
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-23

PEPCO Harrison Street Substation

5210 Wisconsin Avenue NW
Square 1657, Lot 26

Meeting Date: November 16, 2017

Applicant: Tenleytown Historical Society and Art Deco Society of Washington

Affected ANC: 3E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the PEPCO Harrison Street Substation, 5210 Wisconsin 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 1940.



Constructed in 1940 on Wisconsin Avenue in Friendship Heights, the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) Harrison Street Substation was built to meet the immediate and growing demand for electricity for residents and businesses in the area, and also as part of a larger effort to ensure reliable and secure electrical current to Washington in the event of war. In the months leading up to the outbreak of war in Europe, PEPCO had been working with the National Defense Power Committee to develop a plan to add substations across the District to enhance and protect the city's power grid. Designed in an Art Moderne style that was consistent with commercial buildings during the period, the smooth-cut limestone-clad Harrison Street substation reflected PEPCO's established policy to design its substations to be architecturally compatible with their surroundings. This policy, which had been in place before the war, was

enhanced after 1939, as the company sought to protect its power grid by decreasing the conspicuousness of substations.

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 then, 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 then a series of substations to distribute the electricity throughout the city.

This nomination (and other pending nominations by the same author on other PEPCO substations in the city) provides a design history of PEPCO's substations and has classified them into chronological periods. The earliest of the substations, built before 1928, were utilitarian buildings, or were built as extensions to existing streetcar car barns. As PEPCO began to build independent substations in the city's expanding neighborhoods, it developed a policy of designing its substations with architectural sensitivity to the 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 industrial character of the initial design, PEPCO responded by designing a more architecturally compatible building.

In the period between 1929 and 1939, PEPCO hired architect Arthur B. Heaton to design its buildings. Heaton elevated the company's architectural standards and introduced a consistent Art Deco/Industrial Classicism to the buildings, unifying them with a sort of corporate branding. This new aesthetic began with Heaton's design for PEPCO Substation No. 25 of 1930, and continued through the decade.

With the threat of another world war, PEPCO began to expand Washington's electrical system with special sensitivity to system security and reliability. 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 of sub-stations, 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, or the war effort. PEPCO constructed substations that blended into their surroundings throughout World War II and the Cold War era. By the mid-1950s, the art of deception had grown to include lighted Christmas wreaths in the windows and lighted Christmas trees on the lawns. 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. PEPCO 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

While this application is for the Harrison Street substation, the nomination provides a context for the design and construction of PEPCO substations city-wide that is instrumental in understanding

and evaluating the building type. At present, in addition to the Harrison Street nomination, HPO has two other pending nominations for substations.

The Harrison Street substation meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (Events) and B (History) and the similar National Register Criterion A for its critical role in the provision of reliable electric service and infrastructure to a growing city, especially during the time of national preparation for World War II.

The Harrison Street substation meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and the similar National Register Criterion C as an outstanding example of a PEPCO substation building type, designed during the period 1939-1960 when the company emphasized the need for its substations to blend in architecturally with their surroundings for aesthetic and security reasons. The Harrison Street substation is designed to look like a commercial building that is consistent with its location and period of construction. It is designed in an Art Moderne style with a smooth limestone-clad façade, and features a central entry door with a clock above and show windows to either side. It is the only PEPCO substation designed with such imitation commercial storefronts.

The building retains high integrity. Although the show-window openings have been filled and covered, they can readily be returned to their original appearance as a storefront in this commercial block of Wisconsin Avenue in Friendship Heights.

The period of significance is 1940, the year of the building's construction.