

BRONX POST OFFICE, 560 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx. Built 1935-37; architect Thomas Harlan Ellet.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2443, Lot 400.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bronx Post Office and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The item was heard again on February 25, 1975 (Item No. 1). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of four witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the two hearings. There were no speakers in opposition to designation; however, at the second hearing the Commission received several requests to delay designation pending negotiations for the expansion of the post office.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Bronx Post Office, built in 1935-37, was designed by the architect Thomas Harlan Ellett in a style which combined modified classical ornament with the elegant simplicity of modern architecture. A description in Architectural Forum for June 1938 states: "A distinct modern influence and the continuing tradition of 'government classic' are the two conflicting tendencies which have resulted in the first signs of vitality in American post office design, and the new Bronx Post Office is an excellent example of best recent work ... the building subtly suggests a Georgian precedent without the use of traditional detail ..."

Plans for a much needed Bronx Post Office were announced in 1934; the building was to be erected at the Grand Concourse site which the Federal Government had purchased twenty-five years earlier. Construction began in 1935 under the direction of the Office of the Supervising Architect of the United States Treasury Department, Louis A. Simon, and of the Supervising Engineer, Nealy A. Melick. The cornerstone was laid on June 13, 1936, with Postmaster General James A. Farley and New York City Postmaster Albert Goldman officiating. Farley made the occasion an opportunity to assail the critics of the New Deal. The same officials were present at the opening of the new building on May 15, 1937, when it was announced that the building would be known as the Bronx Central Annex and would serve as the Bronx headquarters of the New York Post Office.

The Post Office occupies an entire block. Its smooth gray brick walls rise above a granite terrace which varies in height along the side elevations to conform to the slope of the street. Broad, shallow steps lead up to the three entrances facing the Grand Concourse. The terrace is enclosed by a classically-inspired balustrade, flanked at the entrance steps by blocks decorated with highly stylized swags and rosettes and carrying flagpoles. The ornate foliate bronze flagpole bases have a rather baroque character.

The most prominent features of the building are the graceful window openings set within marble arches which contrast handsomely with the smooth gray brick walls. Radial brick arches, above impost block level, enframe the marble arches of the window openings. The three openings which contain the bronze entrances are set within deep reveals. The facades are crowned by a simple continuous stone bandcourse set with stylized rosettes and containing the inscription "Bronx - United States Post Office - New York."

Two sculptures, larger than life-size, affixed to the front facade add further interest to the building. The designs were chosen from over 400 models submitted in a national competition held in 1936. "The Letter," designed by Henry Kreis, portrays a mother and her child receiving a message from an absent member of the family. "Noah," by Charles Rudy, depicts the Patriarch, with a deer in one arm, straddling the Ark, and receiving the dove's message that the flood was subsiding. Also of considerable artistic and historical interest are thirteen murals in the main lobby depicting the occupations of American workers, painted by Ben Shahn and his wife, Bernarda Bryson, in August 1939.

The elegant simplicity of the building with its finely executed details make it one of the best examples of government architecture in this style. It is notable not only for its architecture but also for its sculpture and paintings. It met a long-felt need in The Bronx when built, and continues to serve that function today.

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 Post Office 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 Post Office is an exceptionally handsome building designed in a style current in the 1930s which combines modified classical details with the elegant simplicity of modern architecture, that it is also distinguished by fine sculpture, and that it has served a necessary and useful function in The Bronx for almost forty years.

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 Post Office, 560 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 2443, Lot 400, Borough of the Bronx as its Landmark Site.