

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

Proposed Water Board Building Historic District

Final Report

By a resolution dated October 31, 2001, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Water Board Building Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

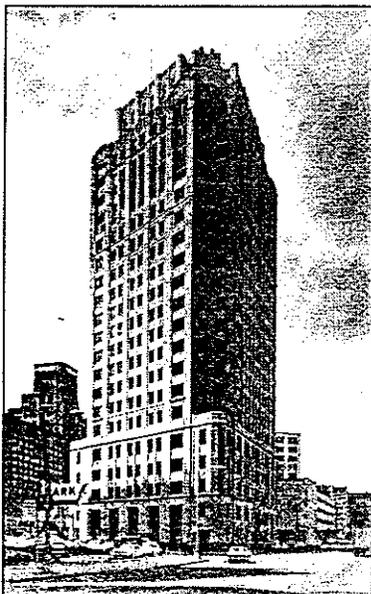
The proposed Water Board Building Historic District consists of the single building located on the triangular block bounded by Randolph, Bates, and Farmer in the Central Business District. It is located one block north of the Wayne County Building and Cadillac Square, and one block south of Monroe Avenue. Built as offices for city agencies, especially the Water Board, it continues to serve that function. The Water Board Building is the sole contributing resource in the proposed district; there are no nearby resources which would suggest that a multi-building district exists in this area.

BOUNDARIES:

The boundaries of the proposed historic district are as shown on the attached map, and are as follows: the centerlines of Randolph, Farmer, and Bates Streets. These boundaries include the property on which the single contributing building stands and a surrounding area of public right-of-way.

HISTORY:

When Detroit was founded in 1701, the Detroit River provided an unlimited supply of water to its residents. Early colonists used various methods, from buckets, to barrels, to public wells with pumps, to get their daily supply of water. In 1824, Detroit's first water supply system was a private wharf on the river, built to pump water to the village. By 1836, the City took over the responsibility of providing an adequate supply of water to over fifteen hundred citizens. A five-member Board of Water Commissioners was formed in 1853 to manage the department. Today, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department is administered by a seven-member board (four from Detroit and one each from Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties) and provides water service to 4.2 million people in one hundred and twenty-two communities as well as wastewater treatment services to three million people in seventy-eight communities.



In 1927 the Board of Water Commissioners petitioned Common Council for a new building for the Department of Water Supply. Common Council provided the present site, then occupied by the vacant former headquarters of the Police Department. The triangular site is a portion (likely less than half) of one of the triangular plots set aside for public use in the Woodward Plan (NR). Randolph Street is the eastern boundary of the Woodward Plan as carried out, and

truncates the intended larger triangular plot. In 1928 the old police station was demolished and the new structure, designed by well-known Detroit architect Louis Kamper was begun. On October 1, 1928, the Water Department officially opened the twenty-three-story skyscraper known as the Water Board Building. The total cost of constructing the building, including Louis Kamper's 5 percent commission was \$1,518,760. With the additional cost of \$250,000 for the land, the cost for the new office building totaled \$1,768,760,20.

The architect of the Water Board Building, German-born Louis Kamper (1861-1953), is well-known in Detroit for his elaborate building designs, ranging from the Hecker House at Woodward and Ferry to the Book-Cadillac Hotel. Born in Bavaria and trained in Germany, he worked at McKim, Mead and White before coming to Detroit. His earliest work in Detroit appears to have been the Detroit International Fair and Exposition Pavilion (1889, no longer extant). His most prominent works are the series of buildings designed for the Book family on Washington Boulevard, and now included in the eponymous National Register historic district. The nude female figures below the cornice of the Book Building, the elaborate decoration of the upper floors of the Book Tower, the interiors of the Book-Cadillac Hotel, and his designs for residential structures, especially interiors (cf. Austin Morey House, 1081 Iroquois, 1905) all remind us that he was born and raised in the Bavaria of Ludwig II. (Ferry, in *The Buildings of Detroit*, quotes Kamper: "I like it varm.") The Water Board Building, which reflects the trend to simplification of forms of the period, is unusual among Kamper's major commissions for its relative simplicity. It is one of the last major buildings designed by the architect; who was in his later sixties when it was designed and built, not to mention that commissions were scarce during the Great Depression.

Description:

The Water Board Building is a twenty-three-story steel frame and concrete skyscraper designed in a distinguished Art Deco style influenced by its architect's earlier preference for the more Baroque manner of Beaux Arts Classicism. Arranged with a five-story base, a fifteen-story shaft, and a three-story penthouse, the slender triangular tower with setbacks and clipped corners is the only structure on its small triangular block. Part of Detroit's last surge of tall-building construction before the Great Depression, it provides an interesting contrast to the trio of virtually contemporary Smith, Hinchman, & Grylls-designed tall buildings: The Guardian Building, the Buhl Building, and the last segment of the Penobscot Building. None of those are in the simplified-classical variant of the Art Deco, and the Water Board Building may be Detroit's premier example of a commercial building in that style.

