

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

For NPS use only

received AUG 18 1983

date entered

1. Name

historic Lever House

and or common

2. Location

street & number 390 Park Avenue _____ not for publication

city, town New York _____ vicinity of

state New York code 036 county New York code 061

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
___ district	___ public	___ ☒ occupied	___ agriculture
___ ☒ building(s)	___ ☒ private	___ unoccupied	___ ☒ commercial
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational
___ site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	___ entertainment
___ object	NA in process	___ ☒ yes: restricted	___ government
	NA being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial
		___ no	___ military
			___ museum
			___ park
			___ private residence
			___ religious
			___ scientific
			___ transportation
			___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name See continuation sheet

street & number

city, town _____ vicinity of _____ state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. New York County Register's Office

street & number 31 Chambers Street

city, town New York state N Y 10007

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

(LP-1277)
title Landmarks Preservation Commission has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes ☒ no

date November 9, 1982 ___ federal ___ state ___ county ☒ local

depository for survey records Landmarks Preservation Commission 20 Vesey St.

city, town New York state N Y 10007

7. Description

Condition

☒ excellent
☐ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☐ unaltered
☒ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☐ moved date N/A

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Lever House is situated in the midtown section of Manhattan to the north of Grand Central Terminal. The nominated property completely fills a lot that is nearly square, bounded by East 54th Street on the north, Park Avenue on the east and East 53rd Street on the south. To the west the lot adjoins another smaller office building and a hotel, near the center of the block. Lever House is located on a street lined with glass and steel office structures, many of which tower above it. Its immediate neighbors include the Raquet and Tennis Club Building and the Seagram Building south of East 53rd Street. The property consists of a twenty-four-story glass and steel structure set perpendicular to Park Avenue above a two-story base element (Photo No. 1). The ground floor is made up of a combination of open colonnaded space and interior space, defined solely by panels of glass. Above this, a single floor enclosed by glass and steel wraps around the entire lot and surrounds an open courtyard located just to the south of the tower.

The ground floor of Lever House is composed primarily of an open space paved in light and dark terrazzo to reflect the grid of the building's walls. This space is pierced by stainless-steel clad columns which support the floor above and a glass-enclosed reception area located directly below the tower (Photo No. 3). Three revolving glass doors allow access to this indoor area, which also serves as an art gallery. Towards the western edge of the lot, a solid black marble wall encloses another section of the ground floor, containing elevator banks and a small auditorium or conference room. Another small enclosed section is located toward the southeastern corner of the lot. This rectangular space is clad in white marble with stainless-steel doors and serves as an exit for fire stairs. To the south of the tower, part of the ground floor area is open to the sky and this section contains a raised, rectangular planter with a reflecting pool (Photo No. 4).

The second floor, which takes the form of a horizontal slab wrapped around the open central courtyard, appears to hover over the entire site (Photo No. 2).

Originally this area housed an employees' dining room but it has been converted to a computer center. The glass elevations of this slab continue the line of the street wall set up by the neighboring buildings on Park Avenue and on the side streets.

Above the second floor the tower rises to accommodate nineteen office floors and three additional floors of mechanical equipment. The tower, only 53 feet wide, is a vertical slab set perpendicular to the avenue. The service core of the

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Lever House

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Owner of Property:

Robert G. Goelet Et al
425 Park Avenue
New York N. Y. 10022

Owner of Building:

Metropolitan Life Insurance Co.
1 Madison Avenue
New York, N. Y.

Leasee of Building:

Lever Brothers Co.
390 Park Avenue
New York N.Y. 10022

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New York County, N. Y.

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tower is located at the rear of the slab, at the western edge, and forms a solid masonry wall. The other three elevations, as well as the "returns" on the rear wall of the property, are entirely glazed. The outline of the tower covers only 25 percent of the total lot area.

