

THE RAINBOW ROOM, located in the eastern section of the 65th floor interior, consisting of the fixtures and interior components of this space, including but not limited to, the walls and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, rotating wood dance floor, stairs, stage, seating platforms, glass panel screens, chandeliers, wall sconces, and window frames; 30 Rockefeller Plaza, aka 1240-1256 Avenue of the Americas, 31-81 West 49th Street, and 30-64 West 50th Street, Manhattan. Built: 1931-34; architects: The Associated Architects, Wallace K. Harrison, lead designer

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1265, Lot 1069 in part

On September 11, 2012 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Rainbow Room and the proposed designation of the related landmark site. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Four people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the owner, the Landmarks Conservancy, and the Historic Districts Council. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

Summary

Since opening on October 3, 1934 the Rainbow Room has been one of New York City's premier nightspots, an elegant supper club to dine, dance and enjoy incomparable views. Located at the east end of the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, this room is particularly notable because few interiors of this type survive from the early 20th century. The Rainbow Room was designed by the Associated Architects, the architects of Rockefeller Center. Wallace K. Harrison, a member of the firm Corbett Harrison & McMurray, acted as lead architect, working with interior decorator Elena Bachman Schmidt. This double-height space was conceived in the building's original design as a single volume, without columns. To create the most memorable vistas possible, the 24 window openings are some of the largest in the building. Construction of the Rainbow Room began shortly after the repeal of Prohibition, in early 1934, and was completed by September of that year. The general style is Streamlined Modern, with calculated neo-classical flourishes. Harrison's scheme was influenced by Joseph Urban, who designed many Manhattan nightclubs, as well as works by the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, which Harrison visited during a 1931 trip to Europe. Guests originally entered the Rainbow Room from the northwest corner, descending wide stairs that lead to a circular dance floor and domed ceiling. The almost square room had a capacity of more than 300 persons and many were seated at tables on tiered platforms located around the perimeter. To give the space additional "radiance," crystal chandeliers and wall sconces by Edward F. Caldwell & Co. were employed. The Rainbow Room has always generated considerable media attention and has been a fashionable setting for musical and dance performances, private parties, charity balls, scholarship drives and award ceremonies. In addition, during business hours it functioned as the Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club, which drew members from the surrounding office complex. Hugh Hardy, of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, supervised a thoughtful renovation in 1987 that preserved many historic features. A rare example of Streamlined Modern design, the Rainbow Room displays many of its original characteristics, making it one of New York City's most elegant – and elevated – restaurant interiors.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

30 Rockefeller Plaza and Rockefeller Center

The Rainbow Room is located on the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza (a designated New York City Landmark).¹ Originally called the RCA Building, this slender 70-story skyscraper fills an entire city block bordered by Rockefeller Plaza, the Avenue of the Americas (aka Sixth Avenue), 49th Street, and 50th Street. In Rockefeller Center, 30 Rockefeller Plaza is the tallest, and arguably, most important structure, containing retail space, offices, television and radio studios, as well as an observation roof.

Rockefeller Center was built on land leased from Columbia University.² The complex was financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), one of the wealthiest men in the United States, who selected the Board of Directors, as well as many of the architects and artists. His son, Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908-79), would serve in various capacities, including chairman of the Roof and Restaurants Committee during the mid-1930s.³

In the earliest scheme, a mixed-use complex was envisioned, surrounding a new home for the Metropolitan Opera. Though this prestigious cultural tenant abandoned the project in late 1929, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. decided to replace the auditorium structure with a tall office building and proceed with construction. Three firms, known as the Associated Architects, collaborated on the general plan and individual buildings. Among the various contributors, Raymond M. Hood, of Hood Godley & Fouilhoux, is thought to have been the chief designer of 30 Rockefeller Plaza. He was responsible for various important skyscrapers in Manhattan, from the American Radiator Building in 1923-24 to the Daily News Building of 1929-30. Many of his best-known works display vibrant colors, such as the 1930 McGraw-Hill Building, faced with blue-green terra cotta, but hardly any color was used on the exterior of the RCA Building, where Hood exploited a jagged silhouette with rhythmic fenestration to provide much of the visual interest.⁴

Site excavations commenced in July 1931. The steel framing was “topped out” in September 1932 and the limestone cladding was finished in December 1932. Though the recently-completed Empire State Building (1,250 feet) and Chrysler Building (1,047 feet), enjoyed greater height, the upper stories of the 850-foot-tall RCA Building had outstanding views, in part because it stood behind a sunken plaza that had been designed in tandem with several smaller buildings along Fifth Avenue.

The RCA Building was named for the Radio Corporation of America – the building’s single largest tenant. Placed on axis with the sunken plaza and promenade (known as Channel Gardens), 30 Rockefeller Plaza is clearly visible from Fifth Avenue. As the most prominent building in the complex, it can be entered from all sides, as well as from the 47th-50th Street subway station (opened 1940) and other buildings. Furthermore, the building contains an elegant double-height lobby with mezzanine, as well as a retail concourse on two levels.⁵

From the outset, the uppermost floors were projected for public use. As the building approached completion, the *New York Times* reported:

. . . when the building was planned and constructed it was the intention that the upper stories be ultimately used for some type of public gathering space. There are several terraces on the floors from the sixty-fourth to the seventieth stories of the building and one two-story section was said to lend itself for use as a high ceilinged dining room.⁶

At the east end of the 65th floor, this “two-story section” was conceived as a single volume, without piers or columns. Of particular significance were the size and number of windows. To create especially memorable vistas, the openings would be some of the largest in the building. In May 1933, the *New York Times* reported that Frank W. Darling had been hired to program the upper floors:

Play Spot Planned Atop RCA Building . . . Tentative plans for an unusual type of amusement centre to occupy the six upper floors and terraces of the seventy-story RCA Building in Rockefeller Center are being discussed and a survey is now under way.⁷

Darling had considerable experience with entertainment venues and restaurants. Earlier in his career, he headed the Thompson Scenic Railway Company, which built rides for amusement parks and world’s fairs. He created Playland Amusement Park (1927-28) at Rye, New York, and served as the park’s director until 1933 when he became “managing director of the Center Restaurants and Observation Roofs” at Rockefeller Center.⁸ Darling, according to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, “laid out the upper six floors of the RCA building in Radio City, including the promenades, observation roofs, bars, game rooms, and the famous Rainbow Room.”⁹

