.<sup>15</sup>

### **George Backer**

George Backer (c. 1875-1921) leased the site from Heckscher for 21 years. According to the *New-York Tribune*, it was the quality of Backer's 1919 proposal that convinced Heckscher to invest in the project and that before seeing the design he was only interested in being the ground owner.<sup>16</sup>

Born in Russia, Backer immigrated to the United States around 1891. His name first appears in the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* in 1898, in association with Arthur S. Miller. Prominent as a builder and developer, Backer erected numerous structures in Manhattan, mainly commercial loft buildings and apartment houses. He frequently worked with the architects Rouse & Goldstone, Schwartz & Gross, and Sommerfeld & Steckler. In 1921, the *New-York Tribune* estimated the value of his properties exceeded \$100 million.<sup>17</sup>

The George Backer Construction Company erected the Heckscher Building, which was nearing completion when Backer died in May 1921. At the time, he had several buildings under construction, was under indictment for perjury, and was just 46 years old. The *New-York Tribune* praised Backer's work, writing "he had a wonderful capacity for detail. It was his aim to make each successive building better than the previous one. He strove for beauty in design, whether the structure was to be used as a hotel, or a factory building. He made a building reflect what it was intended for."<sup>18</sup>

### **Warren & Wetmore**

Charles D. Wetmore (1866-1941) of Warren & Wetmore, architect of the Heckscher Building, was

the third investor.<sup>19</sup> One of New York City’s most prolific architectural firms, their three-decade partnership began in 1898 when Wetmore, a Harvard University-trained lawyer, commissioned architect Whitney Warren (1864-1941) to design a country house. Warren attended Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Before returning to New York in 1894, he spent a decade abroad, working in the Paris studios of Honore Daumet and Charles Louis Girault.

The firm’s first commission was a Beaux-Arts style clubhouse for the New York Yacht Club (1899-1900, a New York City Landmark). Over the next decade, it served a mostly elite east coast clientele, designing country estates and town houses on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Noteworthy examples of the firm’s early work include the Marshall and Carrie Astor Orme House (1900-03, part of the Upper East Side Historic District) and the James A. and Florence Burden Jr. House (1902-05, a New York City Landmark).

Commercial work was an important part of the firm’s practice. In addition to co-designing Grand Central Terminal with Reed & Stem (1904-14, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) for the New York Central Railroad, Warren & Wetmore were responsible for many hotels, apartment houses and office buildings during the 1910s. Built using complementary materials and neoclassical ornament, these structures formed a handsome and mostly understated backdrop to the monumental Beaux Arts terminal.

Warren & Wetmore had previous experience working with Heckscher and Backer. Heckscher commissioned at least three buildings from the firm, including the Vanderbilt Concourse Building (1912-14), the Equitable Trust Company Building (1917-18, demolished), and the Marlin-Rockwell Building (1919-20). Backer served as contractor for the Hotel Chatham (1916-17, demolished), which the firm also

designed.

## Planning and Construction

Initial plans for the Heckscher Building were announced in December 1919, two years after formation of the Anahma Realty Corporation. The delay may have been caused by the 1918-20 influenza epidemic, also known as Spanish flu, which began to wane in mid-1919.

Warren & Wetmore were described as “at work on the preliminary plans,” which resembled an earlier Heckscher office project at 50 East 42nd Street (1917).<sup>20</sup> The *New-York Tribune* published a preliminary rendering in February 1920, calling the design “sensational . . . [it] will mark a new epoch in the structural and commercial future of Fifth Avenue.”<sup>21</sup>

Due to objections from the New York City Building Department and insurers, the plan was revised in August 1920. *The New York Times* called it a “radical change” and the *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* commented it would be “in many respects the most beautiful business building which ever graced this famous thoroughfare.”<sup>22</sup> Plans for a large theater on West 56th Street were abandoned and the apartments on the upper floors were eliminated. Furthermore, the massing and decorative program was substantially modified.

Demolition at the site, including the 1913 taxpayer and other buildings, continued throughout the summer and construction commenced in October 1920. H(omer) G. Balcom (1870-1938), who later worked on the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center (both are New York City Landmarks), was the Heckscher Building’s structural engineer.

