Verizon Building (Barclay-Vesey Building for the New York Telephone Company)

Kathryn E. Holliday


To cite this article: Kathryn E. Holliday (2013): Verizon Building (Barclay-Vesey Building for the New York Telephone Company), Journal of Architectural Education, 67:1, 156-158

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.767135

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
The Architecture of Telecommunication

The telephone building is the most visible piece of the telecommunications network. Telephone wires converge in these buildings and information is rerouted and sent on to its destinations by the complex array of switching equipment contained within. Even today, as we increasingly depend on internet and wireless-based systems, the telephone building remains at the center of the network, the old copper wires exchanged for fiber-optic cables, the old switching systems converted to high-speed routers. Telephone buildings are omnipresent, at the heart of every American city and town, and their forms are varied and hybridized. The development of these buildings as a type shows the importance of infrastructure and corporate culture in determining the forms and meanings of architecture in the twentieth century. Despite their ubiquity, telephone buildings remain something of a cipher, appearing neither in traditional surveys of building types nor in histories of telecommunications. This is especially striking if one understands the three distinct phases in the design of telephone buildings linked to the changing role of telecommunications in American culture and the way the telephone companies understood the meaning of both architecture and the telephone to the larger public.

In the first phase, roughly between 1876 and 1920, the basic typology developed quickly. Within just a few years of the initial commercialization of telephone service, the infrastructure to support the new service outgrew existing buildings, with wires spilling out of windows, across roofs, and through the streets (Figure 1). Telephone companies quickly had to develop their own buildings in close proximity to customers as cities moved to require telephone wires be buried underground by the middle of the 1880s. Probably the first of these buildings was the Metropolitan Telephone Building in New York (1886), designed by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz in association with telephone company engineers. It initiated the basic spatial typology that would inform all subsequent telephone buildings: at the basement and lower levels, switching equipment and wiring extending outward through subterranean tunnels performed the physical task of telecommunication; at street level, the building provided public offices for customers to order service and pay bills; on the floors above, operators routed calls at switchboards and provided directory assistance; and on the top floors, management and marketing had office space. This layered structure created an orderly corporate hierarchy that arranged employees by status and by gender.1 The building’s exterior envelope, though, did not remotely suggest the revolutionary technologies it housed. (Figure 2). Early telephone buildings accommodated complex subterranean infrastructure and mimicked the scale and appearance of surrounding office buildings, disguising the presence of the socially and physically disruptive technology.

This period of relative anonymity for telephone buildings ended as Bell began a national campaign to

---

VERIZON BUILDING (BARCLAY-VESEY BUILDING FOR THE NEW YORK TELEPHONE COMPANY)
1920–1926
Designed by Ralph Thomas Walker
(McKenzie, Voorhees, and Gmelin)
New York, New York

---

Figure 1. The first telephone exchanges were installed in existing buildings and quickly outgrew them. This is the exchange located in the Holmes Hotel on Washington Street in Boston in 1877.  

Figure 2. The Metropolitan Telephone Building, designed by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, was completed in 1886 on Cortlandt Street, New York. Nothing about its exterior suggested the revolutionary technologies it housed.  

Courtesy HLW International LLP, New York.
expand its long-distance customer base at the end of World War I; the first long distance call from New York to Denver took place in 1911 and from New York to San Francisco in 1915. In a policy designed to promote “universal service” to customers across the country, Bell shifted its corporate policy and, through advertising, design, and architecture, began to celebrate its presence as a fixture in American life. It began a massive national building campaign in the early 1920s, shortly after threats that national telecommunications would be taken over by a government buyout were extinguished in 1919. Large-scale investment in new infrastructure resulted in new corporate headquarters for every regional telephone company during the 1920s, building hundreds of smaller facilities that visually linked suburban and rural contexts back to the central headquarters. The city telephone buildings, dubbed “urban giants,” became larger and more ornate, often dwarfing the buildings around them. These buildings of the 1920s celebrated the presence of the telephone in American life and created a marketable image of modernity, speed, and desirability.

