IRT/Con Ed Powerhouse

Save Stack # 5

Designed By
McKim Mead & White

Original Construction 1904

Currently Owned and Occupied
by Consolidated Edison

February 26, 2009

Columbia University
Historic Preservation Studio II
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On July 31, 2008, Consolidated Edison filed an alteration application (110292488) with the Department of Buildings with a job description “REMOVE STACK #5 @ CON EDISON’S 59TH STREET GENERATING STATION”. The permit was issued on August 21, 2008. Additional application have been filed and approved to install scaffolding on the interior and exterior of the building during stack removal.

The planned demolition of Stack #5 should be of urgent concern to those interested in preserving this historic structure. Designed by the prestigious architectural firm McKim, Mead & White, the building was originally constructed to power the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) subway system, which opened in 1904. Stack #5 is the last remaining original smokestack of the 1904 construction [Fig 1].

The original structure of the Powerhouse was 540 feet long with fourteen arched bays along each of its north and south elevations and “its west wall closed by a bulkhead to allow for later expansion” in anticipation of increased power requirements.1 Early images of the Powerhouse show five 240-foot-tall smokestacks [Fig 2].

The first western addition took place in 1904-05, expanding the building to 694 feet with seventeen arched bays. Historical photographs published in October 1904 show the construction of the western extension [Figs 3 & 4]. Visible to the left of the smokestack closest to the camera is the framework for what will be the sixth smokestack. Photographs after 1905 show the six-stack Powerhouse silhouette [Fig 5]. These six smokestacks topped the structure for the duration of its use as the IRT Powerhouse. Con Ed purchased the Powerhouse in 1959 and continues to use it for steam generation.

Between 1948 and 1952, a second addition—clearly distinguishable architecturally from the original building and first addition—extended the Powerhouse even farther west to Twelfth Avenue.

Today, the Powerhouse has only two smokestacks: Stack #5 and a more recent 500-foot-tall smokestack on the eastern end of the building. There is some confusion about the provenance of the existing smokestacks. For example, a 1978 Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) report states that a “single 500-foot stack replaced western-most four 240-foot stacks” in 1966. However, logically, the report is referring to the four eastern-most stacks (originally Stacks #1-4). A 1967 letter from Con Ed to the Borough Superintendent corroborates this interpretation of the facts by referring to the new 500-foot stack as “chimney #1”. Further confirmation is seen in aerial plans dated 2007 (located in the DOB file on the Powerhouse) that clearly label the surviving smokestacks [Fig 6].

Stack #5 is arguably the most powerful surviving architectural element that speaks directly to the original industrial purpose of the IRT Powerhouse. It is of crucial importance that Stack #5 be recognized and protected as the building’s most visible symbol of the amazing technological feat that was the IRT subway.

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1 HAER Report on IRT Subway, Page 308
Removal of Stack #5

DOB ALT PERMIT 110292488:

REMOVE STACK #5 @ CON EDISON'S 59TH STREET GENERATING STATION. THERE IS NO CHANGE IN USE, OCCUPANCY, EGRESS OR FLOOR AREA UNDER THIS APPLICATION.

ca. 1905

Stack #5

2009

Fig. 1
This photograph was published in 1906 in the Ry Street Journal.

Fig. 2
EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE POWER PLANT DURING CONSTRUCTION, SHOWING STEEL WORK

Fig. 3

Fig. 4
Fig. 5

NYPL Digital Archives, ND
Aerial Drawings from 2007: See Eastern Chimney #1 and Stack #5
Stack #6 disappeared at an unknown time, likely when the second western addition from the 1950’s was added. Its previous existence can today be seen as a vacant section in the roofline between Stack #5 and the western addition.