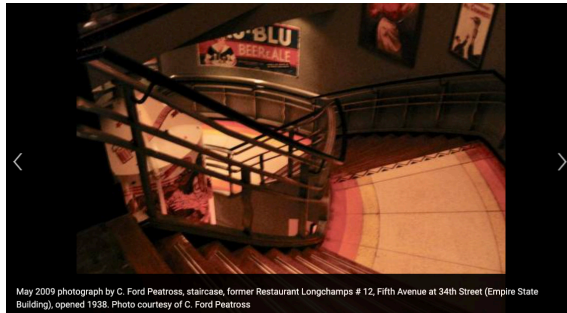


Saving the Starbucks Stairway

Preservationists call for the Empire State Building and its new tenant to reveal plans for Winold Reiss' historic design

MICHAEL ORESKES | 26 AUG 2022 | 12:44



Preservationists demanded that the Empire State Building and its new tenant, Starbucks, reveal their plans for an historic stairway that since 1938 has connected the main floor and basement of a restaurant space that they are now converting into a Starbucks Reserve.

The curved stairway, with sleek railings and rainbow tinted steps, is believed to be the last surviving example of the interior design work of Winold Reiss, an artist, graphic designer and premier creator of restaurants between the 1920's and 1950's.

The stairway, built originally for the Longchamps chain, was brought to public attention in a new exhibition at the New-York Historical Society celebrating Reiss, a German immigrant, who helped bring European Modernism to the United States.

"Given his importance, and the fact that most of his restaurant designs are gone, the Empire State Building should be forthcoming about whether the stairway still exists," said the President of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Peg Breen. "If it does, it seems reasonable to ask the new restaurant to save it."

The stairway survived through many conversions of the space and was photographed largely intact as recently as 2009. The Empire State Building referred questions to Starbucks, which said only:

"Starbucks takes the utmost respect and care when planning new spaces for our stores, and our new Starbucks Reserve location will open later this year in the Empire State Building. We have no additional details to share about the store at this time."

The Buildings department says the construction permit for the new Starbucks makes no mention of the stairway and that no separate permit was requested for its demolition, which would have been required.

"The Stair Looks Fantastic"

But Starbucks' refusal to discuss its plans has unnerved preservationists, who note that tenants have wide latitude to change colors, facings and other non-structural elements, which are integral to Reiss' work.

"I went to the exhibition several weeks ago and loved it," said Andrew Scott Dolkart, Professor of Historic Preservation at the Columbia University School of Architecture. "The stair looks fantastic and its survival, at least up until now, amazing. It would work well in a Starbucks, but they probably have cookie-cutter design frameworks."

In 1981 the city designated the lobby of the Empire State Building a Landmark, but not the adjacent commercial spaces where Longchamps opened in 1938.

Roberta Nusim, President of the Art Deco Society of New York, said that even though the building and its tenant weren't legally required to protect the stairway they should make their plans clear.

"The owners of the Empire State Building have done such a splendid job restoring the building, especially the interior public spaces," Nusim said. "This could be another preservation feather in their cap."

Belmont Freeman, a well know local architect who teaches historic preservation, said the Reiss stairway was "an incredible opportunity to save a work of art" by integrating it into newer design elements of the Starbucks.

"If that Winold Reiss staircase is really still there it's a major treasure of period design and it would be a crime to lose it, to take it out for the purposes of a coffee shop," Freeman said. "It's the kind of thing people did rather carelessly twenty years ago. But now we are wiser about the legacy of these terrific designers like Reiss from that period."

Starbucks, Freeman said, "should be somehow persuaded or pressured into coming clean about it, so we can know."

Famous Eateries

Reiss designed the interiors of close to a dozen Longchamps, as well as other famous eateries such as Rumpelmayers Café and Tea Room, Restaurant Crillon, Lindy's and Dunhall.

C. Ford Peatross, an architectural historian who collected Reiss work for the Library of Congress, said that Starbucks could and should examine the many plans and drawings Reiss made for the Empire State Building location.

He said he would be happy to guide Starbucks' designers through Reiss's work. At his request, a reporter passed his contact information on to Starbucks.

"While we can't save everything, should someone in Seattle decide the value of something they haven't seen firsthand that has lasted for decades?" asked Sean Khorsandi, executive director of Landmark West, a preservation group on the Upper West Side.

A Starbucks spokesman said the company had worked with the Empire State Building "to understand the history of that part of the building."

The spokesman noted that “the design of the original Longchamps restaurant was a collaboration between Ely Jacques Kahn (architect), who designed the space and the stairs, and Winold Reiss (interior design), who contributed to the interior design, art and decoration.”

Reiss collaborated regularly with Ely Jacques Kahn, one of the premier architects of the day, who left most of the key decisions to Reiss, as captured in the archived drawings and plans, Peatross said.

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