

ADMINISTRATION BUILDING AT EAST 180TH STREET (Former New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad Administration Building), 481 Morris Park Avenue, Borough of the Bronx. Completed 1912; architects Fellheimer & Long, Allen H. Stem associated.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 4011, Lot 210 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Administration Building at East 180th Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark site (Item No. 9). The building was heard again on March 25, 1975 (Item No. 1), and the hearing was continued to May 27, 1975 (Item No. 1), at the request of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. All hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of five witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the hearings. The representative of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority requested that the building not be designated until plans for the Second Avenue subway were finalized.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Administration Building of the New York, Westchester & Boston Railway Company, completed in 1912, is a picturesque structure which frequently attracts the interest of passengers on the nearby Harlem River Railroad line. It was designed to function both as a station and as the administrative headquarters of the railroad by the architectural firm of Fellheimer & Long, in association with Allen H. Stem. Fellheimer and Stem were nationally known specialists in railroad station architecture; Stem, in partnership with Charles A. Reed until Reed's death in 1911, was a member of one of the two architectural firms which designed Grand Central Terminal, designated a New York City Landmark in 1967.

This handsome example of the Italian villa style, designed for a location in the northeastern Bronx, still sparsely developed in 1912, is a great contrast to Grand Central, the monumental Beaux-Arts terminal created for an urban environment. The construction of the Administration Building is indicative of the tremendous expansion of railroads from urban centers to serve developing suburban communities in the early 20th century. In this case, the line extended from New York City to the northern Bronx and from there to Westchester and then, on two diverging track systems, to White Plains and to Port Chester.

Unfortunately "The Westchester," as the line was popularly known, never made a profit and service was terminated at the end of 1937. Since the 1940s the building has functioned as the entrance to the East 180th Street station of the New York City transit system, with administrative offices on the upper floors. Thus, this handsome building is an example of practical reuse or "recycling".

The Administration Building, which was the largest of all "The Westchester's" railroad stations on this line within City limits, is one of the two surviving stations inspired by the Italian villa style in the city; the other is the Paulding station nearby on Esplanade. This style of architecture, based on early north Italian Renaissance prototypes, was a nationwide favorite with architects of the period, a time which coincided with the development of suburban residential communities throughout the country. Most of the smaller stations of "The Westchester" were also designed in this Italian villa style, including the station at Wykagyl in New Rochelle, now barely recognizable as a store in the Wykagyl shopping center, and the station at Heathcote which serves as the headquarters of the Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

In an article by J. H. Phillips in the Architectural Record of August 1914, which describes the evolution of the suburban railroad station from the simplest wooden lean-to type, "prevalent not so many years ago," to the "excellent examples" designed by Stem & Fellheimer for the new line of the New York, Westchester & Boston Railroad, Phillips wrote:

In most instances along the Westchester division, concrete has been used on the surface bush-hammered except for the mouldings. The utmost simplicity of treatment, both in general design and ornamental detail, characterizes all the structures, and the Florentine type chosen is exceptionally frank and sincere in its freedom from meaningless ornament... These most recent achievements in suburban railroad architecture possess a subtle charm that cannot fail to make itself felt. Their well-balanced proportions, their chaste lines and effective use of some charming bit of detail in a telling situation make the observer conscious that it is, indeed, a far cry to the old wooden stations that these shapely structures have replaced, and that even the most commercial and utilitarian buildings may now be instinct with grace.

In its picturesque massing, restrained use of ornament and quiet dignity, the Administration Building is a perfect illustration of the buildings described in this article. It faces an open area, originally planted with grass and trees, which could be attractively landscaped once again. The three-story central section of the Morris Park Avenue facade, with an arcaded loggia at street level, is flanked by four-story projecting end pavilions which give the effect of towers. To this classically balanced facade, the red roof tiles and the profiles of the two end towers add picturesque variety. An interesting play of light and shade is provided, against the smooth surface of the building, by the arcaded loggia and the balustered balconies at the tower sections. A narrow bandcourse separates the first story from the upper portion of the facade, with small square windows set above it at the second story. Paired arched windows at the third floor, set within shallow blind arches, repeat the rhythm established at ground floor level. At the fourth story, the tower sections are given emphasis by the introduction of triple windows, enframed with blind arches, set above the bandcourses.

Ornament, kept to a minimum, was used effectively. Round plaques, set between the arches of the street level loggia, recall Tuscan prototypes such as the della Robbia plaques of Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital in Florence and the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino. A large heraldic escutcheon, which occupies a central location above the loggia at the second story, is flanked by pilasters and scrolls, providing a base for the winged head of Mercury (the Roman god of transportation and commerce) which is centered in the crowning broken pediment.

