

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 15A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name 210 East 68th Street

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 210 East 68th Street [] not for publication

city or town New York [] vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10021

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [x] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide [x] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)


Signature of certifying official/Title

4/15/95
Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[] entered in the National Register

[] see continuation sheet

[] determined eligible for the National Register

[] see continuation sheet

[] determined not eligible for the National Register

[] removed from the National Register

[] other (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

New York County, New York
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Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

```
[x] building(s)
[ ] district
[ ] site
[ ] structure
[ ] object
```

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Noncontributing

1

0

- buildings
- sites
- structures
- objects

1

0

TOTAL

N/A

N/A

(enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Deco

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation

walls brick, terra cotta, granite

roof

other

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

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7. Description

The building at 210 East 68th Street, in Manhattan, is a 16-story apartment house located on the southeast corner of East 68th Street and Third Avenue, on the Upper East Side. The building has two major facades, one on East 68th Street, and the other on Third Avenue. It was built speculatively in 1928 to designs by the firm of George & Edward Blum, and is one of the very earliest Art Deco apartment houses to be found in New York City. The building occupies half of its block along Third Avenue; the other half of the block is occupied by five-story multiple dwellings. The East 68th Street façade occupies roughly half of its block; the other half of the block is occupied by a row of brownstones. Otherwise, the immediately surrounding blocks are lined with modern apartment houses.

Exterior

The façades of 210 East 68th Street rise 15 stories on Third Avenue, and 16 stories on East 68th Street, reflecting a gentle slope between Third and Second avenues. The chief material of each façade is buff-colored brick, with randomly set bricks of darker color as accents; major ornamental elements are bands of brick and polychromatic terra cotta.

Third Avenue facade

The Third Avenue façade is divided into 10 window bays of varying width, arranged almost, but not quite exactly, in mirror symmetry. From the north end of the façade to the south, the arrangement is: a double window; then, after a wide space between, a group of three windows set more closely together: a single window, a double window, and a three-part window; then a very small window; then an almost mirror-image group of three windows: a three-part window, a single window, and a three-par window; then, with a wide space between, another very small window, and a final double window.

The 14 stories above the ground floor – demarcated from the ground floor by a projecting terra-cotta band – are set off into groups of two stories by projecting brick bands up to the top of the 11th story; another projecting terra-cotta band sets off the 14th and 15th stories. Each band of brick, darker than the brick used elsewhere in the façade, is arranged as a sort of zigzag: most of each band on the Third Avenue façade is set between, for instance, the third and fourth stories, but at the south end of the façade, in the final bay of double windows, it zigzags down one story, while at the north end of the façade, in the final bay of double windows, it zigzags up one story.

The brick bands are formed by the alternating of five projecting rows of brick with four recessed rows. They are carefully patterned: from bottom to top, the first row is all headers, the second and third all stretchers, the fourth all headers, and the fifth all stretchers. Each of the four recessed rows of brick is all stretchers. As each row approaches the edge of the façade, however, the projecting and recessed rows of brick coalesce into a simple, flat band of dark brick.

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The resulting effect of the window bay placement and the zigzag rows of brick is a sense of geometric patterning – typical of Art Deco design – with a general movement upward suggested by the zigzags. That sense of upward movement is stilled at the upper level and at the ground level by the polychromatic bands, which, unlike the zigzag rows of brick, run straight across the façade.

The uppermost terra-cotta band brings its own sense of motion, with a double zigzag line in black. The zigzag line appears to run over a series of green triangles, alternately pointing up or down, in a counterpoint rhythm – where the zigzag line hits bottom, the triangles point up, and where the zigzag line hits the top, the triangles point down. Crossing the zigzag line, in the same green as the triangles, is a series of angled slashes, pointing alternately to the left or right. The slashes and triangles appear to pin the zigzag line between them. The effect of the whole composition is to suggest some kind of animated geometric dance.

The terra-cotta band above the ground floor is a completely different design, but in the same spirit of alternating geometric patterns in bright colors, in this case green, black and orange. The major element is based around a central diamond form, flanked on either side by a larger, irregular rhomboid and a much smaller triangle. The central diamond form is three-dimensional, angled so that either half projects slightly outward till it meets the other half. This major element alternates between a recessed version in orange and green, and an inverted, projecting version in green and black. The entire band is framed on top by large orange stretchers, and below by large orange squares. A final counterpoint is created by alternating small projecting circles in the orange squares – green below the black diamonds, black below the green diamonds.

In a final, less obvious, decorative flourish, the corner windows at the 14th and 15th stories, at either edge of the façade, are tied together by an edging of rectangular recesses in the brickwork.

The ground floor of the Third Avenue façade is occupied entirely by heavily altered storefronts.

East 68th Street façade

The East 68th Street façade shares the overall composition of the Third Avenue façade, with some notable differences.

Similar to the Third Avenue façade is the buff brick facing with random, darker brick accents. The 68th Street façade continues the terra-cotta bands at the upper and lower portions of the façade; and it has the same brick zigzag bands creating pairs of stories, but in a mirror image, so that the zigzag rises to the corner at the intersection of East 68th and Third, where it meets the rising zigzag coming from the Third Avenue façade, at that corner.