To reach the upper floors as quickly as possible, eight high-speed Westinghouse elevators were installed. While the seven express elevators ascended at 1,200 feet per minute, one elevator achieved 1,400 feet per minute, making it the “fastest passenger elevator ride on record.”¹⁰ At this rate, guests arrived at the 65th floor in just over 37 seconds. Speed was part of the building’s business plan – not only was this item hugely expensive (13% of the construction budget), but the Rockefellers also successfully petitioned the city to increase the maximum allowable speed from 700 feet per minute.¹¹ In 1942, the *Utica Observer* claimed that the “elevators which whisk customers up from the ground floor cost \$17,000 a year to operate; an item other clubs are spared.”¹²

The first venue to open in the RCA Building was the observation deck, also called the observatory, in July 1933.¹³ Located on the 67th, 69th and 70th floors, it featured a 190-by-21 foot terrace. At this time, Darling also announced that he was developing plans to utilize the floors directly below as “restaurants, game rooms, solarium and a ballroom.”¹⁴

The Plan

The 65th floor was configured as two distinct venues. At the west end was the Patio (renamed the Rainbow Grill in 1935)¹⁵ for indoor and outdoor dining, and to the east, the Rainbow Room, a larger restaurant where guests could dine, dance, and be entertained. At lunch, from 11am to 3pm, these interiors (as well as private dining rooms on the 64th floor) functioned as the Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club, whose members were mostly tenants in the Rockefeller Center complex.

By the 1930s, the upper stories of many tall office buildings were occupied by private social clubs and restaurants.

The vogue for “dining in the clouds” far above busy streets – a gesture of gracious living possible only in skyscraper cities – has spread steadily in Manhattan in recent years, in direct proportion to the increase in the number of towering structures erected here.¹⁶

This tradition began in the late 19th century when elevators were introduced and many of most enviable rooms in New York City clubhouses were positioned on the upper floors. For instance, the dining room of the Union League (1881, demolished) was on the fourth floor and the University Club (1896, a designated New York City Landmark) is on the seventh floor.

As office buildings achieved greater height, many were conceived with top floor restaurants, or spaces that could be leased to private clubs. A pioneering example was the Hardware Club in the 12-story Postal Telegraph-Cable Company Building (1894, a designated New York City Landmark), followed by the Arkwright Club and the Merchant's Club, which reportedly led "the list of mid-air dining clubs."¹⁷ One of Manhattan's most famous examples was the Cloud Club in the Chrysler Building (a designated New York City Landmark), which opened in July 1930 and occupied three floors in the crown.¹⁸ This 300-member dining club catered to midtown businessmen and may have provided a model for the Rainbow Room and the Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club.¹⁹

Naming the Rainbow Room proved to be a challenge. In an undated memo, Darling insisted that it be "distinctive" and "not sound like an ordinary Eighth Avenue food joint." He also expressed a dislike of the word restaurant and urged the management to choose a name associated with building's height and a sense of exclusivity.²⁰ At first, "Stratosphere Room" was selected. This name referred to the earth's second layer of atmosphere and was, consequently, meant to underscore the room's aerial perch. In late August 1934, however, it was replaced by Rainbow Room.²¹

The name was inspired by the installation of new technology – an RCA color organ "that automatically converts music into changing colors in harmony with the moods expressed by the music."²² Introduced in the early 1920s, this device was developed by RCA-Victor, the primary tenant in the building, and was used regularly to entertain audiences at the 6,200-seat Radio City Music Hall (opened December 1932, a designated Interior Landmark) and at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago (1933).²³ When music was played, concealed color lights would project across the room's dome and illuminate the dance floor. This novelty generated considerable attention and the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported:

. . . a unique note is the room's indirect lighting arrangement which automatically adjusts itself to fit the mood of the music. If you whistle shrilly into the mike, for instance, yellow lights flood the ceiling. And for softer musical tones, the softer shades of light suffuse the room (romance via robot, huh?).²⁴

It was intended to synchronize with a four-manual (keyboard) Wurlitzer organ, which was frequently played by Radio City's chief organist, Richard Leibert. The sound of this instrument, however, was criticized as "funereal"²⁵ and was rarely used after 1935.²⁶

Designing the Rainbow Room

The layout of the Rainbow Room was mostly determined by late 1933 and the budget was finalized in January 1934. The estimated cost of construction was \$211,000, with the most expensive items being the organ and metalwork.²⁷ Work on the interiors probably commenced in February 1934. The Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club debuted in early September, and the Rainbow Room, in early October. An informative description of "New York's newest dining and dancing establishment...known as the Rainbow Room" was released to the press on August 21, 1934.²⁸

Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1981) probably served as lead designer. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, he moved to New York City in 1916 where he worked briefly for the architects

McKim Mead & White and Bertram Goodhue. At Rockefeller Center, Harrison was a member of the Associated Architects, initially working with Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray and later J. Andre Fouilhoux. Harrison would continue to work on architectural projects at Rockefeller Center until the end of his career in the mid-1970s. Fouilhoux's partner, Raymond M. Hood, had been seriously ill since late 1933 and in his absence Harrison began to play an increasingly important role in design matters. Not only was the room's final decorative scheme described as "left to the discretion of the architects," but the consultant-developer John R. Todd (1867-1945) identified the room's "terraced" plan as "his [Harrison's] scheme."²⁹

Harrison had little, if any, experience designing nightclubs or restaurants and looked to contemporary models for inspiration. He was clearly drawn to spaces that had a sleek, minimalist character – dark rooms that employed indirect lighting and reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and glass, to create drama and visual interest. Joseph Urban, a leading designer of Manhattan nightclubs, had made sophisticated use of such elements in his recent work, in the black glass ceiling of the ballroom in the Central Park Casino (1929), the mirrored circular bar of the Park Avenue Restaurant (1931), and in the Persian Room (1934) at the Plaza Hotel, which featured mirrored bays and a circular dance floor. In the Rainbow Room, the circular dance floor was unusual because it revolved, allowing the room (and the reflections) to constantly change. This novelty was introduced to New Yorkers at Murray's Roman Gardens on 42nd Street in 1915, which closed during Prohibition.³⁰ Norman Bel Geddes also proposed a rotating "Aerial" restaurant for the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, and the Chez Ami Theatre Restaurant (1934) in Buffalo, New York, had a "revolving bar," created by owner Phil Amigone.³¹