The charming Administration Building was an important and characteristic part of "The Westchester" line. In his book, Westchester's Forgotten Railway: An Account of the New York, Westchester & Boston (New York:1962, reprinted 1972), Roger Arcara describes the construction of this railroad, which began in 1909 at Mount Vernon, as:

the culmination of railway development of the period, the most modern and efficient design, the most solid and sturdy construction, the greatest capacity (for its trackage) and the most attractive layout of any line in the world. Stations, signal towers and other trackside structures were not like the simple wood shacks of the past, hastily thrown together, but were made of poured concrete or of masonry covered with concrete. Most stations were to be large in proportion to the amount of traffic anticipated, but even the smaller ones were intended to be handsome, ornamental buildings which would fit well into the fashionable communities which Westchester planners hoped to develop around them...The Westchester would have mansions where other lines were satisfied with sheds,

Technologically, the railroad was very advanced for its time. It was operated entirely by electricity, then still a fairly recent development in railway locomotion. According to Arcara, "The Westchester" was the first American railway of main-line form which was designed and built as an electric line, not merely the electrification of an existing line powered by steam. It opened for business on May 29, 1912, extending from the Administration Building at East 180th Street and Morris Park Avenue to New Rochelle in Westchester. Following a joyous night-time celebration and fireworks on July 4, 1912, witnessed by some forty thousand people according to an account in the New York Times, the White Plains branch was opened as far as Mamaroneck Avenue. By August 3, service was in operation all the way down to the Harlem River. Some of the station buildings, including the one at East 180th Street, were still under construction at that time. To the east, along Long Island Sound, a second line was gradually being extended from New Rochelle to the terminal station at Port Chester which was opened in December of 1929, just at the beginning of the Great Depression.

The fact that both of these new lines paralleled the routes of the Harlem River and New Haven lines at many points, in addition to the decline in passengers during the Depression, precipitated the early demise of this otherwise promising railroad. Another important negative factor was the inconvenient location of the southern terminus of the railroad at Willis Avenue and 132nd Street in the South Bronx. As a result, passengers found themselves without direct access to mid-Manhattan.

The Administration Building and the adjacent 180th Street station were saved by plans, envisaged as early as 1912, to extend the elevated branches of the Independent subway to a comprehensive transfer station adjacent to the facility. In the long run, however, the railroad line was doomed and service ceased on all lines a few minutes after midnight on December 31, 1937. Various plans and bills providing for the resumption of service were proposed but none passed. The axe finally fell on June 9, 1939, when approval was given to sell the overhead power-transmission wires to satisfy pressing financial obligations, and subsequently to sell all the remaining assets of the railroad.

In 1940, a group of residents in the communities of the northeast Bronx began a campaign directed at the municipal government, advocating purchase of the railroad's right-of-way within City limits. They argued that money appropriated for the extension of the Grand Concourse branch of the subway would be better spent acquiring and adapting the existing right-of-way for local transit use. In 1941 a shuttle service, the Dyre Avenue line, was established between the East 180th Street and Dyre Avenue stations originally serving as a part of the Independent Subway Division of the New York Transit System. In 1957, track connections were made with the I. R. T. White Plains Road line, north of the East 180th Street station, and some trains from Manhattan's Seventh Avenue line on the West side began service to Dyre Avenue. Later still, Dyre Avenue trains were routed via the Lexington-Fourth Avenue line.

"Thus," as Roger Arcara observed, "twenty years after the Westchester was forced to the wall for lack of patronage, the only thing which could have successfully saved the line was finally accomplished."

Behind the Administration Building are the original platforms of the railroad, now unused. These platforms, serving the four-track system, may some day be put to use again if the Second Avenue subway line is extended to connect with the Dyre Avenue line, as proposed. The preservation and intelligent reuse of a handsome well-constructed structure, such as the Administration Building, is very much in line with the stated goals of a national, federally sponsored movement, best illustrated in the recent two-volume study, Reusing Railroad Stations.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Administration Building at East 180th Street has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that among its important qualities, the Administration Building, designed by Reed and Fellheimer, two nationally prominent specialists in railroad architecture, is a handsome example of the Italian Renaissance villa style adapted to a utilitarian structure, combining a station with administrative offices, that this picturesque style, a nationwide favorite with architects of the early 20th century, was chosen by the railroad as particularly suited to the northeastern Bronx location, that the building serves as a reminder of the tremendous expansion of commuter railroad lines of the period, that this solidly constructed edifice was integrated with the New York City Transit system in 1941, after the demise of the railroad line for which it had been built, and that it is an example of successful reuse.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Administration Building at East 180th Street (Former New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad Administration Building), 481 Morris Park Avenue, Borough of the Bronx and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 4011, Lot 210 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.