The exterior walls of Lever House were designed as a grid of stainless steel mullions anchored to the structural skeleton at every floor level. These mullions hold in place large and small panels of fixed glass. The large panels (the windows) are green-tinted, heat absorbing transparent glass, and the small panels are tinted wired-glass spandrels sheathing the floor slabs behind. Over the years, panels that have cracked or broken have been replaced by glass of two slightly different shades. The smaller, blue-green panels run in double bands beneath the transparent panels. These panels provide a horizontal counterpoint to the thin gleaming vertical mullions. Behind the spandrels the mechanical systems provided the building with heating and air conditioning.

In order to clean these fixed glass walls, the architects designed an innovative window cleaning gondola that could be lowered from the room and which moved on a miniature railroad track behind the parapet. This machinery continues to function today.

Except for the replacement glass panels mentioned above and some concrete sections which have replaced some areas of terrazzo on the sidewalk, the building is free from alterations.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
☐ prehistoric	☐ archeology-prehistoric	☐ community planning	☐ landscape architecture	☐ religion
☐ 1400–1499	☐ archeology-historic	☐ conservation	☐ law	☐ science
☐ 1500–1599	☐ agriculture	☐ economics	☐ literature	☐ sculpture
☐ 1600–1699	☒ architecture	☐ education	☐ military	☐ social/
☐ 1700–1799	☐ art	☐ engineering	☐ music	☐ humanitarian
☐ 1800–1899	☐ commerce	☐ exploration/settlement	☐ philosophy	☐ theater
☒ 1900–	☐ communications	☐ industry	☐ politics/government	☐ transportation
		☐ invention		☐ other (specify)

Specific dates 1950–52

Builder/Architect Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Gordon Bunshaft, Partner in Charge

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Lever House is architecturally and historically significant as one of the first corporate expressions of the International Style in post World War II America, as an outstanding example of the work of the nationally prominent architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, as one of the first projects to take advantage of a change in New York City's zoning law allowing for construction of an unbroken rectangular slab and a ground level open plaza, and as one of the first buildings constructed during the transformation of Park Avenue from a residential area to the city's most prestigious corporate location.¹

Designed and built in 1950–52, Lever House established the reputation of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and its chief designer, Gordon Bunshaft. With its emphasis on volume and surface rather than mass, Lever House exemplified the basic tenets of the International Style. Its construction on Park Avenue at a time when the section north of Grand Central Terminal was still residential initiated the great influx of commercial development on this street. Because it used only a portion of its lot and, therefore, could be built without setbacks, Lever House broke the tradition of the "shaped tower" skyscrapers that had prevailed since early in the century. Its ground floor public courtyard was the first use of what was to become an almost standard component of office building design in New York City. Built to serve as the New York headquarters of Lever Brothers Company, the noted manufacturer of soap, detergent and other household products, this structure created a striking and successful image for the company and provided encouragement for many other American corporations to redefine their own architectural images within the framework of modern architecture. In siting, form, materials, and design, Lever House embodies the ideals of modern architecture. It has set important precedents for the design of many American office buildings and has exerted great influence on issues of planning and development in New York City. Although less than fifty years old Lever House is recognized as of pivotal importance in the history and development of American architecture.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acres of nominated property Less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Central Park

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	8
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5	8	6	6	8	0
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4	5	1	2	3	4	0
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Zone Easting Northing

B

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Zone Easting Northing

C

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D

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H

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property occupies Manhattan Tax Map Block 1289, Lot 36, as outlined on the attached map, with a scale of 1" = 120,.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries N/A

state	code	county	code
-------	------	--------	------

state	code	county	code
-------	------	--------	------

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Contact: L.E. Gobrecht

Historic Preservation Field

organization Services Bureau

date May 1983

street & number Agency Bldg #1, E.S.P.

telephone (518)474-0479

city or town Albany

state N Y 12238

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

☒ national ☐ state ☐ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title Commissioner

date

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Keeper of the National Register

date

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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date entered

