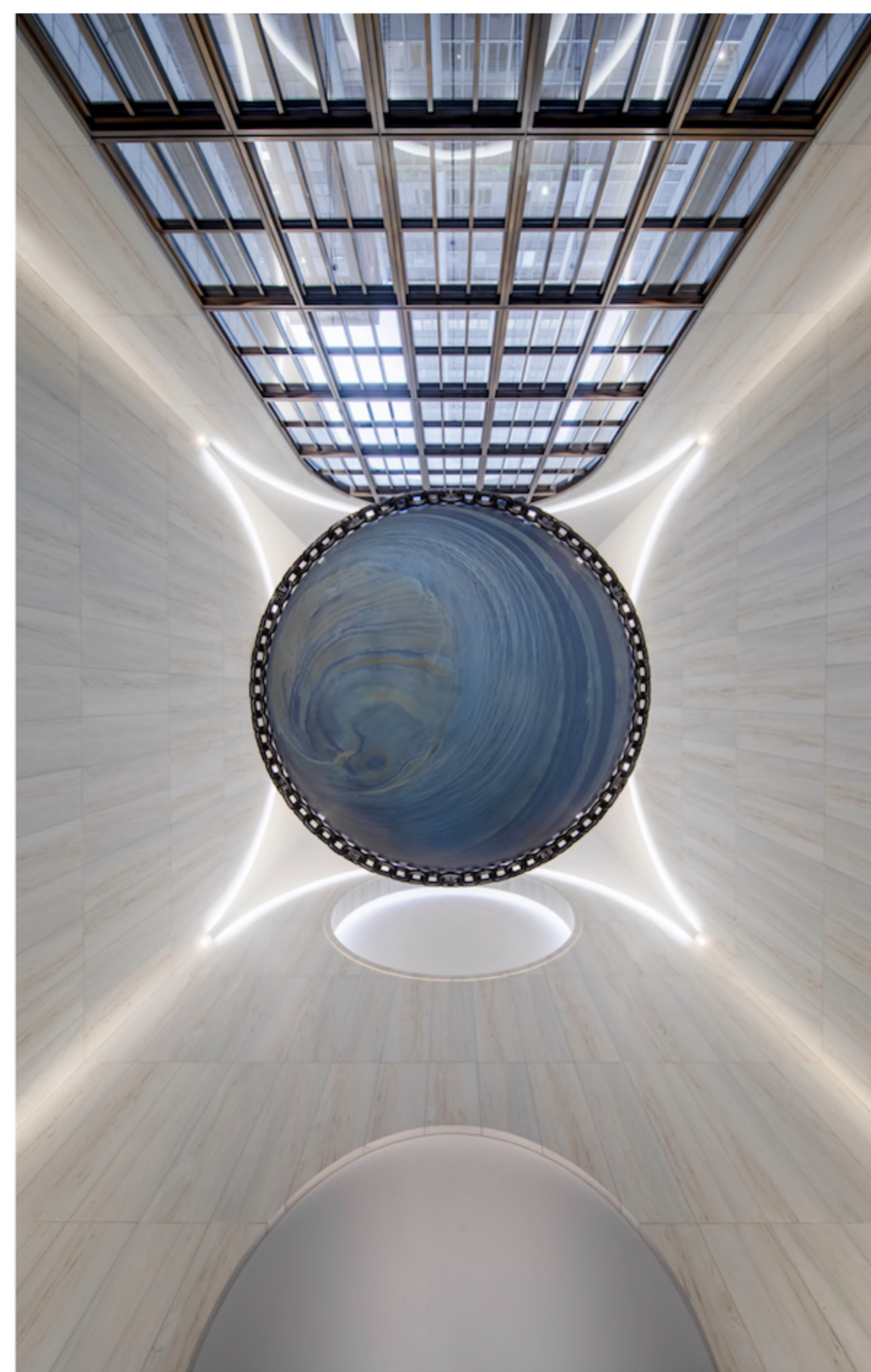




"Solid Sky" (2021) by Alicja Kwade in the lobby at 550 Madison designed by Gensler. Photography by James Ewing

Efforts are underway to revitalize 550 Madison, a Manhattan skyscraper and Postmodern icon formerly known as the Sony Tower and AT&T Building, into a multi-tenant office building for the first time. Though the project angered preservationists concerned about threats to Philip Johnson and John Burgee's cheeky design flourishes, the developers Olayan Group recently unveiled the 37-story building's gutted and transformed lobby: a cathedral-like space designed by Gensler and anchored by a monumental installation by Alicja Kwade.

Dangling a precarious 12 feet above ground within the lobby's soaring 65-foot-tall arched entryway is Kwade's *Solid Sky*, an enormous sphere fashioned from lustrous Azul do Macaubas stone quarried in northeastern Brazil. "This rock is the result of a metamorphosis that took place more than one billion years ago, and was created under great pressure and elevated temperatures," Kwade said in a statement. "A metamorphosis always has something metaphysical and magical about it. Due to the blue color of the stone, the ball appears like planet earth—very fragile and small, in comparison to the entirety of the universe."



Photography by James Ewing and Fred Charles

The Polish-German artist, who enjoyed a solo exhibition on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's rooftop in 2019, intended the Earth-like sphere to pay homage to the building's circular motifs (including the facade's distinctive Chippendale pediment) while drawing curious eyes up toward the impressive triple-height ceilings. "*Solid Sky* respects the building's groundbreaking architecture, at once integrated with its surroundings, while also playing with and challenging them by its mesmerizing color, weight, and lightness," says Alex Toledano, president of VISTO, the building's art consultancy. Estimated at 1.2 billion years old, the quartzite sphere was also rotated 23.5 degrees to match the Earth's axial tilt.

Though *Solid Sky* has become 550 Madison's indisputable centerpiece, expect more art in coming months. Olayan has pledged to fill the rest of the skyscraper with pieces by other renowned female artists and will preserve two massive 30-foot-by-29-foot murals by Dorothea Rockburne that Sony originally commissioned for the second-floor lobby in 1993. Snøhetta, meanwhile, is hard at work on an expansion of the building's landscaped garden.