
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-06

Federal Office Building No. 6

400 Maryland Avenue SW
Square 492, Lot 116

Meeting Date: March 23, 2017
Applicant: U.S. General Services Administration
Affected ANC: 6D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Federal Office Building No. 6, 400 Maryland Avenue SW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, with a period of significance of 1959 to 1961, the building's period of construction. The General Services Administration (GSA) has already forwarded the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

The property merits designation under D.C. Criteria D ("Architecture and Urbanism") and B ("History") as one of the earliest International Style federal buildings in Washington and one that incorporated important landscape features; one of the new General Service Administration's first major construction projects; the first office building erected under GSA's broader 1956 *Construction Program, Federal Buildings, Washington D.C. and Vicinity*; and a major piece of the federal component of the Washington's Southwest Urban Renewal Plan.

This property was the subject of a Determination of Eligibility for listing in the National Register, and it was determined eligible. The DOE is part of a broad effort of GSA to evaluate the federal government's historic buildings, but it was prompted particularly by the proposal for the Eisenhower memorial on the adjacent plaza.

Background

Federal Office Building No. 6, now known as the Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building, received its prosaic original moniker as one of fifteen new office buildings imagined as part of a 1956 plan for federal government facilities in the nation's capital. Despite demobilization, the size of the postwar federal establishment strained the available office space, compounded by the prioritization of the removal of dozens of temporary buildings from the National Mall.

National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) plans of the early 1950s had acknowledged the difficulty of further federal expansion into Washington's Northwest quadrant and had also identified the Southwest quadrant as an appropriate area for urban renewal. A new General Services Administration, created in 1949 to handle construction and logistics for the expanding bureaucracy, prepared a comprehensive plan for new construction, additions and rehabilitation of federal buildings in and around Washington. The GSA coordinated closely with NCPC, with many anticipated projects to be directed to Southwest. It was hoped that the new facilities would

provide an employment center for the redeveloped neighborhood. Federal Office Building No. 6 was the first built, and it was first occupied by NASA and by the cabinet department Health, Education and Welfare, which also occupied the adjacent Wilbur J. Cohen Building.

GSA was innovative in its approach to the Southwest development, attempting to keep down debt by proposing that the office buildings be built by private developers using a lease-buyback arrangement that would mean no money down, except for land condemnation, and payments over time. But potential developers did not find the arrangement attractive enough, and GSA had to rely on traditional appropriations. Despite having passed through a fairly protracted design review, the lack of immediate funding delayed commencement of the project until 1959.

GSA selected two Washington firms, Faulkner, Kingsbury and Stenhouse and Chatelain, Gauger and Nolan as architects and engineers. They were directed to maximize efficiency, to provide a floor area sufficient to accommodate 2,900 employees served by up-to-date systems, and with no wasted space or superfluous ornament. The Modern movement in architecture was already advanced in Europe and received a major push with the need for reconstruction there. The mode became popular among American architects and tastemakers, and it seemed to fit the bill for efficient office space. It also fit the character of the new Southwest, planned by I.M. Pei and Harry Weese, among others.

Faulkner, Kingsbury and Stenhouse came up with an elongated eight-story box, with the upper floors supported on ground-level pilotis. Identical, full-height window openings marched the length of each elevation, punched through a limestone veneer—a nod to D.C.'s traditional architecture—on the column-and-slab structure. In design review, one story would be eliminated, and the resulting top floor—with nearly continuous glazing—was set back to reduce the building's apparent height and mass. Great care was taken to the design of the prominently visible mechanical penthouse, itself faced in limestone.

In addition to satisfying NCPC and Congress with a proposed design, GSA had to submit the project for review by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. An immediate concern of the Commission's was the length of the building, emphasized by the rhythm of the building's rational grid. Worried about it looking like a commercial office building, CFA encouraged that the building be set back in a plaza, giving it an impressive approach and keeping it out of the Maryland Avenue vista to the Capitol, a concern shared by NCPC.

Despite budget constraints, the project team engaged prominent landscape architect Lester Collins to design the surrounding plaza and terraces. The most notable feature is a sunken fountained courtyard upon which basement-level windows open.

Integrity

The property retains high integrity, although there have been some significant exterior alterations. Decorative pierced-concrete screens originally filled much of the space between the ground-floor pilotis. These were removed about twenty years ago, for better views from the first-story spaces, then being repurposed for public or common uses. At the same time, the building's original windows were replaced with aluminum-framed, double-glazed, grey-tinted windows. Between 2005 and 2006, limestone panels on the façade were repaired and cleaned, with all of the spandrels replaced in kind. Air-lock entry vestibules and impermanent accessibility ramps have been added to the exterior.