The East 68th Street façade differs as follows:

Except at the corner of Third Avenue, where a storefront turns the corner, the ground floor has no storefronts. Instead, it has a wall of large square blocks of varying shades of orange, set above a granite water table, and

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three large window openings – plus a large grille opening the same size – set just beneath the terra-cotta band, in the first four bays beyond the corner storefront. Because of the downward slope of East 68th Street, however, what begins as one story beneath the terra-cotta band at the corner of Third Avenue soon – after the four bays with large windows – becomes two stories; the following four bays continue the large windows just beneath the terra-cotta band, and have smaller window openings directly beneath them. Then comes the building's main entrance, followed by additional one-story bays.

At the eastern side of the main entrance the terra-cotta band ends in a spiral form, then drops down to the ground in a different pattern – five very thin projecting vertical lines, the second and third from the east done in a beaded pattern, with paired horizontal squiggles set in a descending pattern between one vertical line and the next. On the west side of the main entrance, the asymmetrical pattern caused by the drop in level of the terra-cotta band is balanced by having another spiral – spiraling in the opposite direction – at the first story level (rather than the second story), with the second pattern (five thin lines, two in a beaded pattern) in a band extending down to the sidewalk. The window above the main entrance is emphasized slightly by four small, plain, green terra-cotta brackets on either side.

The entrance area is recessed about a foot, and has green terra-cotta brackets, similar to those in the window above it, at the corners thus formed. The remainder of the foot-long recessed wall is taken up by a curving glass and bronze column-like form of four narrow lights set between five extremely slender bronze colonettes; the column-like form is divided vertically into five sections by horizontal bronze bands set at regular intervals, and the whole is topped by a narrow bronze panel adorned with a typically Art Deco set of triangles. The entrance is through a pair of bronze and plate-glass doors; a pair of narrow bronze bands running across the center of each door contain bronze letters and numerals spelling out the building's address, "210" on the east door, and "E 68" on the west door.

East of the entrance, the original polychromatic terra-cotta band picks up again one story below its original line, and continues east, so that it is again running just above the ground floor. At the second-to-last bay at the eastern end of the East 68th Street façade, there is a small entrance to a professional apartment, with the address "212 East 68th Street;" it has a door set within an opening framed by green terra-cotta column-like forms. In the upper stories, the wall surfaces are interrupted by a series of set backs at the upper floors; the zigzag brick banding is modified accordingly, as is the upper terra-cotta band. Setback terraces and the roof have simple metal railings.

In the building's courtyard, the walls are plain brick, but in some areas have broad horizontal concrete bands between the stories, and these have incised geometric patterns including circles, triangles and spirals.

Undeveloped facades

The upper portions of the south and east facades of the building are visible from the street. They are of plain brick, with simple window openings.

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Interior

Entrance vestibule

The entrance doors lead into the entrance vestibule, a small rectangular space with a plaster ceiling, stone walls with mirrors in their upper half, and a radiator grille on the right (west) wall. Double doors on the inner side of the vestibule mirror the configuration of the entrance doors, with long, narrow rectangular windows to either side.

Lobby

The vestibule leads into a multi-level lobby space. Three steps lead down from the vestibule to a small, open concierge area. The steps are flanked by a geometric metal railing, and the floor is done in a geometrically patterned terrazzo. On the left (east) wall is a closet with a double wooden door, with a scalloped fret pattern along the top and an egg-and-dart molding. The wooden concierge desk, against the wall opposite the vestibule doors, has similar scalloped patterning, suggesting that it is original to the lobby.

A second set of three steps leads down to a larger, square space. Its terrazzo floor is arranged in squares set in geometric patterns. The walls and ceiling are plain painted plaster. A large wooden cabinet set against the eastern wall of the space (perpendicular to the street wall) has the same scalloped patterning as the concierge desk. In front of it is a second wooden concierge desk, again with similar scalloped patterning.

On the street (north) side, there is another wooden cabinet, with similar scalloped patterning, in the center of the wall. To either side is a large ornamental wooden grille, rising almost to the ceiling, with a scalloped surround; it has windows openings in its upper portion, and radiator grilles in its lower portion.

On the south side, the lobby opens onto a narrow corridor leading to the elevators and the ground floor apartments.

Upper floors

On the upper floors, elevators open onto long, simple, narrow corridors, with modest detail and what appears to be the original floor. There are various sizes of apartments; these have wooden floors, plaster walls and ceilings, simple moldings, and in some cases fireplaces with simple mantels and arched doorways.

Alterations

The major alterations to the exterior of the building are the replacement of the original windows, the replacement of the original storefronts, and the addition of a canopy over the 68th Street entrance. The lobby spaces are largely intact. Individual apartments vary in the level of alterations undertaken over the years.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ **A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave
- ☐ **D** a cemetery
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance:

1928

Significant Dates:

1928

Significant Person:

N/A

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

Blum, George & Edward

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by historic American Building Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other repository: _____

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8. Statement of Significance

The building at 210 East 68th Street, at the southeast corner of Third Avenue, in Manhattan, is architecturally significant under Criterion C. Among the last works designed by the prominent New York firm of George and Edward Blum, it is a handsome, Art Deco style, Upper East Side apartment house – among the earliest Art Deco apartment buildings in New York City – with unusual terra-cotta ornament.

