

BRONX COUNTY COURTHOUSE, 851 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx. Built 1931-34; architects Joseph H. Freedlander and Max Hausle.

Landmarks Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 2468, Lot 1.

On May 11, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bronx County Courthouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Dramatically sited at the southern end of the Grand Concourse, the Bronx County Courthouse is an imposing and monumental civic structure. Constructed between 1931 and 1934, the Courthouse was the work of architects Max Hausle and Joseph H. Freedlander, in collaboration with noted sculptors and artisans. During the depression of the 1930s government-funded projects such as this courthouse provided architects and artists with welcome large-scale commissions. The Bronx County Courthouse, designed in a style which combines boldly modern massing with neo-classic elements, is an exceptionally impressive example of the publically funded architecture of this period.

The site for the new courthouse--just north of Franz Sigel Park, between 158th and 161st Streets--had been selected as early as 1928. By January of 1931 the foundations for the new building were under construction and the architects submitted plans for official approval in March of the same year. In July of 1932 the building was nearing completion although the sculptural decoration and entrance porticoes were not yet in place; the great pink marble blocks, each weighing seventy tons, which were used for the eight sculpture groups flanking the porticoes, began arriving in New York from Tate, Georgia, in September of 1932. By late 1933 all that was wanting were the interior furnishings, and in June of 1934 and appropriately festive three-day dedication celebration heralded the opening of the great new courthouse.

In honor of the occasion Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia officially transferred the seat of municipal government for three days from City Hall to the Bronx County Courthouse. On Saturday June 15, the Board of Estimate meeting was held in the courthouse, and was broadcast on radio for the first time. Borough President James Lyons presented the Mayor with a key to the courthouse, quipping that it was bronze, not gold, due to the Depression. It developed that the key was not purely ceremonial, but functional--and when it was discovered that it opened the door of the courthouse detention room, The Mayor obligingly returned it. The dedication ceremonies, which also marked the twentieth anniversary of the Bronx as a county, further included speeches, a military parade and band concert, as well as luncheons at the nearby Concourse Plaza Hotel.

The Courthouse contains, in addition to courtrooms, jury rooms and court offices, the offices of the Borough President, District Attorney, and Sheriff, as well as offices of the Corporation Counsel and the Bronx County Bar Association.

It appears that the architects Hausle and Freedlander only worked together on the Bronx County Courthouse. Joseph H. Freedlander (1870-1943) was a native New Yorker who received his architectural training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts. A successful Manhattan architect, he designed the Museum of the City of New York, the new Harlem Hospital, several bank buildings and the French Institute Building on 60th Street. He also received commissions in other areas of the country, including the City Auditorium in Portland, Oregon and the Perry Memorial in Put-in-Bay, Ohio. Freedlander was an active member of numerous artists' leagues and societies and, as president of the Fine Arts Federation of New York, for many years an important spokesman for the artistic community.

Max Hausle was born in 1879 in Switzerland and studied architecture in his native land. In 1897 he emigrated to the United States, settled in the Bronx, and became associated with a locally prominent architect, Micheal J. Garvin. At Garvin's death in 1918, Hausle successfully continued the practice alone, receiving several important public commissions in the Bronx, among them two courthouses, the Municipal Courthouse and the Magistrates' Courthouse, both constructed before the Bronx County Courthouse.

Freedlander and Hausle were much concerned with efficient planning as well as architectural beauty: the Impressive entrances on each side of the courthouse, for example, lead to separate banks of elevators which make interior circulation easily accessible. The monumental grand terrace, which sets off and enframes the building, also serves functionally to enclose a lower level garage and a large interior court, above the first floor Memorial Hall, provides ample light and air.

The courthouse was characterized by a contemporary newsreporter (Herald Tribune, 7/24/32) as a prime example of the "Twentieth Century American" style. More precisely, the building is a characteristically American version of a style which was also popular in Europe, seen for example in the new section of Rome, E.U.R., as developed under Mussolini's direction. Bold, simple geometric massing on a monumental scale is combined with ornamental detail and sculpture which derive inspiration primarily from ancient Greek and Roman models. Such classical models are evocative of a period of high achievement, both intellectual and artistic. The Bronx County Courthouse sculptural program depicts universal and ennobling themes for which the neo-classic style is highly appropriate. Moreover, classicizing styles had long been considered the most suitable for large government buildings. Thus Freedlander and Hausle, in using a neo-classic style, were continuing an established tradition while designing a thoroughly modern twentieth century building.

The courthouse is raised upon a great rusticated granite podium which dramatically enframes and elevates the building. Stairways lead to the vast balustraded terrace which surrounds the courthouse on all four sides. The simple silhouette of the building is broken only by the monumental hexastyle porticoes which are centrally placed on each facade. The building is constructed in limestone and is nine stories in height in addition to its two mezzanines. The facades are divided into three sections--analogous to the sections of the classical column--and are comprised of a rusticated base, a shaft with vertical bands of windows, and cornice. The spandrel panels between the windows are of copper and therefore effectively enhance the contrast between the smooth light limestone walls and the vertical strips of the fenestration. At the lower floors the copper panels are inlaid with nickel. The relief on all the panels is a stylized foliate ornament reminiscent of motifs used in the contemporary Art Deco style. The porticoes with their great fluted columns supporting massive, block-like entablatures are a simplified interpretation of classical form. They are adorned with the seals of the City and State of New York, carved in low relief, which flank inscriptions extolling the virtues of Administration of Justice, Government, Law and Order, and the Rights of Man. The doorways screened by the porticoes have elaborate bronze and glass doors with eagles and winged hourglasses. The low relief frieze at cornice level is also adorned with eagles which alternate with foliate ornament.

