
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 11-02

Real Estate Trust Company Building (Continental Trust Building)

1343 H Street, NW
Square 250, Lot 46

Meeting Date: September 18, 2014
Applicant: DC Preservation League
Affected ANC: ANC 2F
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Real Estate Trust Company (Continental Trust Company) building at 1343 H Street NW to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the landmark nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

Architecture and History

The Real Estate Trust building is a twelve-story commercial office building located downtown at the northeast corner of 14th and H Streets NW (since 1982-84, the Real Estate Trust building has been connected to an adjacent non-historic building, and together they have the address 1333 H Street NW). It was constructed in 1913-1914 and designed in a highly ornate Beaux Arts Renaissance Revival-style by the Washington-based architecture firm Milburn, Heister & Company. The Milburn, Heister & Company was responsible for the design of many high-profile commercial and government buildings in D.C. and in the southern United States during the early 20th century.

The building is a steel and concrete frame structure sheathed in ivory-colored terra cotta made more remarkable by its polychrome accents—a treatment uncommon in this city. The building has a rectangular plan, with a frontage of 46 feet on 14th Street and 75 feet on H Street, and entrances on both facades. Although the building retains integrity of design and materials with no significant additions, certain exterior alterations have occurred, including most notably the remodeling of the building's ground floor, removal of the second-floor balcony, and removal of the elaborate pierced crown cornice (likely cast-iron), which was replaced by a patterned polychrome brick parapet cornice. All of the original features are clearly visible in historic photos and elevation drawings, making a full restoration of the building's exterior possible.

The Real Estate Trust Company was built in 1913-14 to house the offices of the Real Estate Trust Company which was organized in 1912 and specialized in financing real estate development and investment. The office building was constructed on the site of the "old" Montrose Hotel, representing the transformation of this area of downtown from a residential

neighborhood to a financial and business center. Within two years of its 1914 completion, the Real Estate Trust Company was displaced as the building's flagship tenant by the Continental Trust Company, and thus became known as the Continental Trust Company building. The reasons behind the Real Estate Trust Company's turn of fortune are unclear, although the Federal Reserve Act of 1914 may have played a role in the company's decline. The Federal Reserve Act made it legal for the first time for banks to make loans secured by real estate and fulfill other functions previously restricted to trust companies. With more players in the marketplace, the Real Estate Trust Company may have lost its favored position because of increased competition following passage of the Act.



The Continental Trust Company occupied the building until 1960, through its 1930 consolidation with Commercial National Bank. After this 1930 consolidation, the building was renamed the People's Life Insurance building. In 1960, when the company sold the building and moved out, the building was renamed the Landmark building.

Preservation Background

In the mid-20th century, the original ground floor was altered through the successive installation of two or three different storefront claddings, the building's original cornice was removed and replaced with a brick parapet, and interior spaces were altered leaving little historic interior features or fabric. In 1983, the building was renovated; the renovation included cleaning and repointing approximately 80% of the terra cotta tiles, and replacement of those beyond repair with new cast stone tiles; redesign of the third floor including replacement of the "decayed" third-floor balcony with a new 18-inch-deep cast stone ledge; and the replacement of the ground floor with new marble cladding and new openings with new surrounds. The carved marble arches and the overdoor panels were retained and restored. Similarly, the historic terra cotta urns and portions of the pedestals were re-used at the re-designed third-floor ledge, while portions of the pilaster capitals and architrave were replaced with cast stone. In 1983, the Real Estate Trust building restoration project received an Award for Historic Preservation from the Washington Chapter of the AIA.

Evaluation and Integrity

The Real Estate Trust building merits listing in the D.C. Inventory and the National Register of Historic Places as an excellent example of an early 20th century office building, and more specifically as a unique example of a polychrome terra cotta building in Washington, D.C. Although there are other terra cotta buildings in the city (the McLachlen building at 10th and G Streets NW, the former Lansburgh Department Store at 7th and F Streets, NW, the Southern Building at 15th and H Streets NW, the Warner Theater at 513 13th Street and the Woodward Building at 15th and H Streets NW to name a few), the Real Estate Trust building is distinguished as the only one with extensive use of polychrome. In addition, the Real Estate Trust Company was one of the first purpose-built, high-rise office buildings erected in downtown D.C. in the early 20th century and represents the first phase of the area's transformation from residential to commercial/business.

As such, the Real Estate Trust Company building meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) because it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of its building type and style, and because it is an expression of urban planning, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. The building also meets Criterion E (Artistry) as its buildings possess high artistic and aesthetic value that contributes significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District of Columbia. Finally, the building meets Criterion F (Creative Masters) because it has been identified as a notable work of an architect whose works are significant to the development of the District of Columbia. Furthermore, the building meets National Register Criterion C for the same reasons as above.

Despite the removal of certain architectural and ornamental elements on the building's exterior and the alteration of the first floor base, the Real Estate Trust building retains integrity of design, materials and workmanship. The Period of Significance for the building is 1913-1914, its beginning and end date of construction.