

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0211

UNITED STATES FEDERAL BUILDING, 641 Washington Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Begun 1892, completed 1899; architect W. J. Edbrooke.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 604, Lot 33.

On March 8, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the United States Federal Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 35). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. In a letter to the Commission, the Acting Regional Administrator of the Federal Government's General Services Administration questioned the proposal to designate the building.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Romanesque Revival warehouse building, now known as the Federal Building, was built as the "Appraisers' Warehouse" by the U. S. Government. It fills an entire city block^{and} is ten stories high. Built almost entirely of brick, its four sides are similarly constructed and make a very effective use of masonry arches.

The great arches at first floor level spring directly from stone blocks and embrace both first floor and basement windows. Above these great arches are paired, square-headed windows beneath a powerful horizontal stone belt-course which extends all around the building. Above this, the windows are impressively carried up for five stories and arched at their tops. A skillful diminution of scale is achieved at the top of the building by means of paired windows extending up two stories and again arched at their tops. The scale is further diminished at the topmost floor where a series of very small arched windows produces a continuous rhythm carried around the curved corners of this great building thus unifying the whole. These windows, as seen from a distance, simulate the effect of battlements such as were to be found in Medieval castles just below the top parapets. Despite all this Medievalism, the general effect is one of powerful unity and of a generally smooth-walled brick building.

The question has been raised by the Federal Government as to whether this building should be designated by New York City as a Landmark. The Commission is cognizant of the jurisdictional question. Nevertheless, it is very important for the Government of New York City to state officially its deep concern that this building be preserved. There should be no uncertainty about this in anyone's mind.

The Commission would be negligent if it failed to act in this situation. At some time in the future this building may be in jeopardy. Our designation will be especially helpful in alerting New York City's elected representatives in Washington of the importance of saving this building. At present the Commission's specialists can be of service in providing advice so that the architectural integrity of this building is maintained. Indeed a fine relationship already exists with many local representatives of the Federal Government.

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 Federal 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 Federal Building is one of the finest examples of the Romanesque Revival Style of architecture in New York, that it is an extremely simple yet powerful architectural composition and that it is an excellent example of arched masonry brick construction almost totally devoid of detail, relying on the rhythm and differentiation of its arches to achieve a quality of architectural distinction such as is rarely to be found.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 United States Federal Building, 641 Washington Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 604, Lot 33, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.