Summary

No 210 East 68th Street was built in 1928 as a speculative apartment house, to designs of the firm of George and Edward Blum. It was commissioned by Sophia Bittenweiser Mayer, the wife of Bernhard Mayer, a partner in the real-estate firm of Weil & Mayer. The building's Third Avenue location places it at the far east of the historic Upper East Side, long Manhattan's most prestigious residential district, and makes it part of the redevelopment of that district with apartment houses ranging from solid to luxurious.

The firm of George and Edward Blum brought an unusual sensibility to architectural design, in part because of the brothers' French origins. Their apartment house designs in general stood apart from the standard approach of other architects of the 'teens and 'twenties of the 20th century, particularly in their use of ornamental brick and terra cotta. No. 210 East 68th Street was among their last works, one of three Art Deco style apartment houses adorned with remarkable polychromatic terra-cotta detailing. It was among the very first Art Deco apartment buildings to be constructed in Manhattan, pre-dating most of the skyscrapers which established the style in New York. Its striking ornament – while clearly Art Deco in style – resembles the ornament of no other Art Deco buildings in New York City (other than the other two designed by the Blums).

No. 210 East 68th Street survives almost entirely intact on its exterior, and largely intact in its interior lobby spaces.

The Upper East Side and the Apartment Building

During the decades following the end of the Civil War – in response to the opening of Central Park, the extension of the city's horse-car lines beyond 59th Street along Second, Third and Madison avenues¹, and especially the extension of the Third Avenue elevated line in 1878, in stages, from 42nd Street to 129th Street, and the Second avenue elevated to 129th Street in 1880 – Manhattan's Upper East Side developed into the city's premier residential district.²

In 1879 the new elevated roads contributed much to the increasing strength of the market. Particularly on the upper [sic] East Side they stimulated the builder, who was already busy in that district.... Population

¹ *A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City During the Last Quarter of a Century* (New York: Record and Guide, 1898; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1967), p. 60.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

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was spreading into the East Side, and the northeastern part of the island.... Everywhere on the East Side people were buying and selling and building.³

As the Upper East Side took shape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the area between Central Park and Park Avenue developed as an enclave of Gold Coast mansions, especially along Fifth Avenue, while the side streets were lined with elegant Beaux-Arts town houses. In the second and third decades of the 20th century, however, much of the area was built up or rebuilt with apartment houses.⁴

The apartment house emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the preeminent housing type in Manhattan.⁵ The borough's population rose from half a million people in 1850 to two and a half million in 1910 – a five-fold increase in a limited geographic area that guaranteed the eventual predominance of multiple dwellings. Initially called "French Flats" after their European models, multiple dwellings at first seemed morally suspect to Americans, who inherited a strong tradition of independent families living in single houses on private property. Of necessity, however, qualms about the suitability of apartment house dwelling soon disappeared, and multiple dwellings of all kinds – from walk-up tenements for the working classes to middle-class and luxury apartment buildings – spread across the city. The apartment house soon came to typify both the Upper East and Upper West sides of Manhattan. The First World War put an end to the initial major waves of apartment buildings, but, after the War's end, the 1920s saw a major boom in apartment house construction all over the city.⁶

The neo-Italian Renaissance apartment house at 998 Fifth Avenue (McKim, Mead & White, 1910-12), while not the first apartment building on the Upper East Side, set a standard for luxury that soon made apartment buildings fashionable throughout the district. In the following two decades, Fifth and Park avenues were largely rebuilt as boulevards lined with luxury apartment houses, a development that stretched in many cases to Third and even Second avenues.⁷ A number of architectural firms designed apartment houses in the area during these decades, including Rosario Candela, J.E.R. Carpenter, Emery Roth, Walter B. Chambers, York & Sawyer, and George & Edward Blum.⁸ They worked in a variety of styles, ranging from neo-Georgian, neo-Federal and neo-Classical to Art Deco and Moderne.⁹

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

⁴ For more on the history and architecture of the Upper East Side, see New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report* (New York: City of New York, 1981).

⁵ This section is based on Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶ Thomas E. Norton, Jerry E. Patterson, *Living It Up: A Guide to the Named Apartment Houses of New York* (New York: Athencum, 1984), p.21ff.

⁷ *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report*, p.21.

⁸ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Guide to New York City Landmarks* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), p. 129.

⁹ *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report*, p.21.

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Like almost all apartment houses, 210 East 68th Street was built speculatively, in this case for Sophia Bittenweiser Mayer, wife of Bernhard Mayer, a partner in the real-estate firm of Weil & Mayer.¹⁰ Bernhard Mayer left much of his real-estate holdings to his widow,¹¹ but she also held many properties prior to his death in 1929, including half-a-dozen apartment houses built in the 1920s.¹² At least one other apartment house built for Sophia Mayer, 1435 Lexington Avenue, was designed by George & Edward Blum.¹³ Bernhard Mayer had earlier hired the Blums to design 101-105 East 74th Street (demolished) in 1915.¹⁴

George & Edward Blum¹⁵

By 1928, when George & Edward Blum designed 210 E.68th Street, the firm had a 20-year-long record of designing some of New York City's most unusual apartment buildings.