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The Lever Brothers Company was founded in England by William Hesketh Lever. His first product was "Sunlight" soap which was marketed in the United States as early as 1890. By 1900, Lever Brothers had established its first American factory in Boston. In 1949, after much expansion, the Lever Brothers Company (the American division of the international Unilever, Ltd.) moved its operations from Boston to New York. The firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was commissioned to design a modern headquarters for Lever Brothers' exclusive use on Park Avenue, as well as a large research facility and manufacturing plant in Edgewater, New Jersey. The company that had introduced to the American public such well-known brand names as Lux and Lifebuoy clearly wanted to convey an image of sparkling cleanliness and modernity. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill were leading proponents of the International Style, which at that time was seen to symbolize production and modern living and was thus a logical choice for the image that Lever Brothers wished to project. The firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was established in 1936 in Chicago by Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings. In 1937, in order to receive an important commission, Skidmore opened a separate office in New York, the first of a series of offices which eventually were established throughout the world. Although managed individually, professional expertise was shared among all the offices and they possessed a common approach to building design. This began as early as 1939 when the two original partners decided that they would develop a staff capable of creating and coordinating big projects. John O. Merrill, one of the specialists hired for this purpose, was an architectural engineer who became a limited partner in the firm in 1939. Gordon Bunshaft joined this team in 1938, becoming the major design force in the firm and a full partner in 1946. Bunshaft was an American disciple of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the firm's principal interpreter of the International Style. Bunshaft disliked regional influences on architecture, striving instead for a more formalized, universal form that was guided by pragmatic utilitarianism and the industrial aesthetic. Following Lever House, which he designed in 1949-50, Bunshaft was involved in the design of a number of outstanding buildings, including: Manufacturer's Hanover Bank (1953-54) on Fifth Avenue; The Union Carbide Building (1960) on Park Avenue; the U.S. Air Force Academy (1959) in Colorado Springs; the Chase Manhattan Bank Headquarters (1960) in downtown Manhattan; and No. 140 Broadway (1967).

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The site on which Lever House was constructed has undergone numerous changes since the early nineteenth century when it was part of a farm owned by Charles McEvers. Railroad tracks, laid down originally along the center of Fourth Avenue (Park Avenue) in 1834, were later placed below ground, first in an open depression and, by 1905, completely covered over. At this later date, Park Avenue became the site of numerous large, luxury masonry apartment houses which replaced earlier commercial and service structures. When the Lever Brothers Company began plans for its new building, the site was occupied by a small, commercial building with numerous shops and the Normandie Theater which faced East 53rd Street. The construction of Lever House on this site began a rapid change in the appearance and character of Park Avenue above 46th Street. Within ten years after Lever House was built, most of the masonry buildings of the early twentieth century were replaced by glass and steel skyscrapers.

Most of these new buildings, of which Lever House was the first, were designed in the International Style, an outgrowth of nineteenth-century concerns with functionalism and the post-World War I upheaval of Europe. The architects who designed in this style, exemplified in the United States by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, desired to create a modern, well-ordered, and enlightened world. The characteristics of the style include: a conception of architecture as volume rather than mass; regularity as the chief means of ordering design; the avoidance of applied decoration; and the articulation of structure.

These ideas can be seen clearly in the design of Lever House. The only solid masonry section of the building is part of the rear or western wall which houses the elevator and service core. The three other glazed elevations give the building a crystalline and volumetric quality. Rather than incorporating any traditional vocabulary such as enhancing window and door openings or stressing any arbitrary tripartite vertical division, the walls of Lever House are designed with a uniform grid pattern of stainless steel mullions and fixed panes of glass. Although these mullions are fixed to the structural skeleton at every level, the glass curtain wall completely masks the structure of the building, except at night when the interior is lit. Then the columns appear as rhythmic verticals at every fifth mullion, and each level becomes a hovering horizontal ribbon of light. The window walls lose their reflectivity and become totally transparent while the

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spandrels become totally opaque. At night, the International Style dictum that buildings should contain volume rather than create mass is most vividly apparent in Lever House.

