

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

204 City-County Building
Detroit, Michigan 48226

(313) 224-3487

Proposed David Whitney Building Historic District

Final Report

By a resolution dated July 21, 1999, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed David Whitney Building Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The David Whitney Building Historic District consists of one building fronting on Park Avenue with major elevations on Woodward Avenue and Washington Boulevard. It is located towards the northern end of Detroit's central business district, in an area known as the "theater district," on the south side of the west half of Grand Circus Park.

Boundaries: The boundaries of the proposed district are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north; the centerline of Park Avenue;

On the east: the centerline of Woodward Avenue;

On the southeast, the south line, extended easterly and westerly, of Lot 23 of the Plat of Section 8, Governor's & Judge's Plan of Section 8, as recorded in Liber 34 of Deeds, page 543, Wayne County Records.

On the southwest, the south line, extended easterly and westerly, of Lot 20 of the Plat of Section 8, Governor's & Judge's Plan of Section 8, as recorded in Liber 34 of Deeds, page 543, Wayne County Records.

On the west, a line fifty feet (50') west of and parallel to the easterly line of the right-of-way of Washington Boulevard, extended northerly to its intersection with the centerline of Park Avenue.

HISTORY: The David Whitney Building is significant as one of the key buildings forming the wall defining Grand Circus Park. It is also one of only three surviving buildings in Detroit credited to the Chicago architectural firm of Daniel H. Burnham and Company, and one of only two buildings in Detroit which contain dramatic skylight-covered interior atrium lobbies. It is a contributing building to the Grand Circus Park Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

The Park

Grand Circus Park, consisting of 4.6 acres in two quarter circles, was created by Judge Woodward's plan for the laying out of streets and public spaces in 1806 after a great fire swept the small frontier town of Detroit. At the time of its creation, a similar ground was to be designated on the north side of Adams Avenue to make a complete circle, but this was never executed. The park was called "Grand Circus" after the name the ancient Romans gave to circular areas where they held games and public spectacles. Other parks and public squares were intended, according to the Woodward Plan, but only Grand Circus Park, Campus Martius, Clinton Park and Capitol Park were initially set aside.

Up to about the year 1870, the area above, or north, of the Campus Martius was designated for residential purposes and land below was for mercantile purposes. Although Grand Circus Park was identified as park land on early maps, its east side was nothing more than a low and swampy marsh land where the sound of bull frogs croaking was not uncommon, and the west side was a pond. The change from bog and goose pasture to park land began after 1840 when H.H. Le Roy, chief engineer of the Fire Department and later city assessor, built his frame Italianate residence on the site of the present David Whiney Building. Through his gradual efforts and petitions to City Council to improve the park, the grounds of Grand Circus Park were filled in and raised from one to four feet. A walkway two planks wide was reportedly laid down around 1841.

Other lots were sold at auction by the City of Detroit in 1843 and over succeeding decades more residences, including that of John Bagley, were built, as was the Church of Our Father. A wood market occupied the park about 1850, but because of protests was displaced by 1853. In that year gas lamps were installed in the park and the City Council authorized the expenditure of \$1,500 to set out trees and build fences surrounding the park. In 1855 water pipes were put in to ready the park for fountains, its first installed in the center of the west half in 1860. In that same summer, walking paths were laid. A fountain was placed in the east half of the park in 1874, but it was moved to another park two years later and replaced with another. The Alger Memorial Fountain, dedicated in 1921, replaced an early fountain on the east side of the park, and the Edison Fountain, dedicated in 1929, remains in its original location on the west side of the park.

Locating various monuments in the park was discussed early in the park's history; there was talk about putting the statue of Washington on one side of Woodward and Lafayette on the other. Although that was not carried out, the intent of two monuments facing each other on opposite sides of Woodward evokes the original placements of Pingree and Maybury many years later (the Pingree Monument was installed in 1904; the Maybury Monument was installed in 1912).

