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Landmarks Preservation Commission
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DEPARTMENT OF MARINE AND AVIATION PIERS (formerly Municipal Ferry Piers to South Brooklyn), 11 South Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1909.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2, Lot 1, in part consisting of the area on which the described improvement is situated.

On December 27, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Department of Marine and Aviation Piers and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 37). Two witnesses including the Commissioner of Marine and Aviation Herbert B. Halberg spoke in favor of designation. The Commission continued the public hearing until January 31, 1967. (Item No. 25). At that time one speaker appeared to testify in favor of designation. In a letter to the Commission, the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association opposed designation. Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were no speakers in opposition to designation at either meeting.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Viewed from a ferry boat approaching the tip of Manhattan, the monumental arched openings of the Municipal Ferry Terminal at the mouth of the East River appear like three tunnels opening into the canyons of the city. These steel arches are an impressive sight to the passenger approaching the City by water. Over three hundred feet long, their bold arched form is seen in marked contrast to all the other rectangular shapes in the architectural back-drop behind them and represent Beaux-Art structural expressionism in style. Commissioner Halberg said at the public hearing, "It is probable that no building designed in similar style will ever again be erected in the City of New York."

Both land and waterfront facades have considerable architectural interest and each is distinctly different from the other. There are many decorative motifs expressed in the steel-work, and these forms and shapes have been used with originality and boldness to enhance the surfaces of both facades. Lattice work is set in panels, raised moldings are used abundantly, while rivets and rosettes intermingle with circular and square-shaped forms and the cross bracings are handsomely featured and framed. All of these and many other forms embellish the structural members of this terminal so reminiscent of the great French Exposition buildings of the turn of the Century.

The three richly decorated arches on the water side of the terminal are set between four colossal pilasters with superb scroll brackets for capitals. These pilasters virtually rise from the water's edge and extend upwards to the penthouse floor of the terminal. Above the arches and piercing the attic story under the cornice is a long row of double hung windows lighting the administrative offices of the Department of Marine and Aviation. A promenade deck is a feature of the penthouse floor.

On the land side, running the length of the building at upper deck level, is a high, open promenade supported by five low steel arches and six piers, resting on granite bases. Six paired, tapered columns with unusual capitals and scroll brackets supporting the cornice and roof above, have a distinctive appearance and represent a type of construction that has all but disappeared today. A handsome railing, using marine forms, decorates the balcony. The three story promenade curtain-wall is handsomely composed of tall tripartite windows framed, containing double doors that once opened from the upper deck waiting room. The swinging gates that protect the entrances to two of the ferry slips are of a superior quality of design. They are designed in the style of the period and are an important part of this architectural composition.

Commissioner Halberg pointed out that, "From the City's founding, the lower tip of Manhattan has been a focal point for ferry activity that has played a vital role in New York City's growth and development. Because Manhattan is an island, the ferries were, originally and throughout most of the City's history, the sole and inescapable link between Manhattan and the surrounding communities... At the peak of the ferry era seventeen separate lines plied between terminals at widely separated points in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Today, all have vanished, and with them have vanished, with one exception, all the old ferry terminal buildings once strung along the East River waterfront." If this Manhattan Ferry Terminal should be destroyed, nothing like this unique structure will remain in New York City.

Ferry service between Manhattan and 39th Street, Brooklyn, began in 1887, when the original Manhattan Terminal for this service was completed. The present Manhattan Ferry Terminal was constructed between the years 1907 and 1909 by the Department of Docks and Ferries to serve ferries plying between Manhattan and 39th Street in South Brooklyn. Service on the Manhattan - 39th Street run was maintained by the City until March 15, 1938. The Terminal has been in continuous operation since 1909, and at the present time the Coast Guard operates a ferry from it to Governors Island. Since 1959, offices of the Department of Marine and Aviation have been located on several floors of the renovated interior.

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 Department of Marine and Aviation Piers (Municipal Ferry Terminal) have 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 Municipal Ferry Terminal is the sole remaining ferry terminal on the East River, that its architecture is unique and blends with its impressive backdrop of skyscrapers in "distinct and welcome contrast" with nonhomogeneous new buildings nearby, and that "it stands as a reminder of the City that was, the water-based City of ferries and piers, on which the present greatness of New York was founded."

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 Department of Marine and Aviation Piers (Municipal Ferry Terminal), 11 South Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2, Lot 1 on which the described improvement is situated.