HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 14-04

West Heating Plant
1051/1055 29th Street NW
Square 1193

Meeting Date: April 23, 2015
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 2E
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the West Heating Plant, 1051-1055 29th Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1942 to 1968.

The property merits designation under District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") as a striking, monumental piece of architecture, classically composed, streamlined and powerful, and thoroughly up to date in its expression. It represents an ending of something older—the New Deal and Art Moderne—and the arrival of the Modern. For a city with relatively little industrial architecture, the West Heating Plant is a standout industrial building, significant to the appearance and development of the District, and should be recognized alongside infrastructure landmarks such the Central Heating Plant and the Main Sewerage Pumping Station. The building was modern not only in appearance but in the engineering of its systems and its steel and masonry structure. Furthermore, it was crucial to the federal government's planning of the nation's capital, especially the expansion of agency headquarters in the Northwest Rectangle and elsewhere.

For similar reasons, the property meets National Register Criterion C as a "significant and distinguishable entity" that possesses high artistic values despite "merely" being a type of heating plant. The building is distinctive as an individual structure and embodies characteristics of the architecture of its period, on the cusp of Modernism.

The property also meets District Criterion B and National Register Criterion A for its association "with events that have made a significant contributions to the broad patterns of our history" and historical periods, groups, institutions or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the development of the District. Foremost among the events and trends is the vast physical expansion of the federal establishment during the Depression, World War II and postwar. But this physical expansion ushered in new modes of architecture and engineering that influenced architectural tastes locally. The property also illustrates the perpetuation of the industrial use of lower Georgetown, whose availability provided a rationale to locate conspicuous support functions beyond the federal core that had been the focus of the McMillan Plan.

In 2012, prior to the property being put up for sale, the U.S. General Services Administration and the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office concurred in a determination that the property is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. But as early as the 2004 publication of the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, the plant was identified among the city's notable and landmark-eligible buildings.

The property also meets the criteria for historic integrity, including all seven aspects of integrity,[1] as the building is relatively intact to its original construction and retains many of the site features as well.

Background

The West Heating Plant, originally known as the West Central Heating Plant, was designed by consulting architect William Dewey Foster, working under successive Supervising Architects of the Public Buildings Administration, Louis A. Simon and Gilbert Stanley Underwood. The project's purpose was to supplement the supply of steam heat to federal buildings provided by an already overburdened Central Heating Plant (1934; 13th and C Streets SW), itself erected to support a New Deal construction campaign that also addressed a fifteen-year backlog. A *West* Central Heating Plant (and the Central plant was, for a time, referred to as the *East* Central Heating Plant) was similarly meant to catch up to the demands of the vast expansion of the federal establishment during the Depression and to allow for future construction. It was essential to the expansion of another Underwood and Foster collaboration, a new War Department headquarters, which later became the Harry S. Truman Building, Department of State.

The heating plant was designed in 1940 and funded by Congress. The laying of pipes and some site work began in 1941, with the retaining walls and foundation laid in 1942. Work halted during World War II, when the War Production Board (WPB) diverted most steel to the war effort, and funds were diverted to other projects until 1946. Construction recommenced that year, with the local Charles H. Tompkins Company as builder. Completed in late 1948, the project's cost nearly doubled original estimates, because of inflation and additional steam mains laid. Within a couple of years, people began to refer to it as the West Heating Plant.

The building's architect, William Dewey Foster, trained at M.I.T. and was a draftsman for several firms before hanging up his own shingle. During the Depression, he was one of a team of consulting architects hired by the Public Buildings Branch of the Treasury's Procurement Division for the design of scores of New Deal projects. Foster is known for a series of post offices in Manhattan, the Bronx, Larchmont, New York, Great Neck, Long Island, Fresno, California, Aberdeen, South Dakota, etc. These exhibit the range of styles applied to public buildings during the 1930s: Colonial Revival, Art Deco and "stripped classical." The combination of a Colonial Revival form with Modern window treatments at his Rockville Centre Post Office in Hempstead, Long Island influenced subsequent postal stations. In Washington, Foster is best known for the original portion of the State Department headquarters (1941), another example of stripped classicism that he designed with Gilbert Underwood, who was then still in private practice. Unfortunately, the new occupants of that building initially had to share some of the privations of the U.S. Army in the field, as the heating plant site stood vacant blocks away. Foster also designed a new headquarters for the Weather Bureau when it was transferred