Grand Circus Park was kept closed until May, 1866, when it was opened to the public on Sundays only. Central Methodist Church opened on the southwest corner of Woodward Avenue and Adams in 1867, and its parishioners promenaded in the park after Sunday services. As late as 1873, a high board fence with gates that were padlocked kept the cattle and people from damaging the trees. In 1896, the Detroit Public Lighting Commission installed modern electric lights in Grand Circus Park; the light poles were of the ornamental pole (O.P.) type throughout

the park, with the more decorative fluted iron pole with double globes later placed on Woodward (the same type as today). The system of paths and location of monument was not substantially changed until 1956, when the park was dug up for the construction of the underground garage.

The park's surroundings began to take on their modern appearance when the Tuller Hotel was built in 1905 (substantial additions were added in 1914 and 1923; the building was subsequently demolished in 1990), followed by the construction of the David Whitney Building and the Statler Hotel (George B. Post, architect), both opening in early 1915. The Eaton Tower, now the Broderick Tower, on Park east of Woodward Avenue, was constructed in 1926-28 (Louis and Paul Kamper, architects). Buildings also sprung up on the north side of the Park, on Adams; they include the Kales Building (Albert Kahn Associates, 1914), Fyfe Building (Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, 1919), the Adams Theatre (C. Howard Crane, 1917), and the Women's Exchange (Smith Hinchman & Grylls, 1916). The erection of substantial, contiguous buildings created a wall of enclosure circumscribing Grand Circus Park.

The character of Grand Circus Park has changed tremendously with the growth of the City of Detroit in the last one hundred fifty years, yet the original intentions of its early planners - that of a place of meetings for "religious, moral, literary or political societies..." (John R. Williams) was left intact. Efforts by the city to build a library or a new city-county building in 1926 were shot down by a public who wanted the park to remain open space for thoughtful repose and exchange of ideas.

Drastic changes to the park occurred in the mid-late 1950's when it was completely dug up for the underground parking garage. Permanent structures related to the parking functions such as ventilating structures and enclosed entrances certainly changed the physical appearance from one that was Victorian to one of the then popular International style. The redesign of the park with a few paths removed and modern paving, the relocation of the Maybury Monument, and the new landscape design left little trace of the nineteenth century romantic landscape with City Beautiful symmetry that had existed before. Recent redevelopment of Grand Circus Park restored the important original relationship between the two statues with a new landscape design.

The Building

The David Whitney Building was named in honor of David Whitney, Jr. (1830-1900), a man significant in the history of Detroit's commercial and industrial development. He was a lumber baron, shipping magnate, landholder, and one of Detroit's wealthiest men at the turn of the century. A native of Massachusetts, he began his career in the lumber business in that state, and came to Michigan in 1857 to take advantage of the ample opportunity for profit in Michigan's lumber business. He preceded to experience phenomenal success in lumbering in Michigan, Wisconsin and Oregon, later investing heavily in Great Lakes shipping vessels. His success in shipping was noted in an 1895 article in the *Detroit Sunday News Tribune* which quoted other "vessel men" as saying that "he (Whitney) is the best prophet of vessel rates on the Lakes." His ownership of a good amount of Detroit's choicest business properties was featured in an 1895 newspaper article on "Detroit's Landowners" which indicated that Whitney's holdings "equaled

that of any other five men in Detroit." In the 1890's his real estate holdings in Detroit and Wayne County alone were estimated at \$2,000,000, and his total wealth was estimated at between \$7 and \$10 million. His investments in numerous Detroit industrial, banking and insurance companies and his extensive lending of money made him an extremely important figure in the commercial and industrial development of Detroit before the turn of the century. The other architectural gem associated with David Whitney, Jr. in Detroit is his exquisite 21,000 square foot home at 4421 Woodward Avenue, now the Whitney Restaurant.



David Whitney Building, c. 1915
Detroit Publishing Co.

David Whitney, Jr. purchased the H.H. LeRoy property on the southwest corner of Woodward Avenue and Park Street in 1885. At that time, there was not a single commercial building in the entire block between Clifford and Park; there were only two or three homesteads, including the home of Mr. LeRoy. Mr. Whitney, envisioning the northward expansion of the Woodward Avenue business district, erected the Grand Circus Building, a five story structure containing five stores, in 1887. David Whitney Jr. passed away in 1900.

