HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 16-10

Municipal Center
300 Indiana Avenue/301 C Street NW
Square 533, Lot 831

Meeting Date: February 22, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 2C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Municipal Center, 300 Indiana Avenue 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 1941, the date of the building's completion. HPO recommends that, before forwarding to the National Register, the nomination be revised to incorporate more description and photographs of and background on the building's artistic details, as discussed below. HPO also recommends future consideration of an amendment to designate the lobbies as protected interiors.

The Municipal Center, more recently known as the Henry A. Daly Building, meets National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B for its association with historical periods institutions, achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia.

The property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C and District of Columbia Criteria D, E and F for embodying the characteristics of an architectural style and as an expression of urban planning, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia and incorporating notable works of craftsmen, artists, sculptors, architects and urban planners that are significant to the development of the District of Columbia and that possess high artistic and aesthetic values.

The property also possesses sufficient integrity to convey the values for which it is judged significant, and sufficient time has passed to permit its professional evaluation in its historical context.

Description and background
Known as the Henry P. Daly Building since 1995, the District of Columbia Municipal Center is an office building which houses the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Department, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and a number of other city offices. During the early stages of planning in the 1920s and early 1930s, the term "Municipal Center" referred to a planned assemblage of judicial and administrative buildings that would occupy Judiciary Square as well

as the squares to its south on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue. By the late 1930s, the name became synonymous with this administrative building, which is the central element among the campus structures constructed in the New Deal era and after, including the John Marshall Park plaza, the D.C. Recorder of Deeds building (1943), and even the tardy D.C. Superior Court (1977), which completed the complex by mirroring the massing and materials of this first building. Today, the term "Municipal Center" is popularly applied to this building and the "Municipal Center Campus" is used to refer to the complex and its component buildings.

Constructed between 1938 and 1941 with the aid of Public Works Administration funds, the Municipal Center is an outstanding example of the Classical Moderne or classically influenced Art Deco style often associated with New Deal civic buildings. The building occupies most of Square 533, but stands on an irregularly shaped lot, the northeast corner of which is clipped by the closed Indiana Avenue right of way.[1] The east end of the building is bounded by another lot which contains a subterranean garage. The west of the property abuts John Marshall Park, a plaza designed to be the centerpiece of an administrative complex and to retain an axial view from Pennsylvania Avenue of the old City Hall/D.C. Court of Appeals building designed by George Hadfield about 1820. The plaza stands over a second garage. The building's two internal courtyards furnish natural light and air to interior offices.

The mass of the building is articulated by the stepping of the upper floors and penthouse so as not to overwhelm the Hadfield courthouse. The resulting horizontal emphasis is balanced by the repetition of three-story openings for windows—each opening flanked by pilasters incised into the ashlar limestone, capped by schematic Deco capitals in low relief—and by the projection of central pavilions on each elevation. A purplish-granite base contrasts with the limestone above. The main roofline at the sixth floor[2] is topped by a simple projecting cornice above a carved frieze recalling repeating anthemia. North- and east-facing porticoes at the northeast corner were a device meant to frame the vista through John Marshall Park with matching porticoes on a courthouse to be erected across the park, a building not completed until 1977. The entrances are reached across entry courts and up steps. The Indiana Avenue entry court is flanked by recently constructed Deco brass torchières on fluted limestone columns.

Significant additional features of the Municipal Center include a program of architectural art: bas-reliefs by Lee Lawrie and John Gregory flanking the John Marshall plaza staircase; terra cotta friezes by Hildreth Meière and Waylande Gregory within the building's landscaped internal courtyards; a tile mosaic map of the District of Columbia designed by architect Eric Menke for the floor of the C Street lobby; and a polychrome concrete fountain by John J. Earley near the northwest corner of the lot, built as a memorial to local police killed in the line of duty. These are notable works of noted artists and craftsmen. They demonstrate the commitment of the local government to the creation of public art in public buildings at a time the federal government was sponsoring such works across the nation. They elevate the significance of the property's design. The building itself is a collaboration of Municipal Architects Albert Harris and Nathan Wyeth with Arved Kundzin, William B. Harris, Edward Donn, Fred Murphy—and the reviewing agencies, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts.

[1] The present Indiana Avenue was Louisiana Avenue at the time the complex was begun.
[2] The drop in grade from Indiana Avenue to C Street means that the north side has one fewer floors above grade.

The District of Columbia municipal government had already outgrown one city hall when the present John A. Wilson Building was completed in 1908. But growth of the local executive and judicial branches continued apace, in parallel with the federal establishment. When the Federal Triangle complex was proposed in 1926, intended to group a new national-archives building with other federal executive offices along Pennsylvania Avenue, the District Commissioners followed suit, seeking to expand and consolidate the municipal courts and concentrate other administrative functions at Judiciary Square. The government already owned several properties on four squares between Pennsylvania and Indiana Avenue and 3rd and 6th Streets that it ultimately assembled for the project.[3]

The initial concept would have occupied all four squares, closing C Street and turning the street John Marshall Place into a north-south pedestrian plaza. The National Capital Park and Planning Commission supported the idea of a concentration of city uses in a classical complex at Judiciary Square as consistent with its vision for a predominantly classical core along Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues. Yet NCPPC's concern about a closure of C Street—which would cause traffic problems and impede access to the complex—killed the idea. Challenged by a lack of funds for planning or construction, the project dragged on, sometimes shelved. Reiterations varied from single buildings that would span John Marshall Place, to ideas for a single edifice on each of the four squares. The CFA supported the parti of two Indiana Avenue buildings flanking John Marshall Place to retain the view of the old city hall from Pennsylvania Avenue. This latter approach ultimately triumphed—possibly with President Roosevelt's behind-the-scenes help—over the Municipal Architect's preference for the efficiency of a single building. Denied Congressional appropriations, the project was paid for largely by the Public Works Administration. In fact, it was a 1939 PWA deadline for commencement of construction that brought a hasty resolution of the outstanding design differences among the sponsoring and review agencies.

