

INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT POWERHOUSE
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

Occupying the entire block bounded by Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues, West 58th and 59th Streets, the original powerhouse of the Interborough Rapid Transit Subway is the most monumental building associated with the subway system in New York City. This mammoth structure was the largest powerhouse in the world upon its completion in 1904, and it represented the highest level of technical sophistication in the production of electrical power at that time. From the powerhouse, current was generated and fed to eight substations to power the signal and lighting systems. In its role as company symbol, the building heralded a new era of electrified urban transportation, illustrating the power of technology to improve urban life. The IRT Powerhouse still stands as a monument to the engineers and architects who planned and built New York City's first successful underground transit system.

The exterior of the powerhouse was designed by Stanford White of the prominent firm of McKim, Mead & White and is a rare example of utilitarian design by that firm. Executed in the Beaux-Arts style and drawing upon Renaissance prototypes, it is the embodiment of the aesthetic ideals of the civic-minded City Beautiful movement, spawned by World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, which held that public improvements could beautify American industrial cities. The structural design of the powerhouse was the responsibility of William C. Phelps, assistant engineer in charge of the Mechanical Department of the Subway Construction Company.

Standing on a base of smooth ashlar granite, the building has symmetrically designed facades of buff-colored brick arranged in bays with two-story arched window openings that are decorated with terra-cotta moldings and keystones. The arcades are surmounted by an attic story with paired window openings framed by terra-cotta moldings. The six windows of the Eleventh Avenue facade are separated by brick pilasters with foliated terra-cotta rustication blocks and topped by terra-cotta wreaths. At the long north and south facades, pairs of rusticated brick pilasters separate the arched bays. Many of the windows retain their original multipane industrial sash. All but one of the original six chimneys—which were erected on a steel substructure 76 feet above the basement floor of the powerhouse in order to maximize floor space—have been removed, and a new, much taller chimney has been added near the southeast corner. The original terra-cotta roof tiles and the upper cornice have also been removed. Four openings have been cut into the base on the south side and one on the north side, and three of the window openings have been partially bricked in (two on the south side, one on the north). An addition was constructed in the 1940s at the Twelfth Avenue facade of the powerhouse, which IRT engineers had purposefully left vacant for such an expansion to the plant. This addition was not included in the proposed designation.