George M. and Edward Blum, brothers born into a French-Jewish family that immigrated to New York City, built an architectural practice that flourished in the 'teens and 'twenties of the last century. George (1870-1928) was born in New York, and in 1904 studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Edward (1876-1944), born in a Parisian suburb, studied at Columbia University (BS in architecture 1899), and also at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (1901). The firm of George and Edward Blum first appeared in New York City directories in 1909. During the next 20 years, the Blums designed more than 120 New York City apartment buildings, as well as a number of other buildings including loft buildings, town houses, and synagogues.

Though the Blums were just two of the many American architects who studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts at the turn of the last century, their family connections to French life apparently led them to a different experience of contemporary French architecture. While other American architects returned to the United States with a standard Ecole repertoire, the Blums brought back knowledge of the most up-to-the-minute trends in Parisian architecture, including an emphasis on brick facades with handcrafted ornamental details, and a new interest in avant-garde architectural design in Glasgow and Vienna. Parisian buildings demonstrating these trends used brick laid in elaborate ornamental patterns, interspersed with abstract ornamental detail in terra-cotta, tile or glass mosaic. The Blums' apartment houses brought this approach to New York City, particularly in their work during the 'teens. In the mid- to late-1920s, their facades tended to be clad in clinker (deliberately irregular) brick with ornament in terra-cotta, iron and fieldstone.

¹⁰ "Mayer Left Gifts to Eight Charities - Widow of Real Estate Man to Add \$200,000 to Bequests Made in His Will -- Estate Put At \$2,000,000," *New York Times*, August 21, 1929, p.10. See also Sophia Mayer's obituary, *New York Times*, September 1, 1945, p. 11.

¹¹ "Bernhard Mayer Left Estate of \$2,150,640 - \$25,000 Bequeathed to Charities, the Rest to Widow, Children and Other Relatives," *New York Times*, May 26, 1932, p. 52.

¹² Besides 210 E.68th Street, these include (with their New Building application numbers): 1435 Lexington Avenue (NB 432-1924), 323-327 Second Avenue (NB 335-1926), 436-444 W.34th Street (NB 468-1927), 205-211 E.69th Street (NB 268-1928), and 158-162 E.84th Street (NB 334-1930).

¹³ New York City Buildings Department, New Building application NB 432-1924.

¹⁴ New York City Buildings Department, New Building application NB 334-1915.

¹⁵ This section is based on Andrew S. Dolkart and Susan Tunick, *George & Edward Blum: Texture and Design in New York Apartment House Architecture* (New York: Friends of Terra Cotta Press, 1993).

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The East 68th Street building was among their last apartment house designs – one of three Art Deco apartment buildings by the Blums built in the late 1920s (the other two being Gramercy House at 235 East 22nd Street, and 315 East 68th Street). For each of these buildings, the Blums designed remarkable and unusual terra-cotta ornament.

Ornamental Terra Cotta

By the early 20th century, terra cotta had attained great popularity as an ornamental material on New York City apartment houses. Terra cotta, or “cooked earth,” was a material known even to the ancient Romans, and used for centuries in European ornamental sculpture, but came into widespread use for architectural ornament in America only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁶

Following major fires in Boston and Chicago in 1871-72 – and the subsequent growth of interest in fireproof materials – terra cotta grew in popularity in the United States as a building material. According to one writer, in 1891:

...by these fires it was conclusively demonstrated that fire-roof buildings could not be made of unprotected stone or iron, and that only brick and terra-cotta walls were practically fire-proof. This increased use of brick work, and of terra-cotta as a constructive and decorative material in connection with brick work, revived the demand for the manufacture of this material in or near New York.¹⁷

Terra cotta – in many ways like cast iron, an earlier response to fireproofing issues – was not only fireproof, but also strong, durable, light and cheap. Much as early cast-iron facades were painted white to resemble marble, the color of early terra cotta (brown or red) could match brownstone or brick.

From George B. Post's Long Island Historical Society (1878-81) at 128 Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn, to Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building (1911-13) at 233 Broadway, ornamental terra cotta grew in use, popularity and visibility. The material could be found on such early examples as Gilbert's Broadway-Chambers Building (1899-1900) at 273-277 Broadway, Clinton & Russell's Beaver Building (1903-04) at 82-92 Beaver Street, and the McKim, Mead & White's Madison Square Presbyterian Church (1903-06).¹⁸ The use of bright colors in terra-cotta, however, was unusual before the 1920s. According to one critic in 1906:

While the process of making glazed and colored terra cotta has not yet been entirely perfected, there can be no doubt that the manufacturers of the material are more successful about making it than the architects are about using it. American architects are, of course, very timid about adopting a material, for

¹⁶ For a history of terra cotta in New York City architecture see Susan Tunick, *Terra-Cotta Skyline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Walter Geer, *Terra-Cotta in Architecture* (New York: Gazlay Bros., 1891), cited in New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Potter Building Designation Report (LP-1948)*, prepared by Jay Shockley (New York: City of New York, 2004), p. 5.

¹⁸ Cited in New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Thomson Meter Company Building (later New York Eskimo Pie Corporation Building) Designation Report (LP-2139)*, prepared by Jay Shockley (New York: City of New York, 2004), p. 7.

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the successful employment of which there are no good precedents. They are, of course, accustomed to using terra cotta in the ordinary way, and most of them appreciate fully the color values of rough or white glazed terra cotta. But the use of livelier colors is a very different thing....¹⁹

The polychromatic possibilities of the material didn't find wide use until the advent of the Art Deco style.