Following Backer’s death in May 1921, a close business associate, attorney Samuel Levy, managed construction.<sup>23</sup> The rental and managing agent Cushman & Wakefield began to market the

office and retail spaces during 1921. While *The New York Herald* called the Heckscher Building a “Cathedral of Commerce,” advertisements generally referred to it as “The Tower of Trade.”<sup>24</sup>

In August 1921, the Heckscher Building was described as “ready about Sept. 1st” but in January 1922 it was still “nearing completion.” Almost entirely leased by October 1923, the owners claimed to be anticipating a “full house” by May 1924.<sup>25</sup>

### The 1916 Building Zone Resolution

Twenty-five stories tall, the Heckscher Building rises in three distinct stages. The primary massing elements are the base, tower, and crown.<sup>26</sup> These setbacks respond to the requirements of the “Building Zone Resolution,” which was passed by the Board of Estimate in July 1916.<sup>27</sup> New buildings were required to taper at specific heights, determined by their location and street width. Bulk was regulated and diminished in stages, encouraging stepped silhouettes in which the uppermost floors would cover 25 percent of the lot.

Heckscher was an enthusiastic supporter of the zoning resolution, which he believed would be a “boon to New York.” In September 1915, he told the *New-York Tribune* that office buildings “should be designed to insure permanent outside light for all offices and in no way injure the air and light facilities of neighboring structures.”<sup>28</sup>

By hiring Warren & Wetmore, Heckscher and Backer selected a firm that had experience with the new regulations. They had recently completed the Equitable Trust Building (1917-18, demolished) on the southeast corner of Madison Avenue and 45<sup>th</sup> Street. *The New York Sun* called this building “novel” and the city’s “first restricted skyscraper.” Though some critics believed the resolution would be “the death knell of skyscraping structures” and that Manhattan would “lose its most characteristic structure,” this unnamed writer claimed the Equitable

Trust Building proved “it was possible to build a finer and much more economical structure under the new law.”<sup>29</sup>

The Heckscher Building demonstrates how a leading Beaux Arts firm interpreted the zoning resolution and refined their approach to high-rise construction. Since it was built within a “one and one-quarter times” district, facing two 100-foot-wide streets, the first setback was at 125 feet above the sidewalk. The primary setbacks were emphasized with bands of white terra-cotta relief, produced by the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company in Long Island City, Queens. Facing Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, not only did tenants enjoy “unparalleled light” and city views, but the octagonal crown incorporated an angled balcony for “exclusive use of the tenant.”<sup>30</sup>

Compared to subsequent skyscrapers in the 1920s, the massing was unusually complex. The mounted tower steps up differently from each side, creating four distinct facades and masses. To weave the volumes together, Warren & Wetmore introduced groups of window spandrels. Centered on each facade, not only do the spandrel reliefs provide visual interest but they read as vertical bands, helping align the base, tower, and crown.

Architect Aymar Embury II applauded Warren & Wetmore’s design. In *Architectural Forum* he wrote:

A striking detail of the exterior is the use of metal panels at the floor levels between the windows of different stories. These panels are of copper wrought in high relief and toned to a light, bright green by the use of acids. The panels create strong vertical lines which have the effect of accentuating the height of the building.<sup>31</sup>

As the floors rise, the number of spandrel panels decrease, from rows of 12 to 8 to 4 panels along West 57th Street, and from 6 to 4 panels along Fifth Avenue. Embury likewise praised the massing: “the silhouette . . . is perhaps as attractive as that of any in the city with the exception of the Woolworth Tower.”<sup>32</sup>

*Vanity Fair* described the Heckscher Building in 1924 as “one of the first buildings to show, with great charm and cleverness, the possibilities of the new building code.”<sup>33</sup> Several months later, the *Manchester Guardian* chose it, along with Shelton Hotel (1922-23, a New York City Landmark), to demonstrate the law’s impact on the skyline. An unnamed correspondent wrote that it was “one of the new experiments in bulk and silhouette . . . a lovely sight from all the southern part[s] of Central Park.”<sup>34</sup>

