
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 11-06

Hill Building
839 17th Street, NW
Square 165, Lot 29

Meeting Date: December 18, 2014
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: ANC 2B
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the office building known as the Hill Building at 1729 H Street NW to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the landmark nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance.

History and Architecture

The Hill Building, named for developer William A. Hill, is a multi-story commercial office building located on the southeast corner of 17th and I Streets, N.W., on the south side of Farragut Square. Constructed in 1925-26, the smooth-faced limestone building features the standard early 20th-century three-part office building massing of base, middle and cap. The building was historically ten stories tall, but now rises to eleven stories since a contemporary rooftop addition was built flush with the original building in the 1990s. Similarly, the ground story, which originally offered six storefronts, is now essentially open between structural piers, providing entry to the METRO station located under the building. Despite these rather substantial alterations at the base and top, the building retains its overall massing and design, its original materials, and its ornamental details.

At the time of the Hill building's construction in 1925-1926, commercial real estate development in downtown was highly active as the city's business and retail industry expanded, replacing Victorian and pre-Victorian residential buildings. These former residences, many of which housed private and governmental business offices, no longer provided adequate space and, more importantly, did not embody the physical characteristics of a 20th-century city. The multi-story Hill Building, designed in a "modern" stripped Classical style, was, like others rising around downtown, the product of a deliberate effort by the city's real estate industry to create a more physically elegant city that was commensurate with the nation's capital. The Hill Building (1925-26) and the Barr Building at 914 17th Street (1926-28) were the first office buildings on Farragut Square to follow the trend. Later, especially during the late 1950s and 1960s, many of these earlier 20th century office buildings were in turn demolished. The Hill Building (and the Barr Building) thus survives as an important representation of the second major phase of development in the city's downtown.



The Hill Building was the result of a team effort. Although the DC Permit to Build identifies Harry Wardman as the owner, builder and architect of the Hill Building, other accounts clearly indicate that the development team consisted of the team of Wardman, Rheem and Hill, and based upon the name of the building, it would seem that William A. Hill played the largest role in the building's development. Hill was a developer, builder and real estate agent active in real estate in the city during the 1910s and 1920s. He was considered a prominent member of the community and is credited with influencing the city's growth.

Although not attributed to any architect thus far, the building has a sophisticated stripped Classical Revival style that points to noted architect George N. Ray who was actively engaged in the city at that time designing office and other commercial buildings in that aesthetic.

Evaluation

The Hill Building meets D.C. Designation Criterion (D) Architecture and Urbanism and National Register Criterion C (Architecture) as an excellent surviving example of an early 20th-century office building designed in a Stripped Classical style. It further provides evidence of the second major phase of the development of downtown, much of which was later demolished in the 1950s-60s, and later 20th century. The Period of Significance is 1925-1926, the beginning and end dates of construction of the building. Despite alterations at the base and top, the building retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, craftsmanship, feeling and association.