

New York Life Building

20 West 9th Street
completed 1890

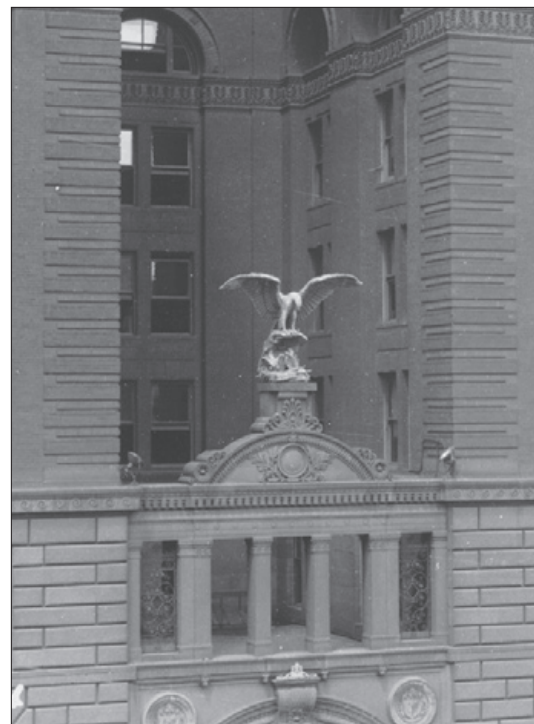
by Donna Francis

The New York Life building was Kansas City's first skyscraper. Located at the northeast corner of Baltimore and West 9th Street, it was the tallest and largest building in Kansas City when completed in 1890. Considered to be one of the city's most important landmarks and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, the New York Life building was one of six similarly designed regional corporate headquarters. At its completion, the building represented the transformation of Kansas City from a "cow town" to a city of importance, heralding the beginning of major downtown development. The ornamentation of the building with its famous bronze eagle and mosaic floors marked an architectural milestone in the Renaissance Revival style.

The Italianate design was both practical and elegant. The H-shape plan allowed for construction rising to heights that were unusual for the time. A 12-story square tower links two 10-story arms. The architects used a "forced perspective" (making the upper windows smaller) that gave the building the appearance of added height. This state of the art building was the first in Kansas City to be erected with an elevator and steel I-beam frame construction.

A classical design facade is applied to the south and west street elevations while the north and east facades remain unadorned. The large brownstone building is constructed of terra cotta and pressed brick. Previously the use of terra cotta was generally considered to be appropriate only in southern regions. The brownstone used on the first three stories was quarried, cut, sized and numbered in Vermont. Cherry wood window frames were made in Boston, bricks were made to order in Kansas City, and the limestone was quarried locally. The interior contains red marble from Vermont and pink marble from Tennessee. Marble tiles used in the first floor mosaics came from Italy as did the workers who laid the tiles, one at a time, completing only a few square feet a day.

A bronze eagle with outstretched wings protecting her young is the building's most notable feature and trademark. Cast in New York by sculptor Louis Saint-Gaudens, brother of Augustus Saint-



Gaudens, the two-ton eagle which guards the door has a 12-foot wingspan.

The New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White designed the New York Life Building. Established in 1879, this firm designed such other architectural landmarks like Madison Square Garden, Boston Public Library, Morgan Library, and Pennsylvania Station. This architectural firm was known for their contribution to the field of Italian Renaissance style that was immensely popular in the United States during the turn of the century. The New York Life Building featured massive blocks, many with towers, contrasting window treatments and minimal but intricate detailing. The style was a sharp contrast to the opulence and excesses of Victorian architecture.

The building was, in essence, a radical statement for Kansas City, a city composed at the time of three- and four-story buildings constructed in the heavy Romanesque style. The choice of location at the very south end of downtown also signaled a change of direction for Kansas City. At the time of the building's completion, Baltimore Avenue, with tall cliffs on both sides from 9th Street to 11th Street, was still unfinished.

Although home to a variety of businesses, by the late 1970s the building was no longer able to compete with more modern facilities. Local investors continued to put faith and money into it until the early 1980s when it became so mired in debt that it was unable to recover. It was abandoned in 1988 and crumbling nearly to the point of no return by 1994. Plans to convert the building to a hotel and to a residential cooperative failed. Deterioration progressed to the point that the building was open to the elements; freezing and thawing water damaged the lobby's tile floors and marble walls. The interior was home to birds and transients living with collapsed ceilings, peeling walls and piles of trash. The building was also subject to vandalism and theft. Bronze handrails and lighting fixtures were removed.

Then in 1994 a \$35 million restoration plan was advanced by the Zimmer Companies, UtiliCorp, and the architectural firm of Gastinger Walker Harden, assisted by the Kansas City Tax Increment Finance Commission, the Missouri Department of National Resources, and the National Park Service. The end result: the rehabilitation of 175,000-square feet of Class A office space restored in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Some of the unique features retained in the 1998 restoration include: terra cotta tiles used in the detailed design crowning the building; textured brownstone blocks used in the front three stories; marble tiles used for the mosaic floors in the entrance and in the lobby; barrel vaulted ceiling and glass panels in the lobby; a grand bronze eagle crowning the entrance; decorative fireplaces; cast iron railings with cherry hand rails; bronze doors on the elevators; and a highly decorative mailbox and lighting fixtures.

The old New York Life Building, now home to UtilCorp's headquarters, is one of the most technologically advanced in the nation. It contains an energy efficient electric chiller that makes an ice solution during the night to cool the building during the day. A computer adjusts lighting levels—lights will dim on a bright day and increase during dark hours, and also turns off lights when it senses that the last person has left the room. The building is equipped with a noise muffling, white noise system.

Today an "Exploratorium" featuring exhibits on the restoration of the building and a history of energy can be found in the lobby of the New York Life Building.

Sources

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