Taking a more critical position in *The American Architecture of To-day*, Harvard University professor George H. Edgell commented in 1928: “It is an imposing pile, though not wholly successful in that the horizontals are overemphasized and there is nothing to bind any of the main masses to those above or below.”<sup>35</sup> Most architectural critics and historians, however, admired the Heckscher Building. Christopher Gray later wrote in *The New York Times* that it was “elegantly styled” and it was described in *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore* as “important” and “the first of many spectacular solutions following the setback controls to come out of the firm.”<sup>36</sup>

### **A French Renaissance Skyscraper**

Warren & Wetmore chose the French Renaissance style to complement George B. Post’s Chateausque Cornelius II and Alice Vanderbilt House, which faced the Heckscher Building until 1927.<sup>37</sup> According to Backer, this ornate style was “well adapted to the location and the principal buildings in this section.”<sup>38</sup> To produce a harmonious relationship

with such prominent neighbors – especially when viewed from points north – Warren & Wetmore borrowed features from the Vanderbilt House such as the dormers, chimney, and pyramidal roof.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing on Gothic and Renaissance sources, the Heckscher Building’s base is clad with limestone, and the tower is textured buff brick. The ornament is associated with Francois I (1494-1547), who ruled France during the first half of the 16th century, or, more generally, France, America’s ally in the First World War, which ended with the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919, as the building was being planned.

To enhance these associations, images of crowned salamanders – Francois I’s personal symbol – decorate the 10th floor balustrades and chimney pedestal. These animals appear on countless French palaces and on such memorable Manhattan apartment buildings as Red House (1903-04) and Alwyn Court (1907-08), both New York City Landmarks. Fleur-de-lys, an emblem often associated with the French monarchy, were also part of the decorative program, appearing with medusa heads in the spandrels, as well as on the vaulted ceiling in the original lobby (not part of the designation).

When the Heckscher Building was completed, the main entrance (now a storefront) was at the south end of the Fifth Avenue facade.<sup>40</sup> Framed by pilasters and columns, it contained four doors beneath an arched relief panel with floral details. Additional entrances were on West 57th Street and in the annex on West 56th Street (not part of the designation). The three entrances formed a T-shaped lobby, in which a block-long shopping arcade connected West 56th and West 57th Streets.

To mark the corner where the main facades meet, Warren & Wetmore introduced a twisting, multi-story column that rises from the lowest cornice to the first setback, where an elaborate tiered hood

and pedestal originally projected at the ninth floor. Modified by the early 1980s, the rounded pedestal now supports a non-historic statue.

At the time of construction there were few tall buildings in this section of midtown and the east- and north-facing facades enjoyed great visibility. The west facade, in contrast, was only visible above the 14th floor, while the south facade (facing 56th Street) had relatively few windows and almost no ornament. The upper stories generally display the most ornament, layering diamond shapes, spiraling colonettes, and an arcaded corbel table. Each side of the 25th story has a twin-window dormer, topped by an elaborate free-standing pediment.

Significant attention was paid to the apex, where major elements were originally gilded. A writer for *Architecture & Building* magazine observed:

The glorified chateau which Warren & Wetmore have designed carried the spirit of its French period even to its lofty weather cock.<sup>41</sup>

Warren & Wetmore placed a ring or crown “encrusted with imitation jewels” on top of the pyramidal roof, as well as a globe-like “ball-bearing device that a slight wind pressure will cause to revolve.” Here, 410 feet above the sidewalk, a 10-foot-tall, 450-pound weathervane was installed, similar in spirit to the Diana statue by Augustus Saint-Gaudens that topped the tower of the original Madison Square Garden (1892, demolished).<sup>42</sup> This gilded feature was variously described as a rooster, chanticleer, and weathercock.<sup>43</sup>

Heckscher branded the weathervane the “Cocque d’Or,” an emblem of France, which he delightfully described in an advertisement as “amiable” and “lofty . . . a bird of good omen . . . He senses the wind of American prosperity in the

offing.”<sup>44</sup> Made of copper, it was fabricated by E. G. Washburne & Company, a sign and weathervane manufacturer on Fulton Street in lower Manhattan.<sup>45</sup> This memorable feature, however, lasted just two decades. *The New York Times* later reported it was removed in 1942, as part of the “war effort.”<sup>46</sup>