The Rainbow Room is almost square in shape, measuring 72 feet (east-west) by 62 feet (north-south). In the absence of free-standing columns and piers, the 24 windows define the room's character and establish a consistent visual rhythm. Each opening begins close to the floor and extends to the edge of the ceiling, approximately 24 feet. While the exterior glazing has standard painted steel mullions,³² the interior panels (currently in storage) were originally "nickel bronze casement sash" that matched the various railings.³³ This layout pleased John D. Rockefeller, Jr. who attended many of the architects' meetings and praised "the proposed scheme of decoration – especially the use of double windows and the use to be made of them as part of the scheme."³⁴ Set flush with the adjacent walls, each window's interior sash was designed to be raised and lowered, allowing the restaurant's staff to adjust the floor-to-ceiling drapes and to control the room temperature. Radiators were installed at the base of many windows. Here, flower boxes were displayed during warmer months.

What is visible through each opening – particularly at dusk and during evening hours – dominates the room. In 1934, the *New York Times* called the windows "huge . . . commanding a sweeping view of North, East and South Manhattan."³⁵ Because their size was larger than usual, *Time* magazine referred to them as "high glass walls."³⁶ And *Arts & Decoration* commented:

Never has the clear, unobtrusive plane of glass had a better chance to prove its merits. All that separate the diner and dancer from the sky and the blinking towers of the tallest buildings in the world are glass and the structure that supports it.³⁷

Straight lines and right angles may define the shapes of the window openings and the room's perimeter, but "a circular motif [was] carried out in all decorations."³⁸ Curved forms were particularly fashionable during the 1930s, giving contemporary interiors and consumer products a sleek, streamlined character. Harrison traveled to Berlin, Moscow and Leningrad in September 1931 where his entourage visited several recently-constructed theaters, including, most notably,

Erich Mendelsohn's Universum Cinema (1926-28, demolished and rebuilt), a project distinguished by smooth surfaces and indirect lighting.³⁹ This Berlin theater, as well as the egg-shaped auditorium in Joseph Urban's New School for Social Research (1929-31, a designated Landmark Interior), likely influenced Harrison and his team's design for Radio City, particularly the use of curved walls, dramatic staircases and indirect lighting fixtures. Rounded elements were also used frequently in New York City nightclubs, such as the circular bar in the Park Avenue Restaurant (Joseph Urban, 1931) and the House of Morgan (Scott & Teegan, 1936), which featured a bar of similar shape and mirrored walls.

From the elevated threshold in the northwest corner, guests could gaze across the Rainbow Room in its entirety. One enters on a diagonal, descending two sets of wide steps to reach the central dance floor. To improve sightlines, tiered seating arrangements were used around the perimeter. There were single tiers along the north and south walls, and in the alcove where a u-shaped bench was originally installed, and double tiers in the northeast and southeast corners.⁴⁰ These platforms had curving profiles to complement the shape of the revolving dance floor and stage. The tiers in the east corners face west and served the largest number of guests. With square, round and rectangular tables, the total capacity was approximately 300 persons. At mid-day, when it functioned as the Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club, the dance floor was covered with carpeting and an additional 75 guests could be accommodated.

Two architectural elements help focus attention on the room's core. The parquet floor is approximately 32 feet in diameter. It revolves clockwise and counterclockwise and each revolution lasts three or five minutes.⁴¹ The current fumed oak and maple marquetry resembles the original pattern and was re-created by Roger Berk of Haywood Berk Floor Company. In 1987, he told the *New York Times*:

. . . the original installation was done by [my] grandfather. And then, early in the 1950s, my father replaced the floor. In that incarnation, however, the pattern was modified. "What we've done is restored the pattern of 1934," Mr. Berk said. "It's a compass rose, sort of a star, surrounded by two sets of diamond patterns, each within a circular band." Mr. Berk admitted to being "sentimentally attached" to a job that was "literally in the footsteps of my father and his father."⁴²

A 41-foot-diameter dome hovers above the dance floor. In addition to hiding various recessed lights, a chandelier was hung from the center circle, suspended from a brass pole and ringed canopy.

The west side of the room was primarily devoted to entertainment, including a low platform for the orchestra or band, and above it, the entertainers' balcony. The musicians were "seated before a curved mirror screen" which hid the entrance doors to the L-shaped service pantry containing dumbwaiters and stairs to the 64th floor kitchen. At each side of the musician's platform were curving stairways, screened by glass panels with brass mullions.⁴³ The shallow balcony functioned as a modest elevated stage for performances, with curtains and dressing areas at the rear. The RCA color organ was originally installed along the south wall, adjacent to the seating tier in the southwest corner. On the far side of the room, directly opposite the balcony, a pair of false columns was constructed. Designed to appear as an extension to the east alcove, each mirrored column disguised a ladder and platform where stagehands operated "spots and floodlights."⁴⁴

A Modern Interior with Classical Touches

When the Rainbow Room opened, there was relatively little written about the decorative scheme. The term “Art Deco” did not exist and most contemporary writers focused on the views and fashionable clientele. In November 1934, *Arts & Decoration* magazine published a brief account that said: “Some very clever thinking has gone on behind this newest and most tip top of the night rendezvous . . . The room itself bows to the ladies. It steps back in a kind of restrained Oriental way and gives gowns their chance.”⁴⁵ *Architectural Forum* called it “Modern, like most post-Repeal ventures . . . To the Speakeasy Generation, inured to smoke-filled catacombs, it offers supreme luxuries: high ceilings and windows to look out of.”⁴⁶ A half century later, architect-historian Robert A. M. Stern wrote in *New York 1930* that the Rainbow Room defied the Depression and was a “tour de force of the Modern Classical style,” while architect Hugh Hardy, who supervised the 1987 renovation, describes it as “American Modern” or “American Modernism . . . typified by highly stylized geometric abstraction; the notion of getting down to the underlying order of things.”⁴⁷

A small group of architectural features complement but never upstage the room’s most unique asset – exceptional city views. What simple decorative elements were chosen – a shallow plaster dome, circular parquet floor, carpeting and crystal chandeliers – were loosely related to mainstream classical taste, while the lucid plan and wall treatments suggest the influence of Streamlined Modernism, or simply early Modernism, sometimes referred to as “moderne” or modernistic during this period. Popular with architects and designers, this style was a uniquely American response to what later would be labeled “Art Deco,” distinguished by unornamented surfaces, thin bands of parallel lines and industrial materials. Shaped by current technological trends and difficult economic times, most notable examples would make limited use of architectural embellishment.