The building is set in a busy downtown commercial district bounded by Randolph Street on the east (primary facade), Bates Street on the northwest, and Farmer Street on the southwest. In plan it is not quite an equilateral triangle; the building's dimensions are 147 feet on Randolph Street, 152.6 feet on Bates Street, and 140.6 feet on Farmer Street. The basement of the structure extends beyond the building approximately three feet on Farmer and Bates Streets, while the extension on the Randolph Street side of the basement beyond the building line is approximately thirty feet. A parking garage is located in the basement. An entry and elevator lobby, customer service area, and stairwells occupy the majority of the ground floor. All upper stories to the twentieth floor are divided into offices except for the fifth floor, which contains a significant public space, the Water Board's meeting room. Service and storage areas occupy the three-story penthouse. After more than seventy-five years of continuous use, the property is in excellent condition and has had few exterior alterations since its construction. A fairly substantial rehabilitation program was undertaken in the early 1980's, and most

alterations date from that work program, although window replacement in the upper floors dates to 1977.

All elevations are clad in a polished pink and grey granite watertable at the base, and Bedford Limestone up to the twentieth floor. Parapet walls crown the twentieth-story as well as the three-story penthouse of painted terra cotta. The building's five-story base fills the entire triangular lot. Above, the three facades of the tower all end at right-angle corners, in order to avoid hard-to-use sharply angled corners within. This creates a recess at each corner. Although at first glance the facades are all the same, in fact the three facades all differ, as do the treatments of the three corners.

The primary facade is that on Randolph, characterized by the main entrance centered on the ground floor. The facade is defined by outer bays with tall pilasters at either side and culminating in a simplified segmentally arched pediment, and containing paired windows at each floor. These outer bays run down to ground level, visually isolating the corner bays of the base, which contain a single window at first and second floor levels. The five inner bays of facade alternate paired and single windows, a device made possible by manipulating the width of the limestone curtain wall between window openings; in this way, the spacing of the recessed main entrance and its flanking single windows is carried up into the upper stories. String courses or secondary cornices interrupt the vertical flow above the second, fifth, and fifteenth and nineteenth floors, while the double windows in the outer bays on the sixth floor have horizontal pediments. On the seventeenth through the nineteenth floors, windows are vertically separated with decorative metal spandrels; on the twentieth floor, these are used only in the outer bays, to continue a vertical emphasis within the pilasters that define those bays. Above the twentieth floor the shaft of the tower culminates with the rounded pediments of the outer bays, with an arcaded railing between them. Some of the ornament on the pilaster of the outer bays at the sixteenth floor level and again at the nineteenth and twentieth floors, is reminiscent of classical/prairie ornament common twenty years earlier.

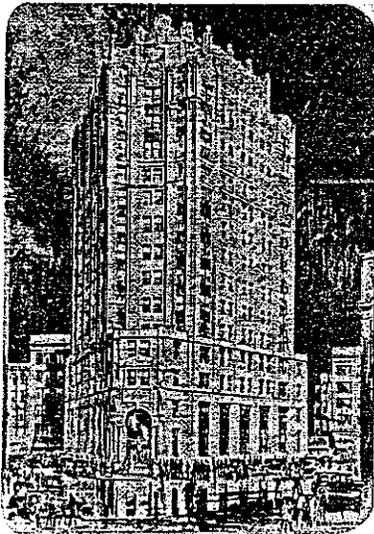
At ground level on that facade a centered main entrance recess two stories tall is flanked by single windows on two stories. The entrance is surrounded by classical pilasters and entablature in the same granite as the base; inscribed in the dark-green marble frieze of the entablature are the words "Water Board Building." The entrance recess has pilasters in the corners, and contains the original bronze frame of a pair of revolving doors, which have now been replaced by hinged doors to provide handicapped access. Above the exterior doors is a large metal framed Chicago-style transom window with a metal spandrel panel painted dark brown, which matches those used in the two-story window openings of the first and second floors generally. These spandrel panels are trimmed with tiny swags along the protruding top edge. Hanging beneath the swags is an alternating row of rosette topped, scalloped edge banners and arrows pointing downward. Above the inner entry doors is a large plate glass transom. The entry recess is flanked by small, single windows on both the first and second stories.

The window arrangement of the first two floors of the Randolph Street elevation is asymmetrical. North of the entrance are two-two-story openings, with Chicago-style triple windows on each floor separated by the typical spandrel. To the south, a recess in the stonework matches the two-story openings to the north, but is filled with a single window flanked with stone on the first floor, and the three-section Chicago-style window on the second floor above. The third through fifth floors have double window openings in the pilaster-defined bays next to the corner bays. In the central bays, fenestration follows the pattern above; the windows are separated vertically by plain stone spandrels, creating a three-story-tall recess divided, where there are two windows to a floor, by a narrow pilaster three stories tall.