## Tenants and Later History

With the opening of the Heckscher Building in 1922, 57th Street solidified its position as one of Manhattan’s key crosstown thoroughfares. Marketed in advertisements as “The Tower of Trade,” the Heckscher Building contained ground floor shops, retail showrooms, and tower offices. J. Clydesdale Cushman, the building’s agent, observed in March 1922:

This building will go far in aiding the rapid development of Fifty-Seventh Street, since it is attracting and offering a business home for the highest type of wholesale and retail merchants. The future of Fifty-Seventh Street, in my opinion, is brighter and more promising than any street in New York.<sup>47</sup>

A subsequent advertisement boasted:

The corner on which the Heckscher Building stands dominates the new center of quality merchandizing. It is unlikely there will ever be another building that can approach it in character, atmosphere, or prominence.<sup>48</sup>

The 23rd floor was proudly described as “the highest priced office in New York . . . high priced but not expensive for the man who appreciates the unique prestige that is unexcelled from one end of the city to another.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, a concurrent advertisement compared the building to “first water diamonds” and “real Oriental pearls, claiming the shops, showrooms and offices offered “genuine satisfaction in knowing

that your neighbors are automatically restricted, by this item of price.”<sup>50</sup>

Tenants included art galleries, charities, doctors, furniture dealers, interior decorators, textile merchants, and stockbrokers.<sup>51</sup> Among the most significant were the New York headquarters of Universal Pictures (1926-34), the art organization Société Anonyme (1924), publisher Alfred A. Knopf (1922-37), and the Museum of Modern Art, which rented a six-room suite on the 12th floor from November 1929 to March 1932.<sup>52</sup> The opening exhibition was *Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh* (November-December 1929). After attracting great crowds, Heckscher reportedly considered evicting the popular new museum.

For five weeks at the end of 1931, the Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera kept a studio on the sixth floor where he produced eight frescoes that were part of a large exhibition devoted to the artist’s work (December 1931-January 1932). The museum’s final show at this location was *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (February-March 1932), highlighting contemporary developments in American and European architecture.<sup>53</sup> Curated by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, this exhibition introduced the International Style to the United States and attracted 33,000 people during a six-week run.

City Bank Farmers Trust Company acquired the Heckscher Building through foreclosure in July 1938.<sup>54</sup> Sold to Charles F. Noyes and Joseph Durst in January 1946, it changed hands again in 1950, this time to an unidentified “out-of-town” investor.<sup>55</sup> In 1964, it was renamed the Genesco Building. This company owned I. Miller, the shoe retailer which had a store in the base, as well as the department store Bonwit Teller (demolished), which was located directly across Fifth Avenue. Centurion Real Estate acquired the building in September 1966.

From October 1981 to April 1991, the

Heckscher Building was owned by Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos and Imelda Marcos as part of a group of New York City real estate investments that were acquired to shelter ill-gained wealth. Renamed the Crown Building, renovations began in 1982. At this time, the spandrels and cornices were painted gold and the facade was illuminated at night. These changes were conceived by advertising executive and lighting designer Douglas Leigh.<sup>56</sup>

The Crown Building was acquired by General Growth Properties, now operating as Brookfield Properties Retail, and Wharton Properties in 2014.<sup>57</sup> The building was sensitively converted to a luxury hotel and residences, opening as Aman New York in 2022, with its main entrance moved to West 57th Street and terraces created at various setbacks. The conversion retained many of the building’s original features, its later gilding, and maintained its stunning architectural character.