Elena B(achman) Schmidt (c. 1890-1955) was hired as the interior decorator for the 65th floor restaurants in mid-January 1934. Born in Colombia, she was briefly associated with Elsie de Wolfe & Company around 1920, and following her marriage to the New York City architect Mott B. Schmidt in 1921, established her own decorating firm. Her contract with Rockefeller Center stipulated that she would aid the architects “in the selection of the color, materials and finishes.”⁴⁸ Though much of the room’s physical character had already been determined by the Associated Architects, Schmidt was involved in many of the finishing touches, helping select the furniture and draperies, as well as uniforms for the elevator operators.

Vincent Minnelli (1903-1986), who later became a major Hollywood film director, would also play a role in the room’s design. He was currently a set designer at Radio City and offered to “prepare several colored panel samples” to test on the auditorium’s stage, under various lights.⁴⁹ The color selected for the walls and ceiling was described as:

. . . subdued. Walls and floors will be used merely for background effects. People will furnish the background colors. The long, narrow wall panels between the full length windows are finished in a rich brown satin.⁵⁰

Subsequent news articles, however, described the wall color as plum or aubergine. A similar hue was chosen for the ceiling linen, and for the curtains that hung inside the windows.⁵¹ In addition, a “deep, soft, dull green carpet figured in Greek key design” was installed throughout the room.

To enhance and multiply the visual activity, mirrors were installed – on the east and west walls, flanking the stage, and in the east alcove. This was a popular design element in the 1930s, appearing in a great number of fashionable interiors. For instance, Schmidt’s former employer, Elsie de Wolfe, installed mirrors throughout the Frances and Jules Brulatour apartment (1934) in

New York City, and many nightclubs made extensive use of reflective surfaces. One particularly dramatic example was located in Rockefeller Center, throughout the main lobby and lounge at Radio City. The latter interior, on the basement level, features nine diamond-shaped piers faced with gunmetal mirrors and chrome trim.⁵²

Lighting was also important to the room's design. Though much of it was subtle and indirect, in some places crystal fixtures were used to "give radiance."⁵³ These elements stood out against the fabric walls, bringing light and sparkle to the room. The most prominent hanging fixtures were four (now three) chandeliers,⁵⁴ as well as multiple glass-and-aluminum sconces, set high on the walls between some windows and on both sides of the east alcove. These fixtures were fabricated by Edward F. Cauldwell & Co., which specialized in the design of artistic electric lighting. Active in New York City from 1895 to 1938, this prominent firm produced fixtures for many well-known buildings and interiors, including the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1929-31, a designated New York City Landmark) and Radio City. Though Cauldwell did produce some modernistic designs in the 1930s, the Rainbow Room fixtures are quite ornate and were intended to contrast with the sleek character of the interior.

The largest and most elaborate chandelier was installed at the center of the room, directly above the rotating dance floor. All of the Caldwell fixtures were draped with similar glass ornament, including faceted prisms, balls, and stars – a subtle allusion to a night sky. These fixtures, however, provided relatively little light, and both concealed and recessed fixtures, as well as spot lights, were needed. The use of recessed down lights was relatively new. A contemporary advertisement touted the installation of such "invisible" fixtures throughout the Rockefeller Center complex, in the "Rainbow Restaurant," as well as in Mr. Rockefeller's private residence.⁵⁵

Nickel bronze railings were installed along the edges of the seating tiers. Added at the suggestion of John D. Rockefeller Jr., each curved handrail is supported by clear glass globes threaded on spindles. Lit by concealed lights, these eye-catching translucent elements were furnished by the Sutton Glass and Mirror Company.⁵⁶

A Mid-Air Rendezvous

Since October 3, 1934 the Rainbow Room has been one of New York City's premier nightspots. Open from 6:30pm to 2am, dinner initially cost \$3.50 per person and formal dress was required, except on Sundays. To enhance the sense of exclusivity, the well-dressed guests enjoyed their own elevators at the north end of the lobby, shielded by a curtain. On many evenings private events were held, including countless charity balls, scholarship drives, and award ceremonies. The first event was sponsored by the Hygiene and Social Service Committee of the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association, which guests paid \$15 to attend. Many who attended the opening had participated in the room's design, including members of the Rockefeller family, Wallace K. Harrison and Elena B. Schmidt, who were seated together, and Vincent Minnelli. During the first four years of operation, an estimated half million people attended events here.⁵⁷

The Rainbow Room generated extensive media coverage, especially on the society pages. Some journals chided the Rockefellers for their involvement in a business that sold liquor. John D. Rockefeller Jr. abstained from alcohol throughout his life and had, in fact, made significant donations to the Anti-Saloon League of New York. In "Talk of the Town," the *New Yorker* noted how different "his place" was from rival clubs, particularly the absence of "old nightclub haze – a mixture of cigarette smoke, tale, writer's venom, and strange Pontine vapors arising from

glasses of gin and ginger ale.”⁵⁸ Not only was the Rainbow Room one of the earliest nightspots to benefit from central air conditioning, but expectations were high because it opened shortly after Prohibition’s repeal, in December 1933.⁵⁹ Despite such unique comforts, it was difficult to attract the right kind of customers and the room struggled to earn a consistent profit. The dress code, for instance, was “relaxed to admit men merely wearing tuxedos,” who *Fortune* magazine described as the “nonflashy strata of the upper crust.”⁶⁰ There were financial losses during 1936 but the Rainbow Room was nevertheless viewed as an asset because the events that took place in this stylish venue helped promote the greater Rockefeller Center complex.⁶¹

Attendance at the Rainbow Room improved significantly in the late 1930s. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that there were impressive annual grosses, making the two venues on the 65th floor among the most successful in the nation.⁶² Press releases described the various celebrities and socialites who visited and an unusual roster of entertainers’ were presented, including now mostly-forgotten singers, dancers, comics, ventriloquists, magicians, athletes and animal acts. In December 1942, a year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Rainbow Room closed. The club, however, continued to operate during the war years because the “luncheon club idea [had] become has a fixed institution in high class office centers.”⁶³ At this time, women replaced men as wait staff and the panels between the windows were described as covered with “rich gold satin.”⁶⁴ When it reopened in 1950, the Rainbow Room functioned as a cocktail lounge only, shutting down at 9pm.