The Bates and Farmer facades differ from each other only in first floor details, and are much like the Randolph facade. In general they differ from the Randolph facade only in that the central bays on each floor all contain double windows; these facades do not repeat the more complex fenestration which reflects the entrance below on the Randolph facade. The first and second floors of the Bates facade contain five of the typical double-height window openings with spandrels, the westernmost of which contains an entrance door on the ground floor. The eastern outer bay has a garage door leading to the basement on the first floor, with a single window above; the western has single windows on each floor. The Farmer facade is generally the same as the Bates, but has an entrance door in the center bay, and vertical pairs of windows in the outer bays.

The treatment of the three corners differs. At the base, the southeast corner is an acute angle blunted by a pair of pilasters set at a shallow angle to each other. On the northeast, the corner is chamfered, and a single window is centered in the narrow wall. On the west, the corner is more blunted, and contains paired windows separated by the typical spandrels.

The main facades of the shaft of the building all terminate at right-angle corners, creating recessed corners; this is, no doubt, to avoid useless acutely-angled spaces in the office floors. On the southeast the corner recess is formed by two single narrow bays with a single window in each, with a pilaster set parallel to the Farmer facade. On the northeast, the same narrow bays with single



Detroit Legal News, August 24, 1927

windows are present, but set further apart, and connected by two pilasters set at shallow angles to each other. The western corner recess is the largest; it also uses the narrow single bays at right angles to the adjoining main facade, but these are separated by a wider wall containing a paired window at each floor, and culminating in a colossal cartouche at the parapet.

This arrangement of the western corner may be a survival from an earlier design for the building, which shows the main entrance placed diagonally on what seems to be this corner of the building.

All of the windows in the shaft of the building were replaced in 1977 with single panes somewhat shorter than the opening, in frames of bronze-color aluminum with flat filler panels in the same material above. The windows of the base were replaced later, also with bronze-colored aluminum frames, but set within the original openings and spandrels so as to change the fenestration very little.

The three-story penthouse, now painted white with gold-brown trim, is set back from the parapet of the shaft, and creates a decorative culmination for the building as a whole. Lower two floors of the penthouse are alike; the twenty-third floor is set back again, with its blunted corners expressed as two-story central facades in the corner recesses. The twenty-first and twenty-second floors have main facades of three bays each, with strongly expressed pilasters emphasizing verticality. Secondary pilasters centered in each bay separate single windows on each floor, and the twenty-second floor is topped by an arcaded parapet between the pilasters dividing the bays. The twenty-third floor is generally not seen, except from a great distance; but the corner walls form a continuous surface with those of the floors below in the corner recesses, creating verticality at the top of the building. The top story is also surmounted by an arcaded decorative parapet. The corner recesses of the penthouse feature niches with shell-shape half-domes and an array of classically-inspired ornament such as the cartouches centered at the top center of each recess.

Major interior spaces include the lobby and banking room on the ground floor, and the Water Board meeting room on the fifth floor.

The triangular lobby is small, now somewhat crowded with such later additions as a security desk. The eastern wall contains the centered Randolph entrance, while the other two walls contain three elevator doors each. The lobby is walled in cream-colored marble surmounted by a gilded cornice. The Art-Deco style brass elevator doors are framed in green marble, and contain symbols of the City of Detroit. The elevator cars are original, paneled in cherry with high-style Art Deco decoration in silver metal.

In the west angle is the entrance to the two-story-tall banking room, lined with buff marble, whose generally triangular space is redefined by colossal cream marble Tuscan columns carrying an oval murrilled ceiling whose center panel features Neptune, God of the Sea (and, therefore water). This room is much altered in its details, the original teller's cages, light fixtures, and other equipment having been replaced. Nonetheless, it retains its intended monumental quality.

The fifth floor Board Room occupies the same space in the western corner of the building; its floor plan much the shape of a mushroom; unlike the banking room, it remains essentially unaltered. It is entered from the elevator lobby through walnut double doors flanked by matching fluted pilasters supporting a full entablature. The frieze of the entablature has the words "Board Room" printed across it in large gold lettering. The room within is paneled in walnut from floor to ceiling. All furnishings and fixtures in the Board Room are original to the building. Two massive, fluted, octagonal pillars of on dark-green marble bases support the huge paneled beams that intersect one another and define the board's table near the corner of the building. Four rows of original mahogany chairs and tables flank an aisle leading to a balustrade. A more recent arrangement just inside the balustrade includes a podium flanked by chairs at a long narrow table that sits between the two columns. The long mahogany board table, surrounded by chairs, is positioned lengthwise in front of the podium.

To the east, ceiling the mural depicts the official seal of the City of Detroit in grey tones set in a red and gold octagon. The mural over the conference table is centered on an American Eagle perched on a stone; it is set in a blue and gold bordered medallion.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets the first and third criteria contained in section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

Recommendation: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance designating the proposed Water Board Building Historic District with the design treatment level of "Rehabilitation." It is also recommended that the City Council designate significant interiors within the building. A draft ordinance of designation is attached, and includes the recommended designation of selected significant interiors.