The nomination focuses on the details of the planning process, and from the vantage point of today, the principal significance of that process was its combination of the "City Beautiful" emphasis on a consistent, classical, urban, governmental core that had arisen with the McMillan Plan with the succeeding "City Efficient" ethos of the concentration of administration and services. The former is evidenced by the choice of the Municipal Center's architectural style and the CFA's insistence that a north-south axis and view connect Judiciary Square with the Pennsylvania Avenue spine.

A handful of critics believed that the project should be designed in a Colonial-Revival mode, to distinguish visually the strictly local functions from the federal establishment. It was an opinion that the CFA had often expressed regarding the design of domestically scaled city buildings in the neighborhoods, including schools, police stations, etc. Yet all the major actors agreed that a large downtown complex should be consistent with the classicism and monumentality of the adjacent federal core. NCPPC and CFA eliminated some elements as too grandiose for the local government offices, however, and the finished Municipal Center is an elegant work of restrained Deco design, fitting the "stripped classicism" of mid-century and a transition to it. The Municipal Center building and its plaza possess a high degree of integrity and present an important expression of the civic identity of Washington, D.C.

[3] The nomination goes into considerable detail about the planning and design of the complex, but it says little about the purchase or condemnation of the lots assembled for the purpose.

Unfortunately, the entire "Classical Moderne" complex was not completed at the time. The southern squares went into other uses, ultimately the U.S. Courthouse for the District of Columbia and the Embassy of Canada. Ironically, the northwest square (now 500 Indiana Avenue) had been intended to resolve a pressing need for new court facilities, but a gas station and parking lot stood on that site at least into the 1960s. The present D.C. Superior Court was completed in 1977, carefully designed to mirror the materials, massing and porticoes of the Municipal Center across the plaza. While the Municipal Center was still in design, the District government erected separately two Police Court, Municipal Court and Juvenile Court buildings, relieving the immediate demand for court space. Also built was one "module" of a library intended to replace the Carnegie, but a new central library would have to wait until 1972. The office of the Recorder of Deeds, first meant for inclusion in the Municipal Center, moved into a new Moderne edifice a block west in 1943.

The interiors, the art and the plaza

The landmark application discusses the Indiana Avenue and C Street lobbies as important interior spaces, with the latter perhaps the more significant for its mosaic floor map of the District. Yet, the nomination does not propose designation of any portion of the building's interior. As that is the case, the Board cannot designate any interior spaces at this time. But it would be worth revisiting the subject in an amendment at a later date.

The Meière and Gregory friezes in the internal courtyards would be protected by the currently proposed designation, because they are exterior elements, despite being obscured from public view.

The nomination makes more than one reference to the Lawrie and Gregory bas-reliefs in John Marshall Park, but these stand outside the boundary of the proposed landmark. Even if the Superior Court building is not to be considered historic for its late date, the plaza is important enough as the focal point of the complex and in possession of its own significant public art. It is worthy of honor and protection as part of a potential Judiciary Square Historic District, for which a nomination has already been prepared.

The nomination references these works of architectural art and decoration, but could certainly go into additional detail on the works themselves and the significance of their creators. More photographs of these elements would be welcome, too, and such revisions should be incorporated before this nomination is forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

Proposed period of significance

According to the National Register guidance, a period of significance is "the length of time when a property was associated with important events, activities or persons, or attained the characteristics which qualify it for listing designation. Period of significance usually begins with the date when significant activities or events began giving the property its historic significance; this is often a date of construction."

The nomination proposes the span 1926 to 1941 as the period of significance for this property, to encompass the duration of planning, design and construction. Although the planning of the project was responsible for what it would become, no one involved could have foreseen exactly

how it would turn out, even once the final plans were drafted. The plans changed markedly over time, and the parties involved in design and review were numerous and often at odds.

Where the primary significance is architectural, the period of significance normally does not take in the whole period of planning or design, but might consider the period of construction, especially if it occurred in phases. Certainly, the contemporary Federal Triangle could be one such property, as it was achieved over decades; the Municipal Center would be a more apt parallel if the designation were somehow to include other related components, such as the John Marshall Park plaza, the Recorder of Deeds building, and perhaps even the D.C. Superior Court. Such associations and broader period of significance are already captured in the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site listing in the National Register, and could also be captured in a potential Judiciary Square Historic District.

One might consider extending the period of significance for some time after the building's completion, to reflect a period of historic use. But the nomination's focus on the planning for the entire complex highlights the importance of the initial concentration of District government agencies and buildings at Judiciary Square.

As the property retains high integrity of the original character-defining features, and no later alterations have been identified as having achieved their own historic significance. HPO recommends that the period of significance be limited to the year of completion.