Subsequent History

Since 1932, the Rainbow Room has been leased to a succession of operators who have overseen various interior renovations. Though some changes were due to regular wear and tear, or the need for technical upgrades, involving air conditioning and lighting, these changes have generally involved in-kind replacements and have in most cases respected the room’s original palette, materials, and streamlined character. When closed by the American News Company for renovations during the summer of 1962, the room was said to have been “refurbished in its original nineteen-thirties décor – a style so rich with plum-colored silk walls, so dazzling with mirrored columns, so ornate with gold satin draperies that one expects, upon entering, to see a half smiling Fred Astaire.”⁶⁵ Under the Brody Corporation, which reintroduced live music and dancing in 1975, a caption that accompanied a black-and-white press photograph featured a similar description: “Panels between the windows are plum colored silk taffeta, complemented by gold draperies and emerald green carpeting.”⁶⁶ The following year, a writer for *Daily News* praised the room as a “genuine artifact . . . its décor remains virtually unchanged.”⁶⁷ *New York Magazine*, in April 1977, said it was like a “wondrous tethered spacecraft” in which “the room radiates outward in vibrant widening rings of light and ascending levels.”⁶⁸

The first structure in Rockefeller Center to be designated a New York City Landmark was the interior of Radio City Music Hall in March 1978, followed by the RCA Building (and Interior), as well as most of original complex, in 1985.⁶⁹ The RCA Building was renamed the GE (General Electric) Building in 1988 and a new illuminated sign was installed at the top of the north and south facades. A year later, in 1989, the Japanese Mitsubishi Estate Company purchased a majority interest in Rockefeller Center. An American consortium, consisting of Tishman Speyer Properties, Goldman Sachs & Company, and David Rockefeller, the youngest son of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., acquired the property in 1996.

The Rainbow Room was closed for major renovations in January 1986. Hugh Hardy (b. 1932) of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Architects oversaw the \$20 million project for tenant Joseph

H. Baum and Michael Whiteman. Tishman Realty & Construction, Inc. served as contractor. In a 1992 interview with architectural writer Mildred F. Schertz, Hardy summarized his approach. Most of the surface materials were replaced and the choices made by the architects were described as “painstaking[ly] researched in remaining office records and libraries.”⁷⁰

The project generated considerable praise from newspapers and magazines. In *A+U* magazine, design critic Sandy Heck described the surface treatments:

As in the original Rainbow, in the restoration north and south walls, as well as the ceiling soffit, have been covered in aubergine silk. No material distinction is made between vertical and horizontal surfaces. Again, as in the original, east and west walls are mirrored; Space seems to turn back on itself. Further confounding space, jambs in the Room’s twenty-four floor-to-ceiling windows are mirrored: Look East, you see west.⁷¹

The authors of *New York 2000* said:

Most dramatically of all, the Rainbow Room was restored and its adjoining bars and meeting rooms completely reimaged . . . only the deliriously mirrored Rainbow Room [was] left more or less as it had been originally designed, though even this incomparable room was tweaked, but in ways that did not alter its essential character.⁷²

At this time, some of the more important features were recreated, such as the 10-point compass rose pattern on the revolving dance floor and the glass globes on the railings. The plaster dome was also resurfaced with Dutch metal gilt strips on the rim, inspired by earlier conditions.⁷³ Some alterations, however, were more conspicuous – a new public entrance at the southwest corner to improve circulation, and “Orbit,” a 15-by-8 foot “wall of light” by glass artist Dan Dailey set behind the entertainers’ balcony.⁷⁴ A new lighting system was also introduced, controlled by computer rather than musical notes.

The Rainbow Room (and the adjoining spaces on the 65th floor) reopened with great fanfare in December 1987. A new operator, Cipriani International, took over the restaurant complex, including the Rainbow Room, in 1999.⁷⁵ This tenant removed the upper seating terraces in the northeast and southeast corners. Carpet, fabric ceilings and wall fabric were also replaced at this time, and some mirrors were added to the walls. In June 2009, the Rainbow Room and the Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club were closed.⁷⁶

Description

Historic: Terraced layout with alcove at east end, curving terraces and stairs at northwest entrance, entertainers’ balcony (stage), staircases to entertainers’ balcony, domed ceiling, false columns adjoining east alcove, north east and south-facing window openings, metal window frames (now refinished, interior metal window sashes in storage), metal railings with some original glass globes on terraces, three glass crystal chandeliers, including large central fixture hung from metal pipe with decorative canopy, glass crystal-and-metal wall sconces.

Alterations: Entrance at southwest corner of room added 1987, glass screen by Dan Dailey behind entertainers’ balcony, bandstand-buffet in front of entertainers’ balcony, air conditioning units on ceiling, placement of some recessed lighting fixtures, removal of side terraces along north and south walls, removal of upper terraces in northeast and southeast corners, re-creation of rotating wood dance floor with 10-point star pattern in 1987, resurfacing of plaster dome and

addition of metal bands, as well as the replacement of wall fabric, ceiling fabric, carpet, curtains, draperies, and mirrors, including some new mirrors on the west wall.

Researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

¹ Rockefeller Center was designated a landmark in April 1985. See Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Rockefeller Center* (LP-1446) report by Janet Adams (New York: City of New York, 1985). For additional information on the Rainbow Room's history and present condition, see CivicVisions LP, "Summary of Analysis of Rainbow Room, Rockefeller Center," prepared for owner Tishman Speyer (2009), and Mary B. Dierickx, "The Rainbow Room: A Cultural Icon," prepared for Cipriani USA, Inc. (2008). For more on the history of the complex, see Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Rockefeller Center* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003); and Robert A. M. Stern et al, *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 1987), 291.