Since the Heckscher Building was completed in 1922, various owners have made successive storefront modifications, in keeping with the changing nature of retail activity on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street. The retail spaces contain flagship stores. In 2016-17, the storefronts and third story windows were substantially enlarged. A reproduction of the long-lost “Cocque d’Or” weathervane has been created, with plans for reinstallation.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The former Heckscher Building remains one of midtown Manhattan’s best known early 20th century skyscrapers. Rising on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, it was not only one of the earliest structures to conform to the 1916 Building Zone Resolution, requiring setbacks, but it signaled the transformation of this section of midtown into a fashionable commercial district.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *King's Handbook of New York City* (1892), 148.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.
- <sup>3</sup> These Fifth Avenue houses have been demolished.
- <sup>4</sup> "The Real Estate Field," *The New-York Times*, September 11, 1912, 15.
- <sup>5</sup> These three Fifth Avenue hotels are New York City Landmarks. The Plaza is also an interior landmark.
- <sup>6</sup> "Fifth Avenue Widening Nearly Completed," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1909.
- <sup>7</sup> "More Space for Traffic on 57<sup>th</sup> St.," *New-York Tribune*, September 10, 1922, 31.
- <sup>8</sup> "Towering Lofts in 57th Street," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1912, 71.
- <sup>9</sup> "Twenty-Story Central Zone Building is Sold," *New-York Tribune*, July 15, 1923, C1.
- <sup>10</sup> Heckscher reportedly purchased the site as a gift for his wife. See "Industrialist is Putting His Millions into Gilt Edge Real Estate," *New-York Tribune*, August 5, 1923, C1.
- <sup>11</sup> "Taxpayer for Whitney's Old Home," *New York Tribune*, July 12, 1913, 14.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> "Realty Notes," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1914, 15. James Alfred Roosevelt lived at 4 West 57th Street. The house at number six was occupied by Theodore Roosevelt Sr., father of the future United States President.
- <sup>14</sup> *New York Herald*, February 4, 1918.
- <sup>15</sup> Heckscher changed the yacht's name in 1910. See "Halesite," *Brooklyn Times Union*, May 21, 1910, 18. The Anahama was approximately 200-feet long. See Robert B. Mackay, *The Great Yachts of Long Island's North Shore* (Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 100, viewed online.
- <sup>16</sup> *New-York Tribune*, December 21, 1919.
- <sup>17</sup> "Business of George Backer, Who Gave the City \$100,000,000 Worth of Buildings, Will Be Carried on by Associates," *New-York Tribune*, May 15, 1921, A15.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> "Florida Agent Buys 25-Story Fifth Av. Tower," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 5, 1950, C1.
- <sup>20</sup> "Fifth Ave. Buildings to Cost \$15,000,000," *New York Herald*, December 21, 1919, 18.
- <sup>21</sup> The Heckscher Building also influenced the design of the Pierre Hotel (1930, a New York City Landmark), constructed a decade later on Fifth Avenue and 60th Street by the architects Schulze & Weaver. The similarity is probably not a coincidence since Leonard Schultze was employed by Warren & Wetmore when the Heckscher Building was being planned. See "Giant Structure for 5th Ave. and 57th St. Corner, Marks Future Development of the Avenue of Avenues," *New York Tribune*, February 15, 1920, 32.
- <sup>22</sup> "Building Plan Revised," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1920; "The New Heckscher Building," *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, October 23, 1920, 585.
- <sup>23</sup> *New-York Tribune*, May 21, 1921, A15.
- <sup>24</sup> *The New York Herald* first called it the "Cathedral of Commerce" in October 1920. See "Work Begins on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave Cathedral of Commerce," *New York Herald*, October 24, 1920, 74.
- <sup>25</sup> Advertisement, *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 1923, 10.
- <sup>26</sup> One of the first Manhattan skyscrapers with a mounted (or partial) tower was the New York Times Building (1903-05, altered). Other examples include the City Investing Company Building (1906-09, demolished) and the Woolworth Building (1910-13). This strategy protected air and light on the upper floors, maximizing their value as rental space. See Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condict, *The Rise of the New York Skyscraper 1865-1913* (Yale University Press, 1996), 324.
- <sup>27</sup> "Building Zone Resolution," view text at <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/about/city-planning-history/zr1916.pdf>
- <sup>28</sup> "Squash Courts on the 23rd Floor," *New-York Tribune*, September 12, 1915, 9.
- <sup>29</sup> "First Restricted Skyscraper Shows New Law's Requirements," *The New York Sun*, March 4, 1917, 14.
- <sup>30</sup> "Stock Exchange Brokers Get Space," *New-York Tribune*, December 22, 1922, 20.
- <sup>31</sup> Aymar Embury II, "New York's New Architecture,"

*The Architectural Forum*, October 1921, plate description, 151.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>33</sup> “Architectural Tendencies of Today,” *Vanity Fair*, February 1924, 44.

<sup>34</sup> “The Zoning Law in New York,” *Manchester Guardian*, June 5, 1924, viewed at Internet Archive, May 2020.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Gray, “Streetscapes: The Crown Building; A 1921 Elegance Entangled in Disputes,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1991; Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker, *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 185-86.