Art Deco

The term "Art Deco"²⁰ – derived from the title of the 1925 Paris "Exhibition internationale des arts decoratifs et industrielles modernes" (International exhibition of modern decorative and industrial arts) – is today used loosely to describe a number of architectural and decorative styles current in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere from the mid-1920s until as late, in some instances, as the mid-1940s.

In New York City architecture, the style developed first in some two dozen skyscrapers, built between 1923 and 1932, and then filtered out and down to building types of all kinds across the city – apartment buildings, hotels, diners, movie theaters, bus and airline terminals. Chief characteristics of the style include vertical rows of windows; a sculptural approach to design, making inventive use of the setback requirements of the 1916 zoning resolution; and the application of "modernistic" ornament, generally based either on abstract geometrical patterns or on stylized floral motifs.

Designers of apartment buildings began turning to the Art Deco style in the very late 1920s. Most of the city's Art Deco apartment buildings can be found in Manhattan and the Bronx, with lesser numbers in Brooklyn and Queens. Major Art Deco apartment buildings in Manhattan include the twin-towered Majestic (115 Central Park West at West 71st Street, Irwin Chanin, 1930-31) and Century (25 Central Park West at West 62nd Street, Irwin Chanin, 1931) buildings. Their ornamentation reflects concurrent skyscraper design. One of the earliest (perhaps the earliest) Art Deco apartment buildings in the Bronx, built 1929-31, was the Park Plaza Apartments at 1005 Jerome Avenue. Its designer, Marvin Fine of the firm of Horace Ginsbern Associates, specifically chose the Daily News and Chrysler buildings as models for his ornamental approach.²¹

The plans submitted by George and Edward Blum in 1928 for 210 East 68th Street were among the very earliest for a New York City apartment house.²² Their work preceded all but a handful of the first Art Deco office

¹⁹ Herbert D. Croly, "Glazed and Colored Terra Cotta," *Architectural Record* (April 1906), p. 391; cited in *Thomson Meter Company Building...Designation Report*, p.7.

²⁰ For a general survey and history of Art Deco as a world-wide phenomenon in art, architecture and design in general, see Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton and Ghislaine Wood, *Art Deco 1910-1939* (London: V&A Publications, 2003), the catalog accompanying the exhibition of the same name, organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. For a specific focus on New York City Art Deco architecture, see Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

²¹ See New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Park Plaza Apartments Designation Report (LP-1077)*, prepared by Anthony W. Robins (New York: City of New York, 1981).

²² In the chronology drawn up by Robinson and Bletter (*op.cit.*, p.84), No. 210 East 68th Street appears as only the third apartment house listed; the first two listings were designed in the same year, 1928.

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buildings. Consequently, unlike later Art Deco apartment house designs, theirs reflected not so much developments in New York skyscraper design, as their knowledge of French design.

The design of 210 East 68th Street

The Blums designed 210 East 68th Street with ornamental brick and terra-cotta facades. Terra cotta had long since found its way to the new apartment buildings rising rapidly around Manhattan. So wide-spread was its use, that terra-cotta companies developed catalogs full of stock ornamental designs from which architects could choose, and many firms simply bought standard terra-cotta pieces in stock designs. George and Edward Blum, however, preferred to commission specially designed ornament.

In line with that preference, the ornamental terra-cotta at 210 East 68th Street, while clearly Art Deco in style – marked by the use of vibrant colors and abstract geometric patterns –nevertheless differs from the usual zigzags and triangles found on most Art Deco apartment houses. Instead, it makes use of projecting courses of brickwork to create a geometric flair, and two broad, ornamental bands of polychromatic, geometric terra cotta, one near the bottom and one near the top of the facades.

Andrew Dolkart and Susan Tunick, authors of the definitive work on the Blums' architecture, explain:

Their powerful combination of varied shades of brick and polychrome terra cotta demonstrates that the Blums had a clear understanding of the French-inspired Art Deco aesthetic. Each [of the firm's three Art Deco apartment buildings] is faced in buff-colored brick, with contrasting accents of brown and black brick at the window spandrels, balconies, belt course, and corners. The bricks are often set at different depths, some protruding and others recessed, thereby adding texture to the facades....²³

Dolkart and Tunick consider the polychromatic Art Deco terra cotta on 210 East 68th Street its "key design element," judging it to be "some of the most notable Art Deco terra cotta in New York." They continue:

The material is glazed in strong colors typically associated with Art Deco – green, orange, black turquoise, and teal – and molded into a series of striking motifs. Rather than utilizing the stylized florals or geometric zigzags common in Art Deco design, the Blums created designs in much the same way as they had in their earlier buildings, by emphasizing the overlapping and weaving of elements, the interplay of positive and negative motifs, and the alternation of identical decorative elements to create varied patterns.²⁴

They describe the ornamental detail as follows:

The front elevation of 210 East 68th Street has two terra-cotta bands, one near the top of the building and the other above the first floor, which differ in design. The upper band combines green triangles

²³ Dolkart and Tunick, p. 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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overlapped by black zigzags, which in turn are overlapped by pointed slashes.... The lively lower terracotta band is created by a simple alternation of positive and negative geometric elements in green and orange. The green shape is identical to the recessed orange one but is turned upside down. In addition, the central shape within this band also alternates in color and position across the facade.²⁵

The resulting facades look like nothing else in Art Deco New York (besides the Blums' two other Art Deco apartment houses).

