

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 24, 1981, Designation List 150
LP-1132

FORMER J. KURTZ & SONS STORE BUILDING, 162-24 Jamaica Avenue, Borough of Queens.
Built 1931; architects Allmendinger & Schlendorf.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 10102, Lot 10.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Former J. Kurtz & Sons Store Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing has 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. One letter was received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Kurtz Store, a striking commercial building in the heart of downtown Jamaica, is a rare manifestation of the Art Deco style in the Borough of Queens. Its ornamentation is typical of that period of architecture prevalent in the 1920s and early 1930s, which looked to the future and to the machine with expectation and optimism. Its compact form, accented by modern materials and skyscraper imagery, enhances this bustling area of the city

The building was erected in 1931 as a retail store for the furniture chain of J. Kurtz & Sons. This company had been founded in 1870 by Jacob Kurtz and had three other stores by that time, including the original one on State Street in Brooklyn. The Jamaica store was used continuously by the Kurtz firm until 1978, at which time it was sold to other retailers. The selling floors have recently been divided to accommodate several tenants but the exterior remains intact.

When the Kurtz company decided to expand its retail operations to Jamaica, the area was an important commercial center for Queens and for much of Long Island. Its central location and well-developed transportation systems had made it the hub of a wide area. Jamaica had always been a crossroads for Long Island, dating back to the time when Jamaica Avenue was an Indian trail. The first railroad line arrived here in 1834, built by the Brooklyn & Jamaica Railroad Company. In 1850 Jamaica Avenue, then called Fulton Street, became a plank road and connected the area to the Brooklyn ferries. Horsecar lines were begun in 1866 and electrified in 1886. The Long Island Railroad station was completed in 1913 with the Jamaica Elevated trains arriving five years later.

Jamaica started as a sleepy Dutch village of assorted, freestanding structures, loosely grouped along main streets, when the town was granted a patent from Peter Stuyvesant in 1656. The English took over in 1664, changing the town's name from the Dutch "Rusdorp" to a variation on the Canarsie Indian word for beaver, "jamecos." One hundred years later, the community had become a trading post where farmers from outlying areas brought their produce. The nineteenth century saw the development of Jamaica as a resort, attracting wealthy urban residents who wanted to escape the numerous summer plagues of the city. The permanent population of Jamaica also increased steadily in the early nineteenth century and brought with it the normal proliferation of new buildings.

The earliest recorded map of the land where the Kurtz Store is located, dated 1836, shows that it was owned by Henry Wilkes. Another map, compiled ten years later shows the Wilkes land subdivided, but neither shows any structures on this lot. On the 1873 Beers Map, a Methodist Episcopal Church is located here, but the building was no longer extant by 1895.¹ From at least that date until the Kurtz company erected its building, this lot held a two-story commercial structure which, in 1929, housed eleven different tenants.

By this time Jamaica contained a thriving business district and the furniture company sought to take advantage of this. The Kurtz family requested that the architects create a building which would be thoroughly modern and arrest the eye of those passing by on the elevated train, which then ran along Jamaica Avenue.

The firm of Allmendinger & Schlendorf, which had previously renovated other stores for the Kurtz chain, was chosen to design the new furniture store. Louis Allmendinger (1876-1937) received his technical training at the Mechanics Institute in New York. He worked for various architects until 1922 when he started his own firm, specializing in industrial and commercial buildings. His work included other types of buildings however, including the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Brooklyn (1916-21, a designated New York City Landmark) and its Parish House (1916). M. Allen Schlendorf (b. 1902) graduated from Cooper Union and attended Columbia University. In 1926, he joined with Allmendinger and formed a partnership which lasted until the older man's death in 1937. Located on offices in Brooklyn, the firm was responsible for numerous institutional, industrial, and commercial designs, including the German Masonic Temple in Manhattan, the Liebman Brewery and the North American Brewery in Brooklyn, as well as the Ehler Coffee Plant in Brooklyn. After Allmendinger's death, Schlendorf continued the practice under his own name, designing such projects as the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Hospital in Brooklyn, the E.B. Stimpson Co., and the East Brooklyn Savings and Loan (now Pioneer Savings and Loan).

The design for the Kurtz Store is clearly different from the other work of these designers. Mr. Schlendorf recalls that his clients requested a building that would be very "modern and colorful" and would reflect the contemporary furniture which was to be displayed there.² The Art Deco or Moderne style of this building epitomized the word "modern" for many people of the period. The straight lines, the jagged or geometrically shaped outline and decoration seemed to symbolize the immediacy of the city, with its bustling population and the prosperity which could be found there.³

The term Art Deco derives from the Paris exhibition of 1925, the "Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes" but the inspiration for the style in skyscraper design came from at least two main sources: the second prize-winning design by Eliel Saarinen for the Tribune Tower competition in 1922, and the publication of Hugh Ferriss's book The Metropolis of Tomorrow in 1929. After these two events the image of the modern skyscraper became that of a "tapered, soaring ziggurat."⁴ While the compact, six-story Kurtz building in Queens can hardly be called a skyscraper, its decorative motifs in the form of tapered pylons in contrasting colors and materials, which rise on the two main facades, as well as the skyscraper-like designs originally painted on the windows pay homage to this idea.