[1] The seven aspects of historic integrity are location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. See National Register of Historic Places Bulletin 15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*.

from the Department of Agriculture in 1940. He published several monographs, plus a series of brochures on English architecture for the Ludowici Roofing Tile Company. Largely on the strength of having headed the Historic American Buildings Survey in New York State and restored the Octagon House, he was appointed one of the original members of the Old Georgetown Board. While a partner in his last firm in the 1950s, Foster defended those who appreciated traditional design and craftsmanship, and he mixed modern features and ideas about siting with formal composition and specialized spaces.

Evaluation

An objection has been raised that the West Heating Plant should not be designated a landmark because it *need not* be designated, as it is already protected as a property contributing to the character of the Georgetown Historic District. But the necessity or advisability of filing a particular nomination is not among the designation criteria established by the regulations.[2] The criteria address only historical and architectural merit and integrity.[3] Once a legitimate nomination is filed, the Board has an obligation to evaluate it on its merits. Whether to nominate a contributing property is a practical matter for the applicant. In this case, the preparation of the application was aided by the existence of a 2012 Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for listing in the National Register that was prepared by the General Services Administration.

It is not unusual to landmark a property that stands within a historic district. There are many such properties, some designated prior to their historic district, some after.[4] The most recent was the Brigadier General George C. Scriven House in Dupont Circle (2013). Whether submitted for the honor of it or to raise awareness, or because of a notion that landmarks ought to be treated more carefully because they are rarer and more important, there is no rule or policy that discourages such nominations. If resources were not finite, it would seem logical to document and designate each property to its appropriate level whether already protected or not.

The West Heating Plant is actually better understood as a historic landmark than as a property contributing to the character of the Georgetown Historic District. It is a building more *in* the neighborhood than *of* the neighborhood. After all, it was constructed very late in the historic district's period of significance, completed two years before the passage of the Old Georgetown Act, and is startlingly different from what preceded it, especially "the type of architecture used in the National Capital in its initial years"[5] and what one might call the Colonial-Revival revival that followed.[6] It joined other industrial buildings along the C&O Canal, but its size and monumental scale made it incongruous and even incompatible with the character of the neighborhood—yet an immediate landmark in the broadest sense, dominating the immediate neighborhood.[7] The plant's siting was hardly random, but it could easily have been erected

[2] The Board has previously noted, for instance, that the level of threat to a property does not determine whether it merits protection as a landmark.

[3] See 10C DCMR § 201.

[4] The Georgetown Historic District, first designated in 1950, contains the most landmarks, many of the area's earliest buildings typically designated by the Joint Committee on Landmarks in the 1960s. It would be unfortunate to conclude that no building post-dating Georgetown's first century is of special distinction.

[5] Old Georgetown Act, Public Law 81-808.

[6] Consider that, after the passage of the Old Georgetown Act, some residents proposed that M Street be "restored" to rival Williamsburg. Columnist Joseph Alsop confessed to "treason" in the Saturday Evening Post for building a "modern" house for himself months prior to the passage of the Old Georgetown Act.

[7] A conspicuous feature that is recognizable as identifying or marking a location. In what sense is "landmark" meant, for instance, in the 2010 blog post "Georgetown's Art Deco Landmark" which preceded any landmark

instead on the opposite bank of Rock Creek. And it was unique in its direct service of federal government buildings outside Georgetown.