² The Rockefeller Group purchased the leasehold from Columbia University in 1985. Eleven years later, in 1996, they transferred ownership of the original properties to a real estate investment trust, known as Rockefeller Center Properties, Inc.

³ Okrent, 373.

⁴ These three Raymond Hood buildings are designated New York City Landmarks.

⁵ The ground floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza was designated an interior landmark in April 1985. For a complete description of this space, see Landmarks Preservation Commission, *RCA Building, ground floor interior* (LP-1448) (New York: City of New York, 1985).

⁶ "Play Spot Planned Atop RCA Building," *New York Times*, May 24, 1933, 24.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Quits as Playland Head," *New York Times*, October 1, 1933, 31; "Night Club To Open Atop RCA Building," *New York Times*, August 22, 1934, 11.

⁹ "Building the Fair," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, April 5, 1939, 9.

¹⁰ "Elevator Speeds 1,400 Feet A Minute," *New York Times*, July 14, 1933, 19.

¹¹ Okrent, 256.

¹² "RCA Rainbow Room Success Under Native Utican," *Utica Observer*, April 26, 1942, viewed online at <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹³ By fall 1935, an average of 1,300 people visited the roof each day. Krinsky, 80. The observation deck is currently called "Top of the Rock."

¹⁴ "RCA Observatory Opened to Public," *New York Times*, July 19, 1933, 19.

¹⁵ "Night Club Notes," *New York Times*, June 8, 1935, 12.

¹⁶ "New Dining Places Atop Skyscrapers," *New York Times*, July 15, 1934, RE1.

¹⁷ "Dining Clubs in Office Buildings," *New York Times*, January 4, 1903, viewed online.

¹⁸ The Chrysler Building lobby is a designated interior landmark. The Cloud Club closed in 1979 and is now used as offices.

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- ¹⁹ “New Dining Places Atop Skyscrapers,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1934.
- ²⁰ Frank W. Darling memo, Rockefeller Center (RC) Archive.
- ²¹ Letter from Frank W. Darling to John Roy, August 31, 1934, RC Archive.
- ²² “Night Club to Open Atop RCA Building.”
- ²³ “Color Organ to Play in Radio City Shows,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1931, 25.
- ²⁴ Art Arthur, “Applause,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 4, 1934, 24.
- ²⁵ Letter, W.L. Searles to Eugene Baumgartner, May 4, 1943; viewed in 2011 at nycago.org.
- ²⁶ The organ was removed in 1986.
- ²⁷ Architects Minutes, possibly January 5, 1934, RC Archive.
- ²⁸ “Night Club to Open Atop RCA Building.”
- ²⁹ Architects Minutes, March 1, 1934; January 14, 1934, RC Archive.
- ³⁰ See <http://www.jazzageclub.com/venues/the-magnificent-murrays-roman-gardens>.
- ³¹ See <http://www.forgottenbuffalo.com/forgottenbflofeatures/chezami311delawareave.html>
- ³² Prior to designation of the interior, LPC issued a Certificate of No Effect to the landmark building for replacement of this feature.
- ³³ Cost estimates for architectural elements, probably January 5, 1934, RC Archive.
- ³⁴ Architects Minutes, December 21, 1933, RC Archive.
- ³⁵ “Society at Opening of Rainbow Room,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1934, 20.
- ³⁶ “Music: Parisienne,” *Time*, October 8, 1934, viewed online at <http://time.com>
- ³⁷ “Society at Opening of Rainbow Room.” Also see “Salon in the Sky,” *Arts & Decoration* (November 1934), 32.
- ³⁸ Press release, 1, RC Archive.
- ³⁹ Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1989), 47.
- ⁴⁰ The north and south tiers were removed before 1956. See floor plan in “Limited Study of Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club, Inc. by Harris Kerr Forster & Company, December 10, 1956, RC Archive.
- ⁴¹ “Music: Parisienne,” *Time*, October 8, 1934, viewed online.
- ⁴² Dennis Hevesi, “Ah, Yes, Isn’t It Romantic? Rainbow Room to Reopen,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1987, B1. The Haywood Berk Company was founded in 1923.
- ⁴³ Press release, 2, RC Archive.
- ⁴⁴ Architects Minutes, February 5, 1934, RC Archive.
- ⁴⁵ “Salon in the Sky.”
- ⁴⁶ “Rainbow Room, Rockefeller Center,” *Architectural Forum* (February 1936), 126.
- ⁴⁷ Hevesi, B2.
- ⁴⁸ Letter to Elena B. Schmidt (author’s name is not visible), January 19, 1934, RC Archive.
- ⁴⁹ Architects Minutes, January 29, 1934 and March 15, 1934, RC Archive. Minnelli may have offered suggestions about configuring the stage and the west end of the room.
- ⁵⁰ Press release. Also see “Rainbow Tonight,” October 4, 1934, RC Archive.
- ⁵¹ “Salon in The Sky,” “Society at Opening of Rainbow Room,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1934, 20.

