
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-10

Wardman Tower (Wardman Park Annex) and Arcade (Amendment) Wardman Tower Lobby (Interior) and Wardman Park Entrance Gates

2660 Woodley Road NW
Square 2132 Lot 32; Part of Lot 850 (old Lot 25)

Meeting Date: November 15, 2018
Applicant: Woodley Park Community Association
Affected ANC: 3C

This historic landmark application for Wardman Tower Lobby (Interior) and Wardman Park Entrance Gates is an amendment to the Wardman Tower (Wardman Park Annex) and Arcade, a Historic Landmark listed in the D.C. Inventory in 1979 and in the National Register in 1984. The already designated property includes the Wardman Tower which was constructed in 1928 as an annex to the Wardman Park Hotel, built in 1919 and no longer standing, and the Arcade, a one-story passageway also built in 1928 to connect the annex to the hotel to its west. This application proposes to amend the existing designation to include the interior lobby of Wardman Tower, and to expand the boundaries of the Historic Landmark to include the two pairs of entrance piers, built 1926, which historically flanked the semi-circular drive on Woodley Road leading to the entrance of the Wardman Park Hotel.

The amended nomination of the Wardman Tower Historic Landmark for the inclusion of the lobby interiors meets D.C. Designation Criteria B and D (History and Architecture/Urbanism), and the expansion of the boundaries to include the Wardman Park Entrance Piers meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism). A separate document, *Wardman Tower Lobby Interior Designation and Guidelines* has been prepared by HPO to accompany the designation document should the interior be designated. These guidelines identify the boundaries of the interior designation, list contributing and non-contributing features, and detail the types of work that will be subject to review by the Historic Preservation Review Board in the future.

Historical Context

The Wardman Tower (historically known as the Wardman Park Annex) is dramatically sited on a hilltop location overlooking Rock Creek Park at the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and Woodley Road, NW in today's Woodley Park neighborhood. Designed in a Colonial Revival style, the red brick building is composed of four, eight-story wings radiating spoke-like from a central octagonal tower that rises above its hilltop site and dominates the area skyline, has splendid views, and serves as a visual landmark to the Woodley Park neighborhood. Wardman Tower, designed by Mihran Mesrobian, an architect noted for his luxury hotels, was built by and for prolific developer Harry Wardman.

The Wardman Tower is the culmination of Wardman's development in Woodley Park on land that he began amassing in 1907 following construction of the Taft Bridge which connected downtown Washington to northwest areas along the Connecticut Avenue corridor. To begin with, Wardman built his own expansive Spanish Colonial Revival-style house at the intersection of Connecticut

Avenue and Woodley Road. During World War I, Wardman engaged in the rowhouse development of Woodley Park, and at the end of the War, built and opened the sprawling Woodley Park hotel on land just west of his residence. With 1,200 rooms, the original Woodley Park hotel was by far the largest hotel in Washington, and offered an array of amenities that gave the hotel a resort-like feel. The hotel faced Woodley Road with multiple wings extending off the south side to take advantage of light, air and views. A semi-circular drive, flanked by the still-extant pairs of entrance piers announced the main vehicular approach to the hotel. These notably tall and assertive red brick entrance piers, designed by Mesrobian and put in place in 1926, are remnants of the Wardman Park hotel, which was demolished in the 1970s. The current hotel on the site, now owned by Marriott, is known as the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. A re-configured “Y”-shaped drive leads to the hotel from Woodley Road. One set of the piers flanks the principal leg of the drive leading to the hotel, while the other set sits in the midst of an open lawn between the hotel and sidewalk along Woodley Road.

Despite critics who dubbed the hotel “Wardman’s Folly,” the hotel thrived, and within the decade, Wardman planned a luxury residential addition to the Wardman Park. This addition would engender the demolition of Wardman’s own estate house on the site. Wardman Tower was built specifically to accommodate long-term guests, many of whom were persons of prominence. During this time, Wardman Tower served as an official address for important social, political and cultural figures, many of whom are identified in the application. The Tower operated as a residential hotel from its completion in 1928 until the late 1970s. Presently, the Tower lobby still serves as a lobby to the Marriott Wardman Park, accessed by the connecting Arcade, while the upper level floors have been converted into condominiums.