Much of the West Heating Plant's significance is architectural. It could be styled Art Moderne, because it was designed in 1940 and has in-curving walls at its entrance and a streamlining effect in the projecting brick bands at its corners. It bears a resemblance to the Central (or "East Central") Heating Plant with its light-colored brick and columns of windows, but lacks the overtly Deco gestures of the latter: buttresses and terra cotta reliefs. But another way of viewing it is as Foster carrying his familiar "stripped classical" mode to an extreme, with the building sitting on a defined base and having a penthouse attic, not unlike the National Archives (or the Deco Central Heating Plant); the façade perhaps the ultimate abstraction of the distyle-in-antis porch; and the solid-void rhythm of its side walls recalling a peripteral colonnade. Perhaps most important, it was spare, functional and muscular, in the manner of Depression-era dams and power stations.

The West Heating Plant was greeted as wholly modern, perhaps the most up-to-date heating plant in the country in appearance and engineering. The District's Board of Trade bestowed on it a design award, not because it was a coal-burning steam plant, but because it represented a straightforward and fresh approach to a government project. It was especially appropriate for a postwar building, because it carried on the transatlantic conversation about new architecture that had arisen, in part, from strictly utilitarian American industrial structures admired by European Modernists. While this building might be characterized as a species of late Moderne,[8] it can also be seen as the dawn of true Modernism in Washington, a time when Europe was rebuilding in that mode. "Stripped classical" was the federal government's first foray into Modernism, but while classical in its composition, the West Heating Plant does not contain the overtly classical references of its design contemporary, the 1941 section of the State Department headquarters, or the decorative features of the Central Heating Plant. The book *Worthy of the Nation: Washington DC, From L'Enfant to the National Capital Planning Commission* (2nd ed., 2006) recalls this period thus:

> The battle between New York City establishment architects versus New York City modernists was replayed in Washington, and the Jefferson Memorial project was the first of successive design conflicts in the capital. The millions of visitors saw little in the Washington skyline to indicate the rising tide of modernism, unless by accident or by astute observation they discovered William Dewey Foster's streamlined [West] Central Heating Plant in Georgetown. Foster's beige triumph was the first federal building of this era to knock aside the Classical Revival forms.

The plant is, of course, important as well for its historic purpose, heating a large number of federal buildings, encouraging westward expansion of the city's federal core. A centralized or "district" heating system was an innovation for federal office buildings in the early 1930s. A steam plant and mains to serve the heating needs of an area were first installed in Lockport, New York by Birdsill Holly in 1881. Holly patented his system and soon found numerous and varied cities interested in the scale efficiencies of a commercial district system: Denver, Detroit,

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nomination or DOE but lauded the building's architecture? http://blogofthecourtier.com/ 2010/05/07/georgetowns-art-deco-landmark/.

[8] The book *Washington and Baltimore Art Deco* (2014) cites the building.

Springfield and Lynn, Massachusetts, New York City, Auburn, New York, Ottumwa, Iowa, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Rochester. Denver and New York still operate the oldest commercial systems. The use of the Holly system and alternatives remained limited, even within cities that were early adopters. District heating systems were more broadly adopted in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union, where a command economy, central planning, and state ownership of real property made the choice a straightforward one for economic and ideological reasons.

At that time, Washington, D.C. lacked a commercial system but had had several private and government systems on campuses and military installations from the early twentieth century. The federal government, with its clusters of large office buildings with redundant facilities, was a natural candidate for a district heating system. The Central Heating Plant, completed in 1934, was a victim of its own success, already at capacity serving 130 buildings eight years later. Generally taken for granted, the provision of heat is a mundane but fundamental function. Its importance can be seen in the desperation with which the Public Buildings Administration pleaded with Congress and the WPB for materials throughout the war. The government's district heating system fostered the development of what one might call several federal campuses—east, south, north and northwest—surrounding the National Mall. For its function and architecture, the West Heating Plant should be considered an important feature of the city's historic infrastructure, to be honored alongside the landmark Central Heating Plant and Main Sewerage Pumping Station.

Period of Significance

While the argument for the period of significance could be spelled out better in the application, the dates proposed appear reasonable. The initial date of 1942 seems justified because, while the plant was years from completion, its concrete retaining walls and foundation had been built. The latter date recognizes a period of use of the property, important for a building significant for its history. The terminal date is when the last boiler was installed, signifying a last expansion of steam supply and predating the conversion of the coal-fired boilers to fuel oil.