The influence of Frank Lloyd Wright on Art Deco design was also a strong one, beginning with his use of abstract, geometric designs in the stained-glass windows

of his early Prairie School houses to the patterned concrete blocks of his California houses of the 1920s.⁵ Mr. Schlendorf recalls always having admired Wright's work and being influenced by it in the design of this building.⁶ This influence can be seen in the horizontally grouped windows and the use of ornament in clearly defined areas. In the Kurtz store this ornament takes the form of flat fields of curvilinear design and groups of horizontal bands protruding from a vertical shaft, both characteristic Art Deco motifs.

The Kurtz store contains five stories plus a mezzanine, all of which were intended to display furniture. It is constructed on a steel frame, visible both inside the windows which wrap around the corner of Jamaica Avenue and New York Boulevard and inside the large display windows which fill the two lowest floors. Crowning the mezzanine windows are stepped horizontal bands of cast aluminum. The strong horizontal lines are pierced by verticals and by blocks containing lightning-like motifs, another important design element of this period. This lower section is set off by a broad band of black glazed tile, making it quite distinct from the light brick which faces the upper stories.

Above this base, the Jamaica Avenue facade is three bays wide while that on New York Boulevard is six bays wide. Each is symmetrically disposed, the composition alternating plain, metal-framed windows with a stepped pylon motif which rises continuously through all four stories. The Jamaica Avenue facade contains one of these pylons in the center, while the longer facade on New York Boulevard has two. They are formed by black and white glazed tiles which contrast in color and material with the rest of the facade, in a manner characteristic of Art Deco. A narrow window is located at the center of the pylon at each floor, and this feature adds to the vertical emphasis of this motif. This verticality is arrested just above each window by a slightly protruding element covered in black tile which has short horizontal bands on each side. At the center of the New York Boulevard facade another tower-like form is outlined in black brick. Small, horizontal bands are grouped along its height, echoing the spandrel motif of the wider black and white pylons. This central tower is crowned by another group of bands, this one turned in a vertical direction and reaching up to the top of the building.

Several windows on both facades contain the remains of a design that was originally painted in silver on many of them. It takes the form of a schematic skyscraper, divided vertically, with matching halves on facing window panes. This is another manifestation of the importance of the skyscraper to the designers of this building. At the roof line of the building is a plain, flat parapet which hides the flat roof. Just below the parapet at the top of each window bay are rectangular panels of flat, stylized designs. The gold and blue terra cotta of this ornament provides the only bit of bright color on the facades.

The Kurtz store is a distinctive commercial structure in the modern idiom, one that created a striking image for the Kurtz Company. Although it is a relatively small building, the designers chose to decorate it with the skyscraper motifs of the period, motifs which cried "modern": tall, tapering ziggurats or pylons; groupings of horizontal bands; distinct panels of flat, stylized design; contrasting colors and materials including glazed tile, terra cotta, brick and cast aluminum. Despite the presence of strong horizontal lines, the vertical emphasis of the decoration dominates the facade, creating a building which is impressive and forceful beyond its size and still enhances the Jamaica streetscape.

FOOTNOTES

1. The map of 1836 is Map No. 335 (new No. 2455) "Map of the Property of the Village of Jamaica, L.I. belonging to Henry Wilkes, May 1836," by Frances Nicholson. The 1846 map is the same, surveyed in April 1846 by Thomas Bradlee, Henry Hagner and James Rider. These maps are located in the Queens County Register's Office. The 1873 Beers Map and the 1895 Bird's Eye View Map are in the local history room of the Queensborough Public Library.
2. Letter to the author from M. Allen Schlendorf, May 27, 1981.
3. Walter C. Kidney, Eclecticism in America, 1880-1930 (New York: George Braziller, 1974), pp. 59-60.
4. Leland Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 240.
5. Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 63.
6. Schlendorf, May 27, 1981.

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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 Former J. Kurtz & Sons Store Building 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 Former J. Kurtz & Sons Store Building is a fine and rare example of the Art Deco style in Queens; that it is a commercial structure in the modern idiom, designed by Allmendinger & Schlendorf to create a striking image for the Kurtz company; that its decorative motifs including skyscraper images and lightning bolts are representative of the urbanistic and futuristic point of view emphasized in Art Deco design; that the strong composition and vertical emphasis of the facades create a building which is impressive and forceful beyond its size; and that the building continues to enhance the Jamaica streetscape.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Former J. Kurtz & Sons Store Building, 162-24 Jamaica Avenue, Borough of Queens, and designates Tax Map Block 10102, Lot 10, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

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162-24 Jamaica Avenue
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Built: 1931
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