
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-20

The Lunch Room and Oyster Shucking Shed

1100 Maine Avenue SW
Square 473, part of Lot 846

Meeting Date: November 19, 2015
Applicant: Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development
Affected ANC: 6D
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Lunch Room and Oyster Shucking Shed, 1100 Maine Avenue SW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and request that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance, with a period of significance of 1916-1918, the dates of construction of the two structures.

Background

An island surrounded by paving and neighboring the seafood-purveying barges on the wharves, what is now commonly known as the Fish Cleaning Building was constructed in 1916-1918, part of a much larger municipal fish market complex. Asserting its ownership of all the waterfront parcels at the turn of the century, the District of Columbia, through its Board of Commissioners and with the financial assistance of Congress, set out to reconstruct the deteriorating Civil War-era wharves. Along with wharf reconstruction came the rationalization and clean-up of the old, chaotic and dirty buildings, lots and uses that characterized the working waterfront, “a menace from a sanitary standpoint.”

Plans for a municipal fish market commenced in 1908 and solidified in 1912-1914. Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford designed a 350-foot long enclosed wholesale market house/warehouse and subsidiary buildings. The market house was to become “the sole place hereafter where fish and oysters for sale in Washington shall be landed.” In the off-season, it could also store lumber, coal and other products that were still commonly transported on the river. Ashford designed the brick-and-steel buildings in the Colonial Revival style, a mode both popular and promoted by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts for municipal facilities in the city’s neighborhoods. The main building contained sheds, stalls and offices. The market spaces soon accommodated retail spaces and restaurants, in addition to their central, wholesale function.

Constructed between 1916 and 1918, the market building was in many ways similar to the city market houses that preceded it, except for its specialization in seafood. Yet, it also illustrates Progressive-Era concerns for sanitation and pure food, and for the rationalization, centralization and regulation of urban functions for the common good. In that sense, it transcended the City

Beautiful movement's inspirational emphasis on improving the appearance of the city, and embraced the City Efficient movement's concern with making it work better.

Among the market's satellite buildings were a Lunch Room and an Oyster Shucking Shed, with functions clearly indicated by their names. The Lunch Room is a brick building, designed in the Colonial Revival style to complement the large market house opposite. Its purpose was to supplement the food-service uses that had sprung up in the market, and it served the working people on the wharves, who were not necessarily welcome in the other restaurants. Later known as the "Cadillac Restaurant," it was expanded with an L-shaped addition that continues to encapsulate the south and west sides of the building.

The similarly hip-roofed Oyster Shucking Shed was just that, an open-air shed supported on posts made of steel angles. It provided a sheltered and bounded area for performing some of the riverfront dirty work, and the shuckers therein served both retail customers and the restaurants. The shed was enclosed in the 1930s and was subsequently joined to the adjacent lunch room by a low, masonry hyphen. The seafood-processing function remained even after the adjoining restaurant closed in 1970—and thus the building survived after the rest of the market was razed in 1960. Although little used and dilapidated these past few years, the two structures came to be known collectively as the Fish Cleaning Building or shed.

Evaluation

The Lunch Room and Oyster Shucking Shed merit designation under District of Columbia Designation Criterion B ("History") and National Register Criterion A at the local level of significance for being associated with broad patterns of our history, and specifically for being associated with the renewal and reconstruction of the wharves of the Southwest Waterfront under the District of Columbia Commissioners. It survives as the last remnant of that extensive complex, as the design inspiration for later Colonial-Revival waterfront buildings, and as the vestige of a pre-Urban Renewal working waterfront where were landed the fruits of the Chesapeake Bay fisheries.

The proposed period of significance is 1916 to 1918, the period of the fish market's construction and the wharves' reconstruction and the opening of the buildings to their original uses. This period predates the additions and the enclosure of the shed.

The building largely retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, craftsmanship, feeling and association. It has suffered from alteration, partial demolition, enclosure, partial encapsulation and neglect, but the restoration of the buildings to nearly their original appearance is imminent. The desire of the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development and the private (re)developer of the waterfront to proceed with restoring them has prompted the hearing on DMPED's landmark nomination at this time.