The Intersection of Church and Bank

The Citicorp Center, now almost 40 years old, is being considered for landmark status

By Zolan Kanno-Youngs
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FORTY IS OLD: The Citigroup Center, the 59-story office tower at 601 Lexington Ave., is now being considered for landmark status by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. ‘Now we have to preserve modernism,’ said John Maciuika of Baruch College. Photo: STAN HONDA/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

When the triangular top of 601 Lexington Ave. rose above Midtown Manhattan in the late 1970s, it was a modern, corporate addition to New York City’s skyline.
Then known as the Citicorp Center, the building today is almost 40 years old. It is now being considered for landmark status by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, one of 12 spaces in East Midtown that were proposed in a public meeting as part of a local preservation initiative focused on the neighborhood.

If approved, the entire 59-story office tower as well as its neighboring church and low-rise retail space would become a single landmark—the youngest one in the city. Experts say it is nevertheless worthy of protection in a fast-changing part of Manhattan.

“Now we have to preserve modernism,” said John Maciuiika, a professor of art and architectural history at Baruch College. “Because it’s old.”

Boston Properties, which owns the building, said it didn’t have anyone available to comment on its proposed landmark status.

When architects Hugh Stubbins and Emery Roth & Sons designed the skyscraper for First National City Bank, now Citibank, they followed the modern themes of Park Avenue’s Lever House and the Seagram Building. The Lexington Avenue building, Mr. Maciuiika said, represented a more “abstract corporate” design.

The open space of its public plaza, which ‘receives a lot of people coming in and out of the station.’ Photo: Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

“It goes a step further by, on the top, having that radical slanted form,” Mr. Maciuiika said. “It becomes a distinctive marker on the skyline. It’s not just a monolithic block.”

The top, inclined at a 45-degree angle, was initially meant to hold terrace apartments, according to a Landmarks Preservation Committee statement of significance. When zoning restrictions nixed the plan, developers suggested installing solar panels on the roof, said Jon Ritter, a clinical
associate professor at New York University’s department of art history. That also proved unsuccessful.

The tower is 910 feet tall and sits on four 115-foot pylons, making room for a subway entrance and an open-air area underneath.

“It becomes a pretty successful public plaza with the stairs and vendors and open space,” Mr. Ritter said. “It receives a lot of people coming in and out of the station.”

The design of the open base was due to St. Peter’s Church, which had been located on the corner of East 54th Street and Lexington Avenue since 1862. Before the tower was built, First National City Bank agreed to demolish the Lutheran church and fund its $9 million reconstruction, according to Sam Hutcheson, St. Peter’s director of operations.

As part of the deal, the pylons had to be placed at the midpoints of each side of the building, rather than its corners. That allowed the adjoining church to remain exposed to sunlight and foot traffic at the street intersection, something that was important to St. Peter’s.

“We had been doing our ministry here for the last 110 years. We want to continue doing our ministry in this place,” Mr. Hutcheson said. “The catchword at the time was the intersection…all the newsletters, even the logo of the church is an intersection.”

Mr. Stubbins, tasked with rebuilding the church in a more contemporary design, intended it to be a “granite tent,” Mr. Hutcheson said. About 60 feet tall, the church now has a skylight on its roof and four floor-to-ceiling windows, so natural light illuminates its open sanctuary.