

Woolworth Bldg. To Be Landmark?

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By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Long considered one of the city's most beautiful unofficial landmarks, the Woolworth Building will probably become the city's most important designated skyscraper by the end of the year.

Its designation now has the tacit support of the 1913 Gothic structure's neighbor across City Hall Park — Mayor Beame.

The 60-story office tower at 233 Broadway with its graceful spires, lacey stonework and humorous gargoyles of bats, frogs, owls, pelicans and other figures was first considered at a public hearing of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1966 and again in 1970.

On those occasions, F. W. Woolworth Co., the original and continuing owner, opposed the designation as an "encumbrance" on the property. It still does, a spokesman said.

But last week Mayor Beame, appearing at the annual meeting of the Fine Arts Federation, read a proclamation declaring the week of May 12 as "Historic Preservation Week." The text of the proclamation cites one outstanding land-

mark in each borough.

The one for Manhattan is the Woolworth Building. It is the only one of the five included in the proclamation that is not a designated landmark.

Private Discussions

It has since been learned that in private discussions the Mayor has given his support to plans by the Landmarks Commission to again hold a public hearing on the building, this time with a clear intention of designating.

Although a hearing is not yet scheduled, Landmarks chairman Beverly Moss Spatt said this week that "we are considering placing it on the calendar in the next few months."

Mayor Beame, in response to questioning, said last week that "the Woolworth Building is a very majestic and beautiful structure that is an integral part of our civic center." He would not comment further, a spokesman noted, because as a member of the Board of Estimate he will have to vote on final approval for landmark designation.

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preservation law, a designated structure cannot be externally altered without Landmark Commission approval.

Ironically, the Woolworth Building has a current vacancy rate of only 5 per cent at a time when the estimated citywide commercial vacancy rate of 18 per cent is leaving many newer, more modern structures substantially empty.

Designed by Cass Gilbert —the celebrated architect of the landmark 1907 U.S. Customs House at Bowling Green—the Woolworth Building was opened April 24, 1913, with elaborate ceremonies that included President Woodrow Wilson pulling a switch in Washington, D.C., illuminating the 80,000 light bulbs in the building. Until 1930 with the completion of the Chrysler Building, the Woolworth remained the world's tallest.

Its opening marked a dream fulfilled for Frank W. Woolworth, founder of the variety store chain, who wanted a building to bear his name and was most proud of its being quickly dubbed the "Cathedral of Commerce." Woolworth particularly liked the Gothic

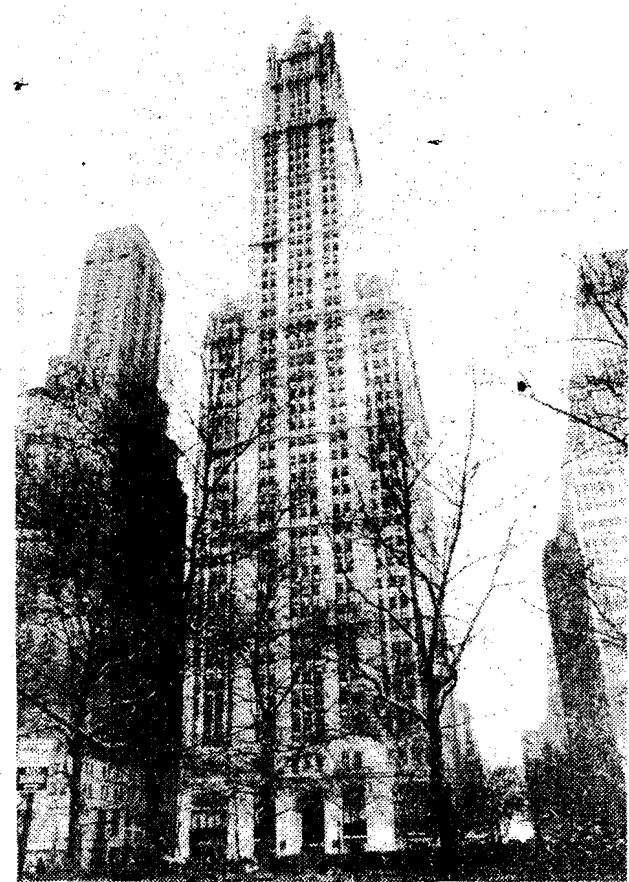
Houses of Parliament in London and specifically asked Gilbert to design a skyscraper in that style.

With its elaborate ornamentation inside and out, the Woolworth has long been cherished by city landmark buffs and calls for its designation have been repeated since the 1965 landmark preservation law first passed. Inquiries from architectural buffs and thesis-writing students continue to come in, a spokesman noted.

In size, style and advanced engineering accomplishments for its day, the office tower received all sorts of awards and accolades and was considered a major breakthrough in skyscraper construction. The construction cost was \$13,500,000.

The building's three-story entrance arcade with vaulted ceilings and mosaic and gold leaf detailing remains today substantially unchanged. The walls and staircases are of Isle of Skyros marble, the carved elevator doors of enameled bronze and frescoes of "labor" and "commerce" adorn the second-floor balconies.

On the second-floor exterior are bas-reliefs of heads representing four continents involved in trade. But perhaps most-often mentioned are the personalized carvings nestled in the supporting beams of the entrance arcade and reportedly ordered by Gilbert without Woolworth's advance knowledge. One is of Woolworth counting his nickels and dimes. Another



Post Photo by Tony Calvacca
The Woolworth Building.

is of Gilbert holding a model of the Woolworth building itself.

In recent years, the Landmarks Commission has been strongly criticized for not

giving status to such internationally-acclaimed landmarks as the Empire State, Chrysler and Woolworth buildings and Rockefeller Center.