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- ⁵² Radio City Music Hall Designation Report, 13.
- ⁵³ “Night Club to Open Atop RCA Building.”
- ⁵⁴ Based on a photo in the RC Archives, the chandelier in the east alcove was removed by 1963.
- ⁵⁵ Advertisement, 1934/1935, viewed in RC Archive.
- ⁵⁶ Architect’s Minutes, January 25, 1934, RC Archive.
- ⁵⁷ RC Archive.
- ⁵⁸ “Talk of the Town: Notes and Comment,” *The New Yorker* (October 13, 1934), viewed at <http://www.newyorker.com/archive>.
- ⁵⁹ Carrier Engineering was responsible for the air conditioning in the RCA Building. Up to this time, it was largest contract “ever awarded.” See “\$1,000, 000 for Air Conditioning,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 1932, 14.
- ⁶⁰ Okrent, 368.
- ⁶¹ “Lyons Den,” *New York Evening Post*, October 22, 1936, section 2, 1.
- ⁶² Harold Conrad, “Gotham Grapevine,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 4, 1941, 5.
- ⁶³ Director’s Meeting, January 23, 1943, RC Archive.
- ⁶⁴ This quote, which describes the room as “now closed” was found in an undated memo in the RC Archive.
- ⁶⁵ “Rainbow Room and Grill: Up, Up and Away From It All,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1965, 24.
- ⁶⁶ Photo, RC Archive.
- ⁶⁷ *Daily News Sunday Magazine*, September 19, 1976, F20.
- ⁶⁸ *New York Magazine*, April 11, 1977, viewed in RC Archive.
- ⁶⁹ The Radio City Music Hall designation report makes reference to all of the interior elements, including wall and floor coverings, stage curtains, and even fire hoses. See Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Radio City Music Hall* (interiors) (LP-0995) (New York: City of New York, 1978). The observatory closed in May 1986. Other restaurant interiors that have been given landmark status include: Gage & Tollner (1892), Brooklyn; the Della Robbia Bar (1910-13); various rooms on the ground floor of the Plaza Hotel (1907); the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Terminal (1913); and the Four Seasons Restaurant (1958-59) in the Seagram Building.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 164; Okrent, 431. For more about the firm’s research, see Edie Lee Cohen, “Rainbow,” in *Interior Design* (June 1988), 248.
- ⁷¹ Sandy Heck, “The Rainbow Room,” *Architecture + Urbanism* (December 1988), 51.
- ⁷² Robert A. M. Stern, David Fishman and Jacob Tilove, *New York 2000: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Bicentennial and the Millennium* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006), 576.
- ⁷³ It is difficult to determine, other than a 1977 Esto photograph, whether the centering of the strips is based on historic precedent. For a 1934 view of the dome and a 1986 working drawing, see report by CivicVisions, 6.
- ⁷⁴ “David Rockefeller Builds His Club in the Sky,” *Manhattan, Inc.* (December 1987), 61.
- ⁷⁵ “New Operators Likely for Rainbow Room at End of Year,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1998, B10; “Change at Rainbow Room,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1998, B7; “Last Dance at the Rainbow Room,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1998, ST1.
- ⁷⁶ “A Farewell to Glamour Atop the Rock,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2009, viewed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/20/nyregion/20bigcity>.

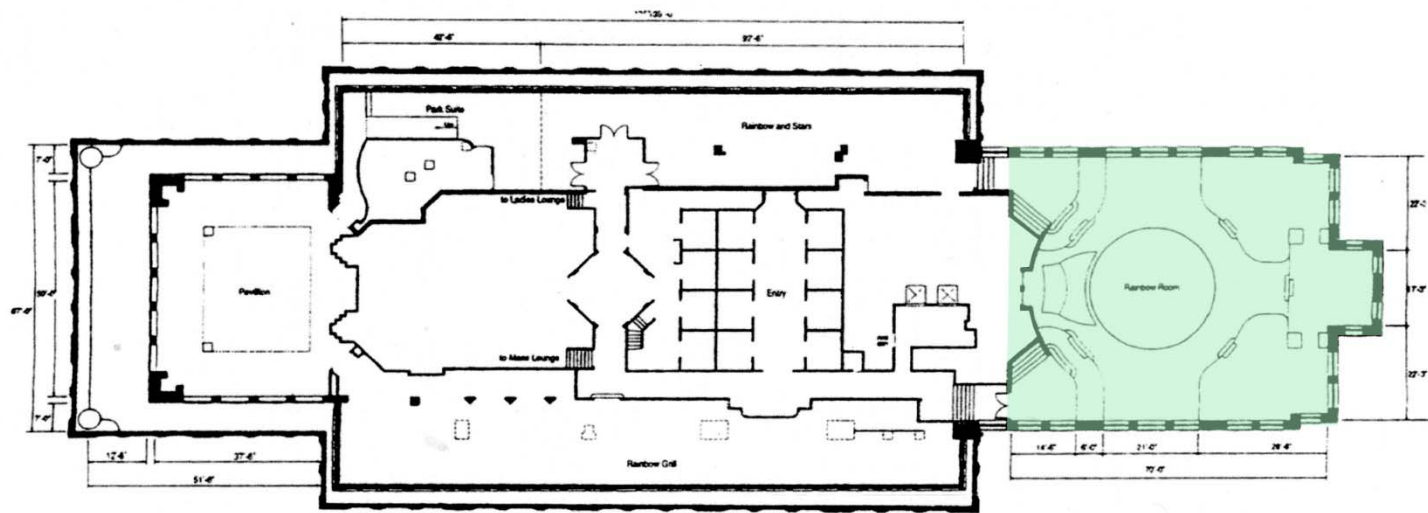
FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION


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

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Rainbow Room survives as one of the few remaining early 20th-century nightclubs in New York City; that since opening on October 3, 1934, it has been an elegant supper club, a place to dine, dance, and enjoy incomparable views; that it is located at the east end of the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza; that it was designed by the Associated Architects, who served as architect of the building; that Wallace K. Harrison, a member of the firm Corbett Harrison & McMurray, acted as lead architect, working with the interior decorator Elena Bachman Schmidt; that in the building's original design this double-height space was conceived as a single volume, without columns; that the 24 windows are some of the largest in the building; that construction began shortly after the repeal of Prohibition in early 1934 and was completed by September 1934; that the general style is Streamlined Modern, with calculated neo-classical flourishes; that Harrison's scheme was influenced by the work of Joseph Urban, who designed many Manhattan nightclubs during this period, as well as works by the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, which Harrison visited during a 1931 trip to Europe; that guests originally entered the room from the northwest corner, descending wide steps that lead towards a circular dance floor and domed ceiling; that the almost square room had a capacity of more than 300 persons and many were seated on tiered platforms located around the perimeter; that the chandeliers and wall sconces were fabricated in Manhattan by Edward F. Caldwell & Company; that the Rainbow Room has always generated considerable attention from the media and has served as a fashionable setting for musical and dance performances, private parties, charity balls, scholarship drives and award ceremonies; that during business hours it functioned as the Rockefeller Luncheon Club, which drew members from the surrounding office complex; that Hugh Hardy, of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, supervised a thoughtful renovation in 1987 that preserved many historic features; and that this rare example of Streamlined Modern design retains many of its original characteristics and remains one of New York City's most elegant and elevated restaurant interiors.