The first of these urban giants was planned in New York, designed for the New York Telephone Company between 1920 and 1926 by Ralph Walker and his firm, McKenzie, Voorhees, and Gmelin (Figure 3). As the Metropolitan Telephone Building did before, so would the Barclay-Vesey building now set the standard for buildings across the country. In section, the building retained the order established in the 1880s even as the corporate structure became more complex—switching equipment, wires, and engineers in the basement and lower levels, operators above them, and corporate management at the top. Massive reinforced concrete floors carried heavy equipment and copper wiring. And even on floors dedicated exclusively to infrastructure, the building had windows. This was a key element of the urban giants—a nod to public civic life. Designers argued that windows were not just for those inside the building, but for those outside. The architects intended to keep the ground floor of the massive building integrated into the city as well, carving out a

Figure 3. The New York Telephone Company Building, designed by McKenzie, Voorhees, and Gmelin (1920–26), at Barclay and Vesey Streets, New York, initiated a phase of “urban giants” in telephone buildings. Courtesy HLW International LLP, New York.
covered arcade along Barclay Street and incorporating a long interior passageway connecting from Barclay Street to West Avenue, decorated with a series of murals celebrating telecommunication throughout history, from smoke signals to semaphores. On the exterior, Walker created a complex iconography for the telephone in limestone and cast-stone panels placed above the entries and windows: intertwining grape vines symbolized the networks of wires, sunflowers, pumas, and elephants transformed the hulking building into a mountain landscape in the heart of the city.  

The telephone company called the building’s dramatic stepped form “American Perpendicular,” and it became a vehicle for transmitting the New York-specific setback skyscraper form to other cities: regional headquarters designed by local architects from San Francisco (1924–25, Miller and Pflueger) to St. Louis (1926, Mauzan, Russell & Crowe), Denver (1929, William N. Bowman), Newark (Voorhees, Gmelin and Walker, 1929), Atlanta (1930, Marye, Alger, and Vinour), and Dallas (Lang and Witchell, 1929) used the New York Telephone Building as a model, employing its powerful combination of heavy masonry walls and elaborate ornamentation to glorify this new age of telecommunications. The Bell System considered these buildings “many expressions of the same policy,” and as representative of “a modern American spirit.”

The third phase of intense building occurred in the postwar decades through the early 1970s as improvements in technology and population growth challenged the existing infrastructure. At this point, the telephone had become an integral part of American life, its presence in every home unquestioned. AT&T’s monopoly on the provision of service was well established and there was no need to lure customers. Corporate building policy changed dramatically as a result and new buildings reflected an increased concern for efficiency and economy, or what was called “noteworthy architecture at low cost.” Philip Johnson’s extravagant 1984 AT&T Headquarters Building, as the home of executives rather than a true telephone building, was a notable exception. Telephone buildings became enormous windowless boxes. The New York Telephone Company Switching Center (Kahn & Jacobs, 1964) and the AT&T Long Lines Building (John Carl Warnecke, 1974), both in New York and routinely voted onto lists of the ugliest buildings in the city, were marked by their monolithic lack of detail (Figure 4). This shift created a deep ambivalence about the existing infrastructure and led to the often bizarre accumulations of additions to existing telephone buildings, many of which have an exuberant 1920s core surrounded by a series of increasingly massive, windowless brick cubes (Figure 5).

Since the break-up of the Bell System in 1984, virtually no telephone buildings have been built and, today, the competing telephone companies are increasingly attempting to divest themselves of much of the real estate accumulated during their first 100 years. Many telephone buildings remain at the heart of the information network as high speed data centers but the replacement of copper wire with fiber optic cables and the increase of dependence on cellular technologies leaves much of the space in the huge real estate holdings unused and unnecessary. Even as the upper floors of telephone towers remain empty, though, the equipment in their basements remains essential to the maintenance of the information network. While new data centers sponsored by competing service providers like Google and Facebook are built far outside cities, old telephone buildings remain essential for their delivery networks.

Kathryn E. Holliday

Notes

5. “Noteworthy Architecture at Low Cost” is the title of a Bell Telephone Companies’ internal publication celebrating the winners of a 1960 design awards program for telephone buildings.