The Blums also relied on an Art Deco aesthetic in the building's lobby spaces, particularly in such details as geometric hand railings, geometric patterns in the terrazzo floor, and an ornamental wooden framing for windows and radiator grilles.

Early tenants at 210 East 68th Street

Residents of the new apartment building might not have been able to afford Fifth Avenue mansions or luxury apartments, but nevertheless came from affluent backgrounds.

Tenants whose names found their way into the *New York Times* during the building's first decade (the 1930s) include: Mrs. William Hall Headington, widow of John M. Toucey, grandson of John M. Toucey "who was identified with the development of the New York Central Railroad"²⁶; R. Alistair Macleod, "who belongs to the Morten branch of the Scottish clan, is a grandson of the late Rev. Dr. John Macleod of Goram and is a descendant of Sir Roderick Macleod of Dunregan, clan chieftain who died in 1626"²⁷; Mrs. Edward Palmer York, recent widow of a principal in the prominent architectural firm of York & Sawyer²⁸; Mrs. Phoebe Elena Cary, centenarian widow of Benjamin H. Cary, "in the leather business," who died in the building at the age of 101²⁹; Mrs. George Monro, owner of \$4000 worth of jewelry stolen from her apartment in the building³⁰; Miss Priscilla Godwin, who "gave a buffet supper last night at her home" and "is sailing Jan. 16" with her sister "to pass the remainder of the Winter in Honolulu"³¹; Mrs. Florence P. Dalsimer, widow of "a political leader on Long Island," whose three sons paid for her to realize her dream of studying for "a master's degree in educational psychology at New York University"³²; Mrs. Helene Schaper, sister of "Frieda Hempel, opera and concert singer" whom she sued over a "platinum and diamond cross valued at \$10,000"³³; and James Donald Thompson, "son of a bank president in Centreville, S.D., and an employee of the Chase National Bank in this

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 48.

²⁶ *New York Times*, January 7, 1938, p. 16.

²⁷ *New York Times*, September 14, 1937, p. 20.

²⁸ *New York Times*, March 29, 1937, p. 16.

²⁹ *New York Times*, February 13, 1937, p. 13.

³⁰ *New York Times*, December 5, 1936, p. 8.

³¹ *New York Times*, December 16, 1935, p. 24.

³² *New York Times*, May 13, 1933, p. 14.

³³ *New York Times*, March 1, 1930, p. 14.

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city" who "was arrested on a charge of grand larceny yesterday, accused of embezzling between \$80,000 and \$100,000 which he is said to have lost in the stock market."³⁴

Conclusion

No. 210 East 68th Street survives today largely intact. Its handsome, polychromatic terra-cotta bands and overall Art Deco design make it one of the most distinctive – as well as one of the earliest – of New York City's Art Deco apartment houses.

³⁴ *New York Times*, May 27, 1930, p. 4.

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9. Bibliography

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- Geer, Walter. *Terra-Cotta in Architecture*. New York: Gazlay Bros., 1891.
- New York City Buildings Department, Manhattan. New Building application dockets.
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- Park Plaza Apartments* (LP-1077), prepared by Anthony W. Robins (New York: City of New York, 1981).
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- New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Guide to New York City Landmarks*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998.
- New York Times*.
- "Bernhard Mayer Left Estate of \$2,150,640 - \$25,000 Bequeathed to Charities, the Rest to Widow, Children and Other Relatives." May 26, 1932, p. 52.

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"Mayer Left Gifts to Eight Charities - Widow of Real Estate Man to Add \$200,000 to Bequests Made in His Will -- Estate Put At \$2,000,000." August 21, 1929, p.10.

Sophia Mayer, obituary. September 1, 1945, p. 11.

Various articles: January 7, 1938, p. 16; September 14, 1937, p. 20; March 29, 1937, p. 16; February 13, 1937, p. 13; December 5, 1936, p. 8; December 16, 1935, p. 24; May 13, 1933, p. 14; March 1, 1930, p. 14; May 27, 1930, p. 4.

Norton, Thomas E. and Jerry E. Patterson. *Living It Up: A Guide to the Named Apartment Houses of New York*. New York: Atheneum, 1984.

Robinson, Cervin and Rosemarie Haag Bletter. *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Tunick, Susan. *Terra-Cotta Skyline*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997.

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 587542 4513181
Zone Easting Northing

3 18
Zone Easting Northing

2 18

4 18

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By (For author see continuation page)

name/title Contact: Kathy Howe, Historic Preservation Specialist
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
organization Field Services Bureau date March 10, 2005
street & number P.O. Box 189, Peebles Island telephone (518) 237-8643, ext. 3266
city or town Waterford state NY zip code 12188-0189

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
- A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name ISTA Holding Co. Inc., c/o Scott Zecher, BLDG Management Co.
street & number 52 Vanderbilt Avenue telephone 212-624-4349
city or town New York state NY zip code 10017

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

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210 East 68th Street

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal boundary description

The boundaries of this property are indicated on the attached Sanborn map, outlined by a dark line, and are identical with Manhattan Tax Map Block 1422 Lot 48.

