
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-21

Federal Home Loan Bank Board

1700 G Street NW
Square 3620, Lot 814

Meeting Date: June 23, 2016
Applicant: United States Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (owner)
Affected ANC: 2A¹

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Federal Home Loan Bank Board building and associated landscape at 1700 G Street NW a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board request the nomination to be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1977, the year construction was completed.

In 2013, the State Historic Preservation Officer concurred with a Determination of Eligibility for the property submitted by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, its occupant. The nomination originated with the General Services Administration's efforts to systematically evaluate its portfolio of properties and, when appropriate, to have them listed in the National Register. This is consistent with both GSA's and the Historic Preservation Office's interest in seeking designation for the best examples of Washington Modern architecture.

Historic background

The office building at 1700 G Street was constructed for the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, created by the Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932 to extend credit to farms, home-owners and small businesses through the nation's savings and loans associations, in order to counteract the monetary contraction during the Great Depression. The Board continued its work until abolished in 1989, and by the 1970s, it needed new and larger office space.

A committee on federal office space developed guidelines in 1962, embracing modern design and integrating landscape with buildings. These principles were modified by the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, which further encouraged quality design and, in response to the energy crisis of the period, environmental sustainability. Without the same security concerns as today, the Act also encouraged a greater mixture of cultural and commercial uses within federal properties.

The new Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB) building was designed in 1974 by the

¹ At the time of compiling this report, the Historic Preservation had not received a resolution from the affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission on the subject of the proposed designation. In fact, HPO has received no letters on the subject.

prominent New York architecture firm of Max O. Urbahn Associates. Urbahn himself had worked for John Russell Pope (including on the National Galley and Jefferson Memorial projects) and Holabird and Root. His own firm was especially known for Modernist structures for scientific and medical facilities for government and private institutions.

Urbahn's FHLBB Building exemplified modern architectural design that blended the rational grid of the International Style with the plasticity and honest unity of structure and skin exhibited in Brutalism. Especially notable was its integration of a major courtyard and two atria accessible to the public and introducing natural light and air in the characteristically Modern interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces. Most of the ground floor is dedicated commercial space occupied by cafes, coffee shops and retail businesses. The property's landscapes were designed by the internationally recognized landscape architects Sasaki Associates. Led by founder Hideo Sasaki, former chairman of Harvard's Graduate School of Design, the Watertown, Massachusetts-based group was among the leading Modernist firms, collaborating with the likes of SOM and Eero Saarinen.

The project was notable not only for its own sake, but its response to its context. The project had met opposition from the young Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and a local advocacy group, Don't Tear It Down (now the D.C. Preservation League), who objected to the proposed demolition of a 1924 bank building and of an annex to the adjacent landmark Winder Building. While the preservation groups did not succeed in forestalling demolition, they did influence the ultimate design. The building was stepped down and articulated into large bays or pavilions to better relate to its surroundings and especially the Winder Building, gestures that would be commonly applied after the District of Columbia adopted a historic preservation ordinance a few years later. The project is thus an interesting illustration of a moment when the well-established Modernist movement overlapped with a nascent preservation movement.

Evaluation

The FHLBB building is significant under District of Columbia Criterion B ("History") and National Register Criterion A in the areas of community planning and development and government, for being "associated with historical periods... institutions... or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation," specifically as it is associated with a heightened period of federal office building construction that occurred in the United States after World War II, and a concomitant re-examination of federal architecture and the role of federal buildings within communities. The building was developed by the General Services Administration, which was established in 1949 to provide procurement and facilities development support to a growing postwar federal government. The agency's construction role was guided by initiatives that were developed during the Kennedy and Nixon administrations. Adopted in 1962, the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture provided a framework for government design which dictated the character and aesthetic of federal office buildings. The 1976 Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act and the Living Buildings Program encouraged a mix of commercial and cultural uses in federal buildings as part of a program of community outreach and revitalization. The FHLBB Building was one of the first in the country constructed by the GSA under the 1976 act.

The building is also significant under D.C. Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") and

National Register Criterion C for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction, or... [being] expressions of landscape architecture, engineering, or urban planning, siting or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation.” As the work of the New York-based modernist architecture firm Max O. Urbahn Associates, the building embodies the distinctive characteristics of both the International and Brutalist Styles, and represents a blending of twentieth-century architectural Modernism and contextualism in an attempt to ensure consistency with the neighborhood and surrounding buildings. During the postwar years, Urbahn Associates specialized in the design of large-scale office buildings and facilities for primarily government and private sector clients. The firm designed structures that ranged from massive National Aeronautics and Space Administration vehicle-assembly buildings to corporate headquarters and hospitals. The FHLBB Building’s Liberty Plaza was designed by the distinguished modernist landscape design firm of Sasaki Associates. The internationally recognized firm was led by Hideo Sasaki, a preeminent figure in the field of landscape architecture and an instructor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design from 1958-1968. The firm designed distinctive and enduring landscapes across the United States that ranged from urban parks to university campuses and corporate headquarters. As a product of Urbahn and Sasaki, the property also merits designation under D.C. Criteria E and F, for possessing high artistic or aesthetic values and a notable work of architects and landscape architects “whose works have influenced the evolution of their fields of endeavor.”

As the project was constructed between 1974 and 1977, it is less than 50 years old, meaning that, according to the National Register’s 50-year rule, it would have to be found to be of exceptional significance to be listed in the Register. On the other hand, the District of Columbia’s regulations for designation of properties require only that “sufficient time shall have passed since they achieved significance or were constructed to permit professional evaluation of them in their historical context.” Significant Modernist D.C. properties such as the Watergate complex and Third Church of Christ, Scientist have been designated at a comparable age.

The National Register will be the final arbiter of whether the significance of the FHLBB building is exceptional significance under National Register Criteria Consideration G. The nomination makes a credible argument that its construction was viewed as an early and important local and even national example of innovative government development under the 1976 Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act. Max Urbahn, who served as the president of the American Institute of Architects in 1971-1972, was regarded as one of the country’s leading Modernist architects, his firm working on projects of national importance that ranged from NASA facilities to the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. The FHLBB Building is also exceptionally significant for its extensive outdoor plaza, which serves as an important Washington example of the work of Sasaki Associates, recognized as one of the pioneers in American landscape architecture during the postwar period. The importance of the integration of uses including commercial, recreational and retail as well as the integration of exterior and interior spaces in a government facility was a critical component of the FHLBB building program, one that was expertly reflected in the designs of Max Urbahn and Hideo Sasaki. This is a development that could be considered ephemeral, in the sense that more recent federal architecture tends to internalize other uses for the sake of employees and externalizes security features.