Above the rusticated base is an exceptionally handsome frieze, divided into panels by windows, and encircling the entire building. The creation of the sculptor Charles Keck, it depicts, in a classic heroicizing style, the activities of the universal working man. Themes of agriculture, commerce, industry, religion, and the arts, as well as war and enslavement are all shown. Generalized scenes of plowing, harvesting, shepherding and the like contrast with specific historic allusions to the Revolutionary, Civil, Spanish American, and First World Wars. The variety of subject matter is welded into a cohesive whole through the homogeneity of its classical style. A notable element of the composition is the convergence of figures at the corners of the building toward a single figure placed directly at each corner angle. Near the southeast corner, a seated figure displays an elevation drawing of the courthouse itself--labeled the "Bronx Unity Building." Through the consistent use of low relief Keck's masterful frieze enhances the building without interrupting the strength and clarity of its massing.

Charles Keck (1875-1951) was a native New Yorker who studied here and in Rome at the American Academy. A student of both the noted sculptor Philip Martiny and the renowned Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Keck was known for his public commissions. In New York City his works include a portal figure at Columbia University, the figure of Islam on the facade of the Brooklyn Museum, and the Times Square statue of World War I chaplain Father Duffy. He received public commissions from all over the United States and was selected by President Truman personally to do an equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson for Kansas City.

Flanking each entry are two monumental freestanding groups of figures carved in pink marble. They rest on simple bases and are placed at the edge of the terrace. The noted sculptor Adolf A. Weinman supervised the creation of these groups and himself designed two, "The Song of Achievement" and "Progress" which stand at the Mount Eden Avenue side of the courthouse. At the 161st Street entrance are "Civic Government" and "The Majesty of Law" by George H. Snowden; at the Walton Avenue side are "Victory and Peace" and "Loyalty, Valor and Sacrifice" by Joseph Kiselewski, and at the 158th Street side "Triumph of Government" and "Genius of Administration" by Edward F. Sanford Jr. The figures in all the groups are well over life size, carved in very high relief and are imbued with a remarkable sense of energy and strength. Each sculptor has adopted a classic style, with great powerful figures forming heroic groups, suitable to the elevated subject matter depicted.

Adolf A. Weinman (1870-1952) emigrated as a child to this country from Germany. Like Keck, he was a student of both Martiny and Saint-Gaudens, and he also worked with the noted sculptor Daniel Chester French. Although best known for his architectural sculpture, he was also interested in medallion work and designed the 1916 half dollar and Mercury dime. Of his sculpture, which was classic, often displaying overtones of baroque flamboyance, notable New York examples include the crowning statue "Civic Fame" and the facade sculpture of the Municipal Building, Manhattan, the Brooklyn Museum pediment done in collaboration with French, panels for the J.P. Morgan Library, and the pediment of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (now in the Metropolitan Museum). Weinman was also active in Washington, D.C. where he designed the frieze of the new Supreme Court Building.

Edward Field Sanford (b.1886) was a native New Yorker who studied in New York, Munich and Paris. He was director of the sculpture department of the Beaux-Arts Institute and his most notable commission was for the architectural sculpture of the Library, California State Capitol.

George Holburn Snowden (b. 1902) studied at Yale and was a pupil of Weinman. He too was involved with architectural sculpture and did a pediment of The State Drink Hall, Saratoga Springs, and the Yale Memorial of Pershing Hall in Paris.

Joseph Kiselewski (1901-), a native of Minnesota, studied in Minneapolis, New York, Paris and Rome. A student of Lee Lawrie, the "dean of American architectural sculpture", he has been involved in architectural sculpture, and among his many important commissions were the Fishery pediment of the Commerce Department Building in Washington, D.C., a great sundial for the Business System Building of the 1938-39 Worlds Fair in New York City, and a limestone panel for the New York City and Municipal Courthouse. He also designed, in the medallion field, the Good Conduct Medal for the War Department. Today, Kiselewski maintains a studio in New York.

The sculptors of the Bronx County Courthouse contributed an essential element to this highly successful design. The use of architectural sculpture enhances and enlivens the building. Such sculpture, traditionally an integral part of architecture, has in recent years been employed infrequently. The Bronx County Courthouse is an important and handsome example of the effective combination of modern twentieth century style with figural sculptured adornment.

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 Bronx County Courthouse 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 Bronx County Courthouse is an imposing and monumental civic structure designed in a style which combines boldly modern massing with neo-classic elements, that it is dramatically sited, that it was designed by two locally prominent architects, in collaboration with a group of well-known sculptors, that the sculptural ornament which depicts, ennobling universal themes is exceptionally handsome and enhances the over-all design of the buildings, and that the courthouse is an impressive example of publicly funded architecture of the 1930s.

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 Bronx County Courthouse, 851 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 2468, Lot 1, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.