

Style Standard for Early Steel-Framed Skyscraper

Now a mixed-use co-op, it is undergoing restoration.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

OLD-LINE preservationists still mourn the demolition of the elegant 47-story Singer Tower, built in 1908 at Broadway and Liberty Street, one of the big architectural losses of the 1960's. But an earlier and perhaps more important Singer building survives, at Broadway and Prince Street, and a \$1 million restoration campaign has workers disassembling and repairing the unusual iron and terra cotta facade.

In 1900, the Singer Manufacturing Company bought the L-shaped plot at 561 Broadway through to Prince Street. Singer was controlled by Alfred Corning Clark, whose father, Edward, had built the Dakota and other West Side buildings in the 1880's, all designed by Henry Hardenbergh.

But by the 1890's, Alfred Clark was working with a different designer, Ernest Flagg, freshly returned from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. According to Mardges Bacon, author of a monograph on Flagg, the Singer Company was then expanding its sewing machine market into Europe, including Russia.

Singer's president since 1889, Frederick Bourne, had managed the construction of the Dakota for the Clarks and at the turn of the century also used Flagg for his giant country house and other projects. In 1902, Flagg designed the loft building for the 561 Broadway site, to be used as a product showroom and for rental income. Flagg had designed two other commercial buildings for Bourne and Singer, both in an elegant but conventional Parisian mode.

At the time, the architectural world was groping for the appropriate style for the steel-framed skyscraper, a building type less than a decade old. There was general consensus that skyscrapers should not imitate older masonry structures. But beyond that, nothing was certain and most tall buildings still piled blocks on top of columns on top of blocks, as if skyscrapers were really just tall bearing-wall buildings.

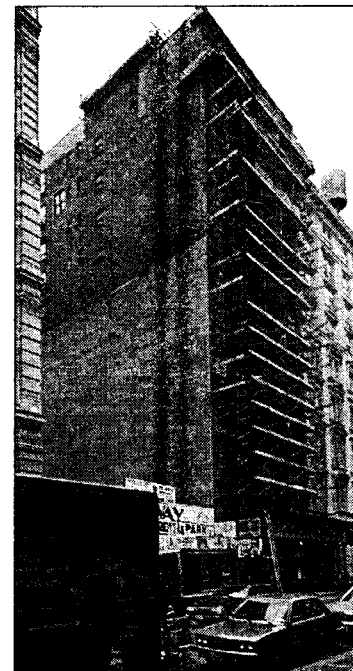
For the 12-story Singer loft building, Flagg developed a different approach, one with an innovative mix of style and function. Instead of the usual thick masonry wall with holes punched for windows, Flagg designed an airy screen of iron and glass, admitting perhaps twice the light of the usual design as well as air — the floor-to-ceiling glazed units are transoms and French windows.



Although it did not attract popular attention, the new Singer structure did excite architects and critics. The amount of glass was unusual, as was the way that Flagg produced it. He could have run up phony fluted columns along the edges supporting

phony plinths and bandcourses, in the popular "masonry fiction," as the critic H.W. Desmond termed it in *Architectural Record* in 1904.

But instead Flagg encased decorative rectangles of plumb red terra cotta in an



Left, the Singer building at 561 Broadway (with white flag on the roof) in 1911. Above, the building today; workers are disassembling and repairing the unusual iron and terra cotta facade.

iron lattice work running up the sides and across each floor. These were nothing more than decorative facings covering brick fireproofing over the steel beams and columns that really did hold up the building.

Desmond praised Flagg for reducing his assignment to the bare minimum — provide shelter and as much light as possible, and protect the steel frame and then letting "the building tell its own story as agreeably as it might." Desmond called it a "revolutionary structure ... very novel, very ingenious, highly thoughtful." In *Scribners*, Montgomery Schuyler called it "a rational skyscraper." Even in color the Singer loft was radiant — instead of the tan limestone, white marble or gray granite of other buildings, it was red and green almost whimsical.

Flagg's superintendent on the job was Arthur Sutcliffe and he recorded problem after problem with finishing the building. A

1903 entry bemoaned "our hoodooed luck," but upon completion in 1904 the building was apparently fully occupied by underwear, infant clothing and related industries.

Not every critic admired Flagg's work — the magazine *Architectural Review* complained that the metal and terra cotta assemblies would be vulnerable to fire damage and difficult to maintain.

FLAGG continued to work for Bourne and in 1905 designed a mansion for him at 52d Street and Fifth Avenue that was not built. But he had also been concentrating on another project — since 1903 he had been planning a tower at Broadway and Liberty Street for Singer that would be the tallest in the world.

The height of the Singer Tower, completed in 1908, totally eclipsed any prominence the Singer loft building might have gained. The tower backed off from the innovation of its little cousin, preferring instead the dress of a Parisian mansion. And the sense of structural expression, of not masking the essential structure of a building with neo-Gothic or other decoration, was lost until the advent of Modernism, about 1930.

The reputation of the Singer loft building was revived in 1957, when Alan Burham wrote "Forgotten Pioneering" about it in the magazine *Architectural Forum*. By that time, the transoms were painted out, decorative urns on the parapet had been removed and Singer had sold the building.

According to John Blanchard, the managing agent until recently, the building was converted to a co-op in 1979 but ran afoul of city regulations on such conversions. With large floors and situated on Broadway, the Singer loft building was supposed to be preserved for manufacturing tenants.

Because the city sued, the co-op did not get a certificate of occupancy until last December. In a joint agreement between the Department of City Planning and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the cooperative received a special permit in exchange for restoration work on the facade.

Now the co-op, with 15 residential units and 20 commercial units, is proceeding with a \$1 million repair campaign overseen by Bone/Levine Architects. All over the facade, the intricate iron lattice and terra cotta units have been disassembled and repaired.

Joseph Levine, the architect, says the big surprise is that the steel imbedded in the masonry is in worse condition than the exterior work, even though the exterior has been painted only once since 1904. With other buildings, terra cotta in close contact with metal is often a recipe for disaster, but for some reason with Flagg's radical design it has been just the opposite. ■