Boundary justification

The nomination boundaries conform to the current and historic boundaries.

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National Park Service

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210 East 68th Street

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11. Form prepared by

Anthony Robins
50 West 67th Street, 1-F,
New York, NY 10023
(917) 494-6982

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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Additional Documentation

Photo Key

Photos by Anthony Robins, October 2004

Negatives stored with Anthony Robins, 50 West 67th Street 1-F, New York, NY 10023

EXTERIOR PHOTOS

1. Second Avenue façade, looking southeast
2. Second Avenue façade, roofline at corner of E.68th Street
3. Corner of Second Avenue and E.68th Street, detail, looking southeast
4. E.68th Street façade, west half, looking south
5. E.68th Street façade, east half, looking south
6. E.68th Street façade, street level, looking east
7. E.68th Street façade, street level, main entrance
8. E.68th Street façade, entrance detail
9. E.68th Street façade, entrance doors and surrounds
10. Interior courtyard wall, detail

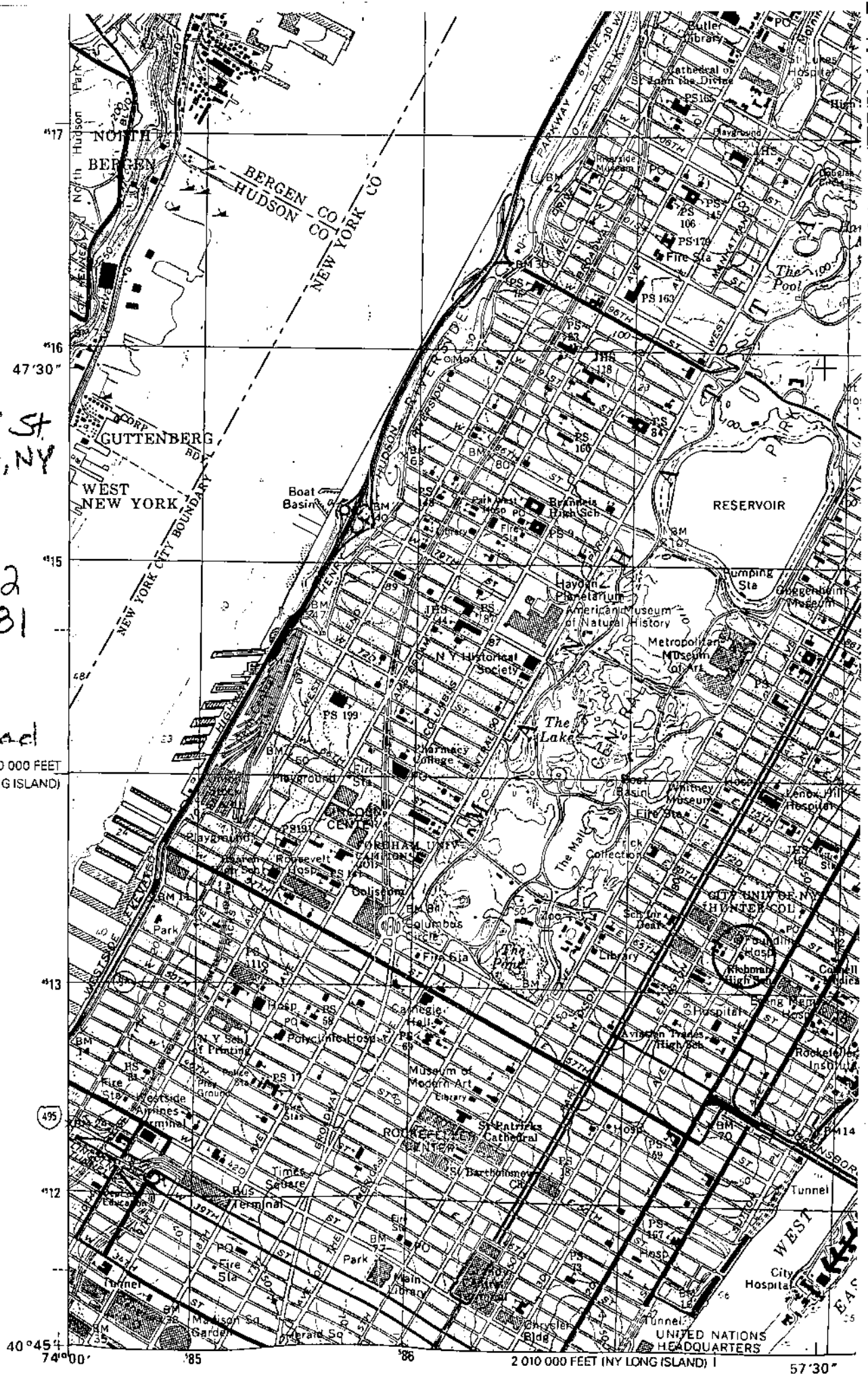
INTERIOR PHOTOS

11. Lobby, raised area, looking east
12. Lobby, lower area, looking east
13. Lobby, window frames
14. Upper floor, typical hallway
15. Typical apartment, hallway
16. Typical apartment, bedroom
17. Typical apartment, livingroom

