
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 10-15

Barr Building
910 17th Street, NW
(Square 126, Lot 830)

Meeting Date: October 25, 2012
Applicant: The D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 2B
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the HPO recommends that the Board designate the Barr Building at 910 17th Street, NW a Historic Landmark to be entered into the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.



Historical and Architectural Background

The Barr Building, constructed 1927-1928, is an eleven-story office building located on the west side of Farragut Square in the heart of the city's business district. It was built by prominent real estate developer John L. Barr for whom it was named, and designed by architect B. Stanley Simmons with whom Barr often collaborated. It is executed in a soaring Gothic Revival style that is not common for this city's commercial building fabric. One of the oldest buildings on Farragut Square, the Barr Building illustrates the initial wave of 20th century commercial development in the city when older 19th century residential buildings were replaced with larger office buildings catering to the city's growing business community.

Farragut Square emerged in the late 19th century as a fashionable residential square defined by stately free-standing mansions and notable attached rowhouses occupied by members of Washington's business and military communities. Of particular note, Adolph Cluss and Alexander "Boss" Shepherd lived on the north end of the square in two of three Cluss-designed stone dwellings known as "Shepherd's Row." In 1891, the Army-Navy Club built its headquarters at Connecticut Avenue and I Street just south of the square; two decades later the club moved north of I Street to face the east side of Farragut Square. In erecting its club house on the square, the club razed a substantial dwelling on the site, signaling the beginning of the square's gradual shift from residential to commercial.

In 1926, developer John L. Barr purchased a series of lots across the square from the Army-Navy Club, improved with 19th-century rowhouses, and proceeded to develop an eleven-story office building. Upon its completion in 1928 until 1963, the 110-foot-high Barr Building with its cornice spires rose above its older neighbors and dominated its streetscape and park frontage. After 1963, however, a number of larger multi-story office buildings were constructed in the vicinity, surpassing the height of the older Barr Building. Despite the taller buildings surrounding it, the Barr Building still feels the taller, with its Gothic spires and vertical emphasis drawing the eye skyward.

The Barr Building is designed in a Gothic Revival style that was a sub-set of a larger trend of Academic styles in 20th-century American buildings. These Academic styles ranged from Colonial and Classical Revivals to Medieval Revivals and were embraced by academically trained designers who sought to shed the American Victorian design aesthetic that had been widely promulgated through pattern books. During this time, the Gothic Revival style, which had earlier been a preferred style for ecclesiastical buildings, was promoted by architects for other building types. For instance, Ralph Adams Cram, architect of St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City argued that Gothic architecture "was not exclusively devised to express Christian ideals." With such encouragement, the Academic Gothic Revival style eventually came to be seen as appropriate for non-religious buildings, including public buildings, commercial structures, and, in particular, the American college campus.

The Gothic Revival style provided an important expression for the country's newest commercial buildings—skyscrapers. Unlike the load bearing churches and cathedrals of the past, these new buildings were freestanding steel-frame structures. The applied Gothic ornamentation was meant to emphasize the soaring verticality of the skyscraper. The single-most famous example of the Academic Gothic Revival style commercial building is New York City's Woolworth Building. Designed by architect Cass Gilbert and constructed 1911-1913, the Woolworth building stood as New York City's tallest building until 1931. Upon its completion, the Woolworth Building won immediate acclaim for its use of Gothic forms and detail, and served to inspire the design and construction of other Gothic Revival-style commercial buildings, such as the Chicago Tribune

Tower by Howells and Hood (1922); and the Cathedral of Learning (1926-27) at the University of Pittsburgh.

With adoption of the 1901 McMillan Commission Plan, Washington, D.C. was dominated by Classical building forms and styles during this period of Academic Revival styles. The Gothic Revival remained dominant in the city for religious buildings and, at the same time, found expression in some of the city's schools and apartment buildings. The Chastleton Apartment (1919) building on 16th Street and Eastern High School (1921-23) on East Capitol Street are both notable and exuberant examples of the style in D.C. More often, though, the Gothic Revival was applied in a reduced manner where Gothic ornamentation was used around door and window openings and at the rooflines, giving the impression of height in a city of height limits.

Unlike in other major cities where Gothic Revival commercial buildings were common, the use of the Gothic Revival style for commercial buildings in Washington was unusual. Based upon the *DC Office Building Survey* (1992) conducted of the downtown area for the Historic Preservation Office, it appears that only a few fully executed Gothic Revival-style commercial buildings were built and are still extant, including the Barr Building (1926-27), the Mather Building (1916), the Denrike Building (1925-26), and the Securities Building (1926).

The Barr Building is the result of the close and long-established working relationship that architect B. Stanley Simmons had with developer John L. Barr and his developer father Lester Barr. Under their patronage, B. Stanley Simmons designed some of his greatest architectural achievements in this city. B. Stanley Simmons is credited with the design of over 280 buildings in the city from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. The Barr Building provides an important illustration of Simmons' maturation as architect as he moved away from the Victorian-era aesthetic in the 1880s and 1890s, to a more academically studied aesthetic of the City Beautiful Movement in the early 20th century.

Evaluation

The Barr Building meets D.C. Designation Criteria D, *Architecture and Urbanism* and E, *Artistry* and National Register Criterion C, *Architecture*. The Barr Building is an excellent example of the 20th-century academic Gothic Revival style as executed for commercial buildings. Although the style was favored for commercial buildings in other cities during the early 20th century, such as New York, the style was less common in this city for buildings other than ecclesiastical ones. Indeed, the Gothic Revival style and detailing of the Barr Building give the building a distinct verticality reflective of the much taller Gothic Revival skyscrapers of the period, including the Woolworth Building (1913) and the Chicago Tribune Tower (1922).

The Period of Significance for the Barr Building is 1927-1928—the beginning and end dates of the building's construction. The Barr Building maintains a high degree of architectural integrity. The building has not undergone any major changes or additions. All of the building's features, except its 1/1 replacement windows in the building's shaft, are intact, and all of its highly ornamental carved stonework and metal spandrels remain in good condition. Though not original, the building's 1/1 replacement windows do not alter the number or size of the original openings, and thus respect the Gothic emphasis on the "void" rather than the "wall."