In addition to the International Style precedents which this building set, it was also the first New York real estate venture to take advantage of a zoning provision which permitted a building to rise with no setbacks provided that the building covered only twenty-five percent of its lot (as was the case with Lever House). Thus, it helped to break the tradition of setbacks or shaped tower skyscrapers which had prevailed since the 1910s. In conjunction with this, its open, planted courtyard started a design feature which became almost standard for New York office buildings.

One of the truly extraordinary aspects of Lever House is the place it has attained in the literature of architecture. Indeed, it is rare to find a history of contemporary architecture after 1952 that does not include a reference to, and an illustration of, the building. The building is almost universally viewed by historians as a milestone in American architectural development. It marked the turning point, for better or worse, of the Modern Movement from the European avant-garde to corporate America.

While there were no earlier New York buildings in this new corporate International Style, the United Nations Secretariat Building, a 39-story glass curtain wall structure (part of the United Nations complex) was also completed in 1952. With input from an international committee of architects, this entire group of buildings was under the direction of Wallace K. Harrison, and the resultant buildings, while structurally innovative, are considerably less distinguished architecturally than Lever House.

Lever House retains a special place in American architecture as the most famous corporate expression of the modern International Style in postwar America. Its innovative design and mechanical features set important precedents for the design of American office buildings. Of particular interest are the building's crystal-line and volumetric qualities emphasized by the glass curtain walls as they turn corners, visually float above the base, create outdoor space, and wrap around interior volume. Lever House spawned a host of imitators but has been rarely

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equalled. It remains outstanding for its spatial clarity, scale, and beauty of form.

Footnote

1. This report is taken almost in its entirety from the text of the Landmarks Preservation Commission designation report, "Lever House" (LP-1277), November 9, 1982, by Alex Herrera.

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Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and Danz, Ernst. Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1963.

Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and Johnson, Philip. The International Style. Reprint Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1966.

Huxtable, Ada Louise. "Park Avenue School of Architecture." New York Times Magazine, December 15, 1957, pp.30-31, 54-56.

New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. Research files: Lever House.

"Lever House, New York: Glass and Steel Walls." Architectural Record, 111 (June 1952), 130-135.

Wilson, Charles. The History of Unilever. Vols. 1 and 3. New York: Frederick A Praeger, Inc., 1954 and 1968.

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Form Researched & Prepared by:

Virginia Kurshan

May 1983

Landmarks Preservation Commission

20 Vesey Street

New York, N Y 10007

(212) 566-7577

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Substantive Review

Lever House
New York County
NEW YORK

Working No. AUG 18 1983
Fed. Reg. Date: 2, 5, 85
Date Due: 9/15/83 - 10/2/83
Action: ☒ ACCEPT 10/2/83
☐ RETURN
☐ REJECT
Federal Agency: _____

- ☐ resubmission
☐ nomination by person or local government
☐ owner objection
☐ appeal

Substantive Review: ☐ sample ☐ request ☐ appeal ☒ NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Lever House is an outstanding example of the International Style and existing scholarship establishes the building as a landmark in American architectural history. The building easily meets criteria for exceptional importance as a building less than 50 years old.

Recom./Criteria Accept C
Reviewer Bushong
Discipline Historic
Date 10/2/83
_____ see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for: ☐ technical corrections cited below
☐ substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name

2. Location

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
	Public Acquisition	Accessible	

4. Owner of Property

5. Location of Legal Description

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☐ no

7. Description

Condition	Check one	Check one
☐ excellent	☐ deteriorated	☐ unaltered
☐ good	☐ ruins	☐ altered
☐ fair	☐ unexposed	☐ original site
		☐ moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- ☐ summary paragraph
☐ completeness
☐ clarity
☐ alterations/integrity
☐ dates
☐ boundary selection

8. Significance

Period Areas of Significance—Check and justify below

Specific dates

Builder/Architect

Statement of Significance (*in one paragraph*)

- ☐ summary paragraph
- ☐ completeness
- ☐ clarity
- ☐ applicable criteria
- ☐ justification of areas checked
- ☐ relating significance to the resource
- ☐ context
- ☐ relationship of integrity to significance
- ☐ justification of exception
- ☐ other

