

Empire State Building – Historic Art Deco Lobby Backgrounder

The Empire State Building (ESB) lobby is one of the few interiors in New York to be designated a historic landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. As part of the building’s renovation and modernization initiative, the ESB lobby is being restored to the original architects’ Art Deco vision, while introducing a contemporary visitor processing system and employing state-of-the-art technology.

Led by Richard Metsky, Partner, and Frank Prial, Senior Preservation Architect, of Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners LLP (BBB) and project managers of Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL), the restoration team includes architects, historians, artists and specialty craftsmen. Guided by historic documents, photos, original design sketches, blueprints and forensic analysis of existing architectural elements, BBB’s team of experts are working to recapture the aesthetic of the original 1930 design.

“The restoration and modernization of the ESB lobby has taken us on a fascinating journey,” said Prial. “Through our research, we discovered design elements that have been lost throughout the years and some that were planned but never installed due to cost restraints when the building was constructed. We now have the privileged opportunity to restore the lobby to its original design with its intended art installations and lighting.”

Recapturing Lost Features

Over the years, key design elements were obscured and lost. In the 1960s, an acrylic-panel dropped ceiling was installed, covering an ornate ceiling mural and introducing fluorescent lighting to the lobby. Glasswork, such as intricate cast glass fixture lenses that lined elevator banks and side corridors, were replaced over time with acrylic inlays. Luckily, JLL discovered photographs and descriptions of original panels at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, New York, which served as a guide for highly-skilled artisans used to recreate over 12,000 linear feet of the historic glasswork.

Original Lighting Design With Contemporary Technology

Through extensive research, the BBB team identified original ESB lighting concepts to match that intent with modern lighting technology, featuring energy-efficient bulbs and ballasts that can be adjusted based on lighting needs and New York power grid demands.

Additionally, ESB will restore the original 1930s lighting levels, making the overall lighting scheme dimmer and more dramatic to bring out the colors in the lobby’s stone walls and draw the eye up to the ceiling mural as the focal point for the restored lobby. Store-level tenants will be required to follow new design guidelines, requiring retailers to not block interior windows in order to allow natural light to flow into the lobby.

Art Deco Chandeliers and Installations

Original ESB lobby blueprints show plans for two ornate chandeliers to be installed over the second-floor pedestrian bridges along the 33rd and 34th Street lobby corridors. BBB discovered that the original chandeliers were never created. Instead, two 1920s fixtures, which were since removed and destroyed, were hung, likely as a cost-saving measure, in the later phases of the original construction. After careful consideration, the Landmarks Preservation Commission approved installation of the originally intended

chandeliers, which will be interpreted and fabricated by Rambusch, the fourth-generation firm that created the original ceiling mural.

On the iconic wall mural within the Fifth Avenue main lobby entrance, JLL will coordinate the restoration of the anemometer (that was later replaced by a clock) to measure wind speed and direction from a weather station above the ESB’s world-renowned 86th floor Observatory. Although the anemometer was part of the original 1930s design, its weather station will offer modern-day technology, linking it to not only the main lobby, but also the ESB website (www.esbnyc.com) and real-time weather dials in the observatory areas.

Visitor Screening Desk

In the 34th Street lobby corridor, a new Visitor Screening Desk (VSD) will be installed for tenants’ visitors to the building. Behind its marble desk, the VSD will showcase a world-class glass artwork installation, featuring a multi-panel, illuminated glass wall mural created by artist Denise Amses of Amses Cosma.

Restoring the ESB Marble

The original masons used exquisite carefully selected international marbles throughout the lobby to create a unique example of “bookmatching,” in which slices of stone from the same block are arranged to mirror each other, highlighting the marble’s natural veining for artistic purposes. Pieces of the building’s original marble were removed or damaged over the past 77 years, so historians from BBB have searched the world and replaced lost material with new to match as closely as possible.

Creating the Empire State Building Typeface

A product of the Machine Age, the Empire State Building is synonymous with Art Deco style. To capture the true look and feel of the time, Two Twelve Associates created a custom font that was approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission to be used on all interior and exterior signage created for the Empire State Building that is reminiscent of the building’s Art Deco elements and inspired by the 1930s. From the redesigned employee uniforms to exterior signage for all store-level retail tenants, this ESB-trademarked font ensures branding consistency, legibility and historic accuracy for all ESB signage.

Fast Facts

- 12,000 linear feet of cast glass light fixture lenses are being recreated to line the ESB lobby and side corridors.
- Ambient light levels will be returned to the original 1930s levels. Dramatic up-lighting will bring out the colors of the lobby’s stone walls and draw attention to the restored Art Deco, aluminum and gold leaf ceiling mural.
- All lighting will feature energy-efficient bulbs and ballasts that will be reduced at night for power-saving and can be dimmed according to lighting needs and New York City power grid demands.
- ESB worked with the Landmarks Preservation Commission to approve the design and installation of two Art Deco chandeliers, which were originally planned for the building but never created. The new chandeliers will be interpreted from original architects’ drawings and fabricated by Rambusch of Jersey City, NJ.

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