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 Rainbow Room, consisting of the eastern section of the 65th floor interior, the fixtures and interior components of this space, including but not limited to, the walls and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, rotating wood dance floor, stairs, stage, seating platforms, glass panel screens, chandeliers, wall sconces, and window frames; 30 Rockefeller Plaza, aka 1240-1256 Avenue of the Americas, 31-81 West 49th Street, and 30-64 West 50th Street, Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1265, Lot 1069, in part.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice Chair
Frederick Bland, Diana Chapin, Michael Goldblum,
Christopher Moore, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners



 | Boundary of Interior Landmark

The Rainbow Room, located in the eastern section of the 65th floor interior, consisting of the fixtures and interior components of this space, including but not limited to, the walls and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, rotating wood dance floor, stairs, stage, seating platforms, glass panel screens, chandeliers, wall sconces, and window frames; 30 Rockefeller Plaza, aka 1240-1256 Avenue of the Americas, 31-81 West 49th Street, and 30-64 West 50th Street, Manhattan.



The Rainbow Room

Part of 65th floor interior, east side

30 Rockefeller Plaza, aka 1240-1256 Avenue of the Americas

31-81 West 49th Street, 30-64 West 50th Street

Top: view west towards entrances and entertainers balcony.

Lower: view to east

Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2012



The Rainbow Room
Top: south wall. Lower: north wall
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2012



The Rainbow Room

Top: View towards southeast corner, from stairs

Lower: View east from the entertainers balcony

Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2012



The Rainbow Room
East alcove
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2012



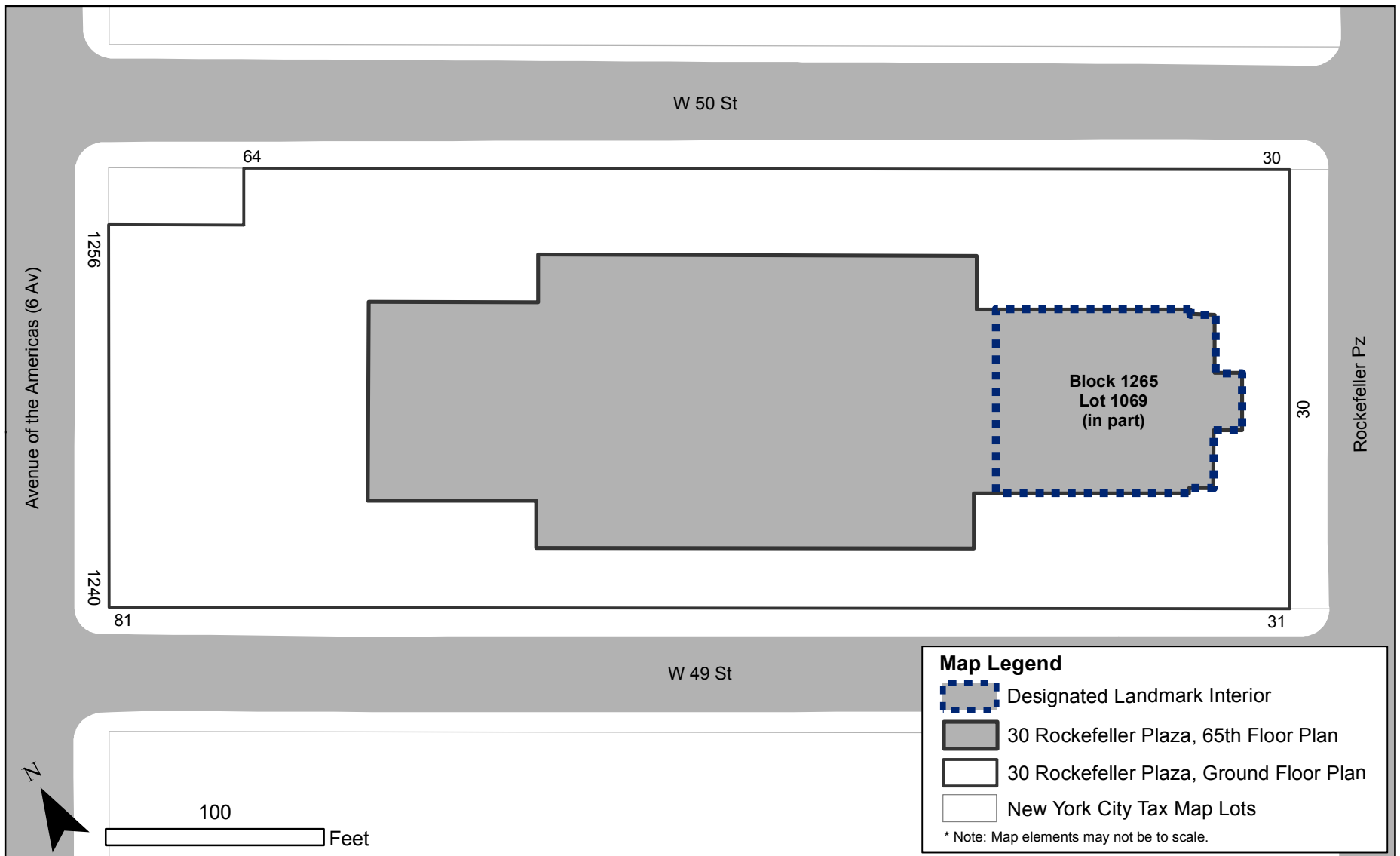
The Rainbow Room
Side windows, south side
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2012



The Rainbow Room
Center chandelier
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



The Rainbow Room
Wall sconce
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2011



THE RAINBOW ROOM (LP-2505), 30 Rockefeller Plaza (aka 1240-1256 Avenue of the Americas, 31-81 West 49th Street, and 30-64 West 50th Street). Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1265, Lot 1069, in part, consisting of the Rainbow Room, located in the eastern section of the 65th floor interior, consisting of the fixtures and interior components of this space, including but not limited to, the walls and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, rotating wood dance floor, stairs, stage, seating platforms, glass panel screens, chandeliers, wall sconces, and window frames.

Designated: October 16, 2012