9. Major Bibliographical References

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property _____

Quadrangle name _____

UTM References _____

Verbal boundary description and justification _____

11. Form Prepared By

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

____ national ____ state ____ local

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title

date

13. Other

- ☐ Maps
- ☐ Photographs
- ☐ Other

Questions concerning this nomination may be directed to _____

Signed _____ Date _____ Phone: _____

Comments for any item may be continued on an attached sheet



1. LEVER HOUSE

New York County, New York

Photo by: Carl Forster, 1982

Neg. at: New York Landmarks

Preservation Commission

Park Avenue facade, view from the east



2. LEVER HOUSE
New York County, New York

Photo by: Carl Forster, 1982
Neg. at: New York Landmarks
Preservation Commission

View from the south



3. LEVER HOUSE

New York County, New York

Photo by: Carl Forster, 1982

Neg. at: New York Landmarks

Preservation Commission

Detail of ground floor and courtyard



4.

LEVER HOUSE

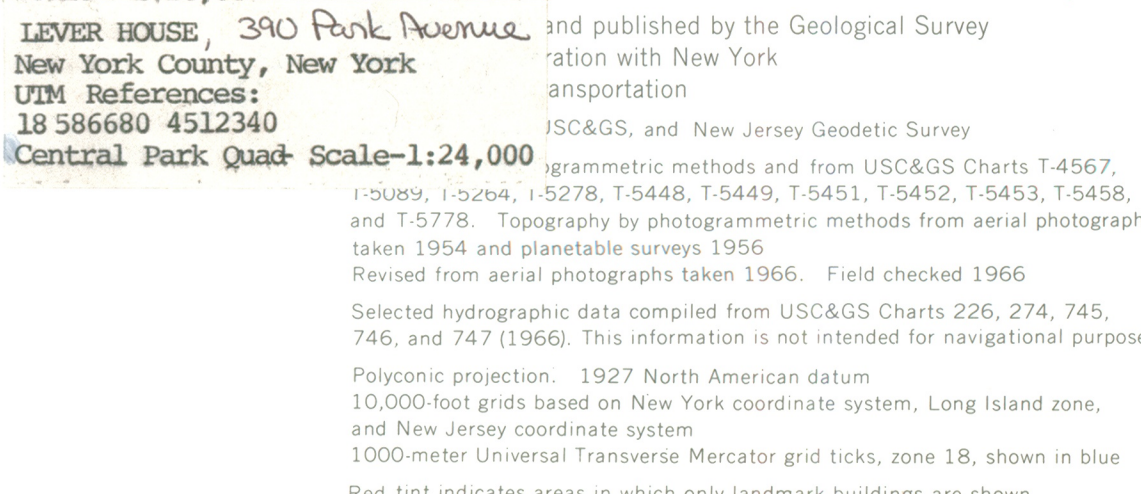
New York County, New York

Phot by: Carl Forster, 1982

Neg. at: New York Landmarks

Preservation Commission

Interior of courtyard and facade
detail



CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929
DEPTH CURVES AND SOUNDINGS IN FEET—DAMUS IS MEAN LOW WATER
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO DATUMS IS VARIABLE
SHORELINE SHOWN REPRESENTS THE APPROXIMATE LINE OF MEAN HIGH WATER
THE AVERAGE RANGE OF TIDE IS APPROXIMATELY 2 FEET
4 FEET IN THE HUDSON RIVER AND 5.7 FEET IN THE EAST RIVER

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U. S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Revisions shown in purple compiled from aerial photographs taken 1977 and other source data. This information not field checked. Map edited 1979

There may be private inholdings within the boundaries of the National or State reservations shown on this map

CENTRAL PARK, N. Y.—N. J.
SW/4 HARLEM 15' QUADRANGLE

N4045—W7352.5/7.5
1966
PHOTOREVISED 1979
AMS 6265 IV SW. SERIES V80