Architecture

Mihran Mesrobian designed the eight-story Wardman Tower in a Colonial Revival style with English influence that incorporated tri-partite “Palladian” windows, balconies, projecting bays, mansard roofs, classical elements including Ionic and Corinthian columns, and decorative applied moldings of classical motifs and figures. Mesrobian continued the refined classicism on the interior of the building, designing the Tower’s lobby with attenuated columns flanking doorways, arched openings, and delicate applied plaster carvings and *bas reliefs* panels that were inspired by the interiors of the eighteenth-century British architect Robert Adam and his brothers. The work of the Adam brothers was highly fashionable during the eighteenth century, and would again influence architecture and interior decoration during a twentieth-century revival of the Classical Revival style. Known as the “Adam” style, or as “Adamesque” detailing, this interior décor is defined by classically inspired motifs used freely, but with clarity of form, use of color, and realized in a refined and delicate manner like that of the Adam brothers.

Mesrobian was well-acquainted with the work of Robert Adam and, according to the application, had decorated other hotel lobbies in the “Adam” style, including Meridian Mansions (1916), Kew Gardens (1922), the Presidential (1922) and others, though the Wardman Lobby has the most extensive and sophisticated of his Adamesque interiors. Wardman himself had an affinity for the decorative style as the earlier Wardman Park hotel, not designed by Mesrobian, featured Adamesque décor in the lobby, including classical swags, medallions, urns, and arabesque detailing as seen in an historic photo. The amendment application notes that Wardman’s office library held published copies of books on the Adam brothers’ work, including “The Architecture, Decoration and Furniture of Robert and James Adam” indicating that Wardman himself was familiar with the decorative style. The application identifies the specific sources of inspiration for

the Wardman Tower lobby interiors, identifying the Derby House designed by Adams (1773-74) in London as the principal source.

The Wardman Tower lobby provided common space, housed the mail alcove and guest registration, and served as the primary access to residents' suites. The lobby provided formal and informal gathering space, while the Arcade provided access to the hotel's full-service amenities, including spacious dining rooms, Turkish bath, billiards and card tables, swimming pool and ice rink. The tower residents thus enjoyed a secluded and private existence in immediate proximity to the full-service hotel.

The two pairs of stately entrance piers are situated along Woodley Road and historically framed the semi-circular drive. The four piers are constructed of red brick, rise approximately fifteen feet in height, and feature secondary, smaller brick piers, connected by low brick walls. The principal piers are decorated with limestone panels set into the brick walls and are capped by decorative Grecian-style urns.



Evaluation and Integrity

The D.C. Preservation Law provides legal protection to the exteriors of buildings listed as D.C. historic landmarks or as contributing buildings in historic districts. The interiors of properties are protected only if provided for by a nomination specifically addressing the architectural and or historical significance of those interiors. Currently, there are 25 interior designations listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. These designations range from the highly ornate and exceptionally intact Victorian interiors of the Christian Heurich House to the spare and modern interiors of the I.M. Pei-designed Slayton House in Cleveland Park. Interior nominations specify particular areas of the interior that are being designated and thus subject to protection. In this case, the application identifies the lobby of the Wardman Tower for the interior designation.

The lobby interior of the Wardman Tower provides an excellent and intact example of the “Adam” style of interior décor, and offers a fine example of the exceptional quality of the work of Mihran Mesrobian. Mesrobian’s commissions from Wardman and other developers illustrate his skill in working in a variety of styles and in carrying that quality of design from the exterior to the interior of his buildings. Mesrobian’s work evolved dramatically throughout his career as an architect in Washington. During the 1920s, he favored a traditional Beaux Arts aesthetic, but would later

embrace more Modern styles, particularly the Art Deco style, showing remarkable creativity and playfulness in his designs both inside and out. The Sedgwick Garden Apartments, influenced by Mesrobian's Ottoman heritage, has a remarkable interior lobby with a colonnade of connected Romanesque-inspired arches encircling a center fountain. The Sedgwick Gardens, including its lobby interior, was recently designated as a D.C. historic landmark.

The Wardman Tower lobby has seen a certain amount of alteration as outlined in the application, including arched openings that have been closed and fitted with doors, or covered with mirrors; the replacement of flooring; and the replacement of ceiling fixtures. Despite these and other minor changes, the overall integrity of the lobby interiors remains high.

The entrance gates to the Wardman Hotel are a remnant of the now-demolished Wardman Park hotel. They were designed by Mesrobian, are architecturally notable, and are consistent with the design of Wardman Tower. Although the entrance piers have been moved over time, one pair still frames an entry drive, and the other pair is sited in appropriate relation to each other and the other pair. Together they provide an important reminder and highly ornate architectural remnant of the former hotel building on the site and retain sufficient integrity to qualify for inclusion within the landmark boundaries.