<sup>37</sup> Warren & Wetmore rarely worked in the French Renaissance style. New York City landmarks designed in this style include: New-York Cancer Hospital (1889-90), American Fine Arts Society (1891-92), Miller Gould Carriage House (1902-03), and Felix Warburg House (1907-08, now the Jewish Museum).

<sup>38</sup> “Fifth Avenue Showhouse Abandoned,” *New-York Tribune*, August 15, 1920, 30. The rooster is visible in the rendering that accompanies this article.

<sup>39</sup> In 1920, it was rumored that George Backer was planning to replace the Vanderbilt house with a 21-story hotel. See “\$9,000,000 Hotel Is Planned on Site of Vanderbilt Home,” *New-York Tribune*, January 10, 1920, 7.

<sup>40</sup> As originally built, the pilasters on either side of the Fifth Avenue entrance had composite capitals that incorporated figures that were likely caricatures of the syndicate’s chief investors. Heckscher, who wore a mustache and beard, was depicted on the right or left side, while Backer, who died unexpectedly in 1921, could have been the angel at center. Above the doors was a bas-relief, set between what were grilles or windows. This panel displayed the date when construction began (ANNO MCMXX) and two lions grasping an urn – a variant of many European coat of arms. The bas-relief may have been removed in the early 1980s. The uppermost section had three niches, two of which originally functioned as windows but were later enclosed.

<sup>41</sup> “Heckscher Building,” *Architecture & Building*

(February 1922), 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Hawk Wins Battle in Fifth Avenue With Birds Trying to Save Pigeon,” *The Evening World*, October 2, 1922.

<sup>44</sup> Advertisement, *New-York Tribune*, September 13, 1921, 9.

<sup>45</sup> “Weathervanes,” *The New Yorker*, November 10, 1932, 17.

<sup>46</sup> “Tower of Trade, Gem of 1921,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 1978.

<sup>47</sup> “Development of Fifth Avenue as Fine Shop Section Has Just About Started,” *New-York Tribune*, March 19, 1922.

<sup>48</sup> Advertisement, “A Building Appealing to Foresighted Merchants,” *The New York Herald*, September 6, 1922, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Advertisement, *New York Herald*, March 3, 1922, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Advertisement, *The Evening World*, March 3, 1922, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Jesse Livermore, a stock trader, was a tenant of the Heckscher Building in the 1920s. One of the richest individuals in the world, some sources blame him for the 1929 Wall Street crash. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse\\_Livermore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_Livermore)

<sup>52</sup> The Museum of Modern Art moved to 11 West 53rd Street in 1932.

<sup>53</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, “Modern Architecture Shown,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1932.

<sup>54</sup> “Heckscher Building Offered at Auction,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1938.

<sup>55</sup> “Florida Agent Buys 25-Story 5<sup>th</sup> Av. Structure,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 5, 1950, C1.

<sup>56</sup> “Seasons of Gilt,” *Daily News*, December 23, 1982, 111; “Douglas Leigh, The Man Who Lit Up Broadway,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1999.

<sup>57</sup> See “GGP and Sutton Grab Crown Building for \$175B+,” *New York Post*, December 18, 2014, viewed online.

<sup>58</sup> For a 2016 video about recreating the rooster, see: <https://www.shvo.com/aman-new-york/>



## Findings and Designation

Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building)

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building) has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Heckscher Building (now the Crown Building) and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1272, Lot 7503 (previously 39) as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.



Heckscher Building, 730 Fifth Avenue, view from 58th Street  
Sarah Eccles and Bilge Kose, May 2024



**Heckscher Building, view from East 57th Street**  
Sarah Eccles and Bilge Kose, May 2024



**Heckscher Building, view from West 57th Street**  
Sarah Eccles and Bilge Kose, May 2024



**Heckscher Building, view from Fifth Avenue, south of 56th Street**  
Sarah Eccles and Bilge Kose, May 2024



**Crown, view from West 57th Street**  
LPC, 2023



**Corner, view from East 57th Street**  
LPC, 2023



**Fifth Avenue storefronts**  
LPC, May 2024



**West 57th Street storefronts and entrance**  
LPC, May 2024

