HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 16-11

PEPCO Substation No. 25
2119 Champlain Street NW
Square 2562, Lot 97

Meeting Date: January 25, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 1C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate PEPCO Substation No. 25, 2119 Champlain 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, with a period of significance of 1931, its completion date.

PEPCO Substation No. 25 meets D.C. Designation Criterion B (History) and the similar National Register Criterion A for its critical role in the provision of reliable electric service to a growing city. It is one of a small class of historic buildings representing this vital infrastructure.

The Champlain Street substation also merits designation under D.C. Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and the similar National Register Criterion C as an excellent example of a particular substation building type, designed in a muscular Art-Deco industrial style.

History and architecture
The Potomac Electric Power Company traces its history in this city to 1891 when it first organized as the Potomac Electric Company. Over the course of the next decade, the company merged with other electric companies and, in 1902, combined forces with the Washington Railway and Electric Company (WRECo) to become PEPCO. In 1907, PEPCO established a new central generating power plant along Benning Road, and a series of substations to distribute the electricity throughout the city. Mostly, the substations are responsible for reducing the voltage transmitted from the generating plants and then feeding it to transformers near the customers. Much of the sensitive equipment had to be placed under cover to protect it from the weather, while providing additional security and visual screening.

This nomination sets forth a context for considering the design evolution of PEPCO's substations, classifying them into chronological periods by type. The earliest, built before 1928, were mostly utilitarian buildings, or extensions of existing streetcar barns. As PEPCO erected independent substations in the city's expanding neighborhoods, it developed a policy of designing them with architectural sensitivity to their surroundings. This policy emanated from its proposal in 1907 for a substation at Harvard Street and Sherman Avenue, the company's first outside the city's core. When the community objected to the utilitarian character of the initial design, PEPCO responded by designing a more architecturally compatible building.

In the period between 1929 and 1939, PEPCO engaged architect Arthur B. Heaton to design its buildings. Heaton elevated the company's architectural standards and introduced a consistent Art Deco/Industrial Classicism, unifying them with a sort of corporate branding. This new aesthetic commenced with Heaton's designs for PEPCO Substation Nos. 16 (1929; demolished) and 25 (1930), and continued through the decade. The extant substation strongly resembles Heaton's bus garages for WRECo (one of which has been demolished, one is a landmark, and one is rending designation review) and a contemporary PEPCO service station. These new buildings had settings that were largely industrial.

As the development of suburban areas added to the demand for electrical distribution, PEPCO increasingly sited and designed substations to fit their neighborhoods. And with the threat of another world war, the company showed a new sensitivity to system security. From 1939 to 1960, PEPCO architects designed substations to blend in architecturally with their surroundings and to decrease public awareness of them through the art of deception. Often designed to look like houses, substations might even have curtains and blinds in the windows, making it appear as if they were occupied by families. Commercial look-alike buildings, such as the Harrison Street substation, had display windows with changing displays advertising PEPCO, appliances, holidays, or the war effort. PEPCO constructed substations that blended into their surroundings throughout World War II and into the Cold War. The substation at 2 Westmoreland Circle even contained a system of switches that automatically turned lights on in the evening hours.

After 1960, PEPCO-designed substations no longer followed any prescribed aesthetic. The company continues to consider location, the character of the neighborhoods, and the technical requirements for delivering reliable electrical service in its design of new buildings.

Evaluation

Electricity quickly became a vital utility in American cities at the turn of the twentieth century, and the generation plants and distribution substations are the principal artifacts of its physical infrastructure. This nomination provides a context for the design and construction of PEPCO substations citywide that is instrumental to understanding the building type and designating the best examples.

The Heaton period of the 1930s is one in which PEPCO was still mostly siting its buildings in industrial areas. The blank wall of Substation No. 25 abutted a C & P Telephone garage, and the new building stood among commercial-storage warehouses and a car lot. Its expression building reflects its use, its setting and its 1930s origin, in that Heaton created an example of muscular Art Deco, evoking contemporary power plants. A strength and dynamism is conveyed through the buttresses of the south side—which flared into partitions for the location of external equipment—and shallow projections at each corner give the building massive "shoulders." The Champlain Street facility is the only extant Heaton substation of the era, and it was awarded a Washington Board of Trade merit award at its completion.

The building retains high integrity, harmed visually by the installation of security screens over the windows and physically by the loss of much of the historic fence, the sole important site feature.