210 East 68th St
New York County, NY

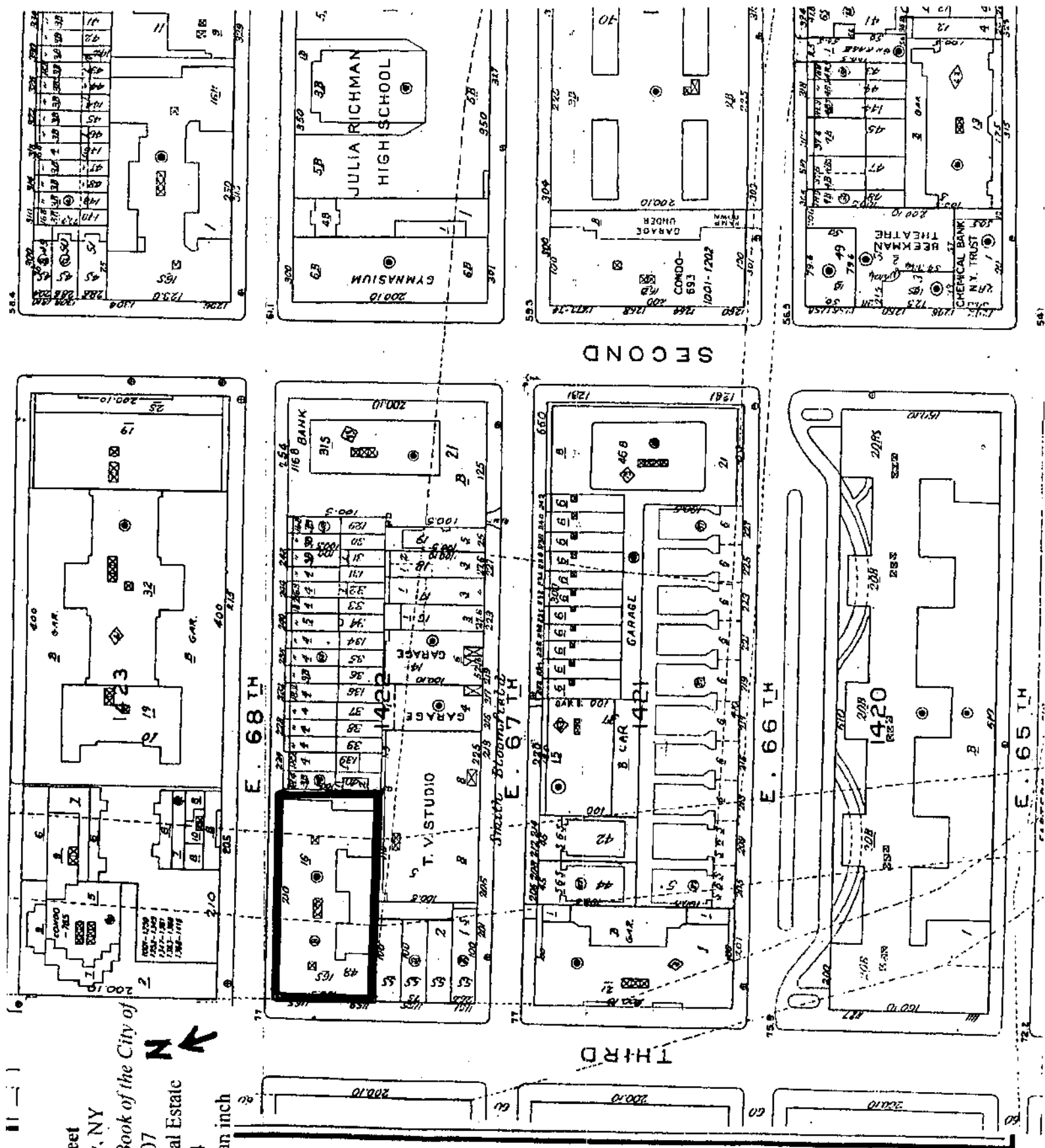
Zone: 18
Easting: 587542
Northing: 4513181

Central Park Quad
USGS
1:24000



Produced by the United States Geological Survey
Topography compiled 1966. Planimetry derived from imagery taken
1977 and other sources. Photinspected using imagery dated 1995.

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The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North, New York NY 10007 TEL: 212-669-7922 FAX: 212-669-7797

<http://nyc.gov/landmarks/>



RONDA WIST
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
rwist@lpc.nyc.gov

February 3, 2005

Ms. Ruth Pierpont, Director
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation
Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island
P.O. Box 189
Waterford, New York 12188-0189


Re: 210 East 68th Street, New York, New York

Dear Ms. Pierpont:

I write on behalf of Chair Robert B. Tierney in response to your request for comment on the eligibility of the building at 210 E. 68th Street in Manhattan for the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

The Commission has reviewed the materials submitted by the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau and recommends that the building at 210 E. 68th Street appears to meet the criteria for inclusion on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

Sincerely yours,


Ronda Wist

cc: Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Mary Beth Betts

December 9, 2004

Ms. Kathy Howe
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
Field Services Bureau
P.O. Box 189
Peebles Island
Waterford, NY 12188

Re: 210 East 68th Street, NYC

Dear Ms. Howe,

As the owner of the above referenced property, I am writing to you to express our unqualified support for its listing on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further comment on this matter.

Sincerely,

Ista Holding Co., Inc.

By: 

Lloyd Goldman

Title: President















