
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-20

West Heating Plant

1051/1055 29th Street NW
Square 1193

Meeting Date: November 2, 2017
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 2E

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, if the property owner does not still object to listing.

On April 23, 2015, the Board reviewed an earlier application by the D.C. Preservation League to designate the property. By a narrow vote of four to three, the Board denied landmark designation. But it reaffirmed that the property contributes to the character of the Georgetown Historic District, in the face of extensive testimony from the project team to suggest that the building's condition had too greatly diminished its historic integrity. Arguments put forward by the Board members who objected to designation included the contention that the architecture is not distinctive enough and that the plant had been coal-fired and therefore a polluter of the neighborhood. The HPO staff report was substantially the same as the present one and recommended designation.

Although the Board has acknowledged its contributing status, the West Heating Plant is better understood as a landmark than as just another property contributing to the character of the Georgetown Historic District.

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 it 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 its utilitarian function. This

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 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 federal-government support functions beyond the federal core that had been the focus of the McMillan Plan.

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. 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. And in an appeal of the 2015 HPRB recommendation, the D.C. Preservation League asked the National Register of Historic Places to evaluate the property based upon the record. On August 6, 2015, the Register formally determined the property eligible for listing but did not proceed to list it, as the owner had objected.

The property 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 original 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 meant to address 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

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*.

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 the new facility 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 Great 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, and Great Neck, New York; 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 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

There was a previous objection 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 is obligated to evaluate the property on its merits. Whether to nominate a contributing property is a practical matter for an applicant. And in this case, the preparation of the application was assisted by the 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. Georgetown has scores of them, all designated after the neighborhood was made the District of Columbia's first historic district in 1950, and several after the neighborhood was designated a National Historic Landmark. Whether submitted for the honor of it or to raise awareness, or because landmarks might be treated more carefully as rarer and more important properties, 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.

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.

The West Heating Plant is 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"⁴ and what one might call the "Colonial-Revival revival" that followed.⁵ It joined other industrial buildings along the C&O Canal and waterfront, but its monumental size and scale made it incongruous and even incompatible with the low-slung character of the existing neighborhood. Yet, it became an immediate landmark in the broadest sense, dominating its surroundings.⁶ And it served federal government buildings in the Northwest Rectangle, beyond Georgetown. The plant's siting was hardly random, as the most important considerations were access to rail and proximity to the Northwest Rectangle, but the building could easily have been erected instead on the opposite bank of Rock Creek, as other sites were considered.⁷

Much of the West Heating Plant's significance is architectural. It could be styled Art Moderne, because it was designed in 1940 and has inward-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—buttresses and terra cotta reliefs—of the earlier building. 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 Central Heating Plant, or even the Lincoln Memorial. Its façade is perhaps the ultimate abstraction of the distyle-in-antis porch; and the solid-void rhythm of its side walls recall 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, maybe 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 a transatlantic dialogue about new architecture that had arisen, in part, from European Modernists' admiration for utilitarian American industrial structures. 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, at 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

⁴ Old Georgetown Act, Public Law 81-808.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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 nomination or DOE but lauded the building's architecture? <http://blogofthecourtier.com/2010/05/07/georgetown-art-deco-landmark/>.

⁷ Among these were the present site of Columbia Plaza Apartments, at the corner of Virginia Avenue and 24th Street, and the mouth of Rock Creek, where Thompson's Boathouse now stands. The PEPSCO site on Water Street in Georgetown was also considered, but most of these ideas were nixed by the National Capital Planning Commission.

⁸ The book *Washington and Baltimore Art Deco* (2014) mentions the building.

references of its design contemporary, the 1941 section of the State Department headquarters, or the decoration of its older brother, the Central Heating Plant. The book *Worthy of the Nation: Washington DC, From L'Enfant to the National Capital Planning Commission* (second edition, 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, enabling further 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 entire 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, 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 both 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 hitherto 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.

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 its 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. Because of the relocation of the War Department to Virginia, the Northwest Rectangle was never fully realized, but it received many federal headquarters that were served by the heating plant, among which were the State Department, the Department of the Interior, the Office of Personnel Management, the Federal Reserve, and some smaller bureaus. The importance of this heating plant extended beyond the Northwest Rectangle, of course, as it was tied together with the Central Heating Plant in one system.

Period of Significance

The proposed period of significance appears reasonable. The initial date of 1942 is justified because, while the plant was still 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, and it takes into consideration the gradual development of the many federal office buildings that depended upon its steam heat. The terminal date is when the last boiler was installed, signifying a last expansion of steam supply predating the conversion of the coal-fired boilers to fuel oil.