The Grand Circus Building was demolished while still in excellent condition in early 1914 for the construction of the David Whitney Building by the Whitney Realty Co., Ltd. led by David Charles Whitney, Detroit banker, real estate developer and head of the second generation of the Whitney family in Detroit. Building permit #317 was issued to the Whitney Realty Company on February 5, 1914 for the construction of an eighteen story building to cost \$1,000,000. The successor firm to D. H. Burnham & Company at the time was Graham, Burnham & Company. Lanquist & Illsley Company of Chicago was the general contractor; it awarded many of the sub-contracts to Detroit firms.

Also in 1914, the Hotel Tuller added a fourteen-story addition on the site previously occupied by the Church of Our Father at Park and Bagley. According to an article in the *Detroit Free Press* (5/27/56), that set off a builders' race on the next two corners. The David Whitney Building opened in January, 1915; the Hotel Statler registered its first guests a month later. Of those three mentioned, the Whitney Building is the only one that has remained viable to this day. The Tuller was demolished in 1990 and the Hotel Statler has been closed for over twenty years; its continued presence as a defining building of the park is in question.

The David Whitney Building on Grand Circus Park was built with an interior court, permitting an outside exposure for all offices, which were primarily occupied by doctors and dentists. Billed as an "Exclusive Shopping Center," the first four floors were designed exclusively for high-class shops, while the stories above were rented for offices. The ground-floor shops had splendid street frontage as well as fronting on the inner corridors of the rotunda. The shops included Watkins Cigar Stores Company; G.M. Schettler Drugs; Rogers Shoe Company;

Huyler's confectionery; Martin Maier and Company, trunks; Capper & Capper, men's furnishings; F. Rolshoven & Co., jewelers; Berlitz School of Language; and milliners, hairdressers, ladies clothes shops, tailors, and corset shops. A promotional booklet entitled "When Royalty Shops" spoke to the quality of the shopping experience in the Whitney Building: "The shops of the David Whitney Building have attained reputations as enviable as New York's smart shops ... prices are really moderate."

Levels above the fourth floor were primarily rented as the offices of physicians and dentists. Having doctors as tenants reportedly had a downside; despondent tenants receiving bad prognoses occasionally hurled themselves down the central light well. In the 1950s, Detroit's population began the migration to the suburbs and eventually their doctors followed.

The Whitney Building underwent drastic modification to its exterior in 1959. Harley, Ellington & Day, Inc., the Detroit architectural and engineering firm, were responsible for the toned down, spare look of the exterior as seen today. The removal of the cornice, parapet and terra cotta detail resulted in an appearance that was more modern but less elegant. Bryant & Detwiler & Co. was the general contractor.



Daniel Hudson Burnham
Chicago Landmarks

The Whitney Building was still 95% occupied with 300 physicians and dentists in 175 suites when the Whitney family sold the building in 1965. It had two successive owners prior to 1985, when Joseph and Debbie Grella purchased the building and the Grand Circus Park people mover station was constructed. The occupancy rate continued to slide with the economic recession of the 1980s. Now to be reused as a hotel (*Detroit News*, May 14, 1999) by new owners, the David Whitney Building will continue to be a bright light on Grand Circus Park.

The Architect

Daniel H. Burnham (1846-1912), a Chicago architect, was, among other things, acknowledged to be the most prestigious designer of skyscrapers by the year 1900. The emergence of the skyscraper as a uniquely American building type was influenced by commercial development in Chicago. The architectural firm of Burnham and Root was one of a handful of firms in Chicago in the 1880s that were decisive in the development of the modern skyscraper. The Rookery Building (1885-86), Reliance Building (1890/1894-95), and the Monadnock Building (1884-85/1889-92), are among its better known commissions.

Burnham was chief consulting architect for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, officially named the Columbian Exposition but dubbed "the White City" due to its classical layout and design. The White City on the shores of Lake Michigan reflected Burnham's guidance of the best American talent in landscape design, architecture and the arts. The type of architectural training offered at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, with its emphasis on a comprehensive and analytical approach to an architectural solution, produced monumental, symmetrical buildings of Beaux-

Arts eclecticism, usually in the classical or Renaissance idioms. That system was adapted by Burnham for a firm that developed into one of the largest architectural offices of the day, D.H. Burnham & Company. William H. Jordy described this "large-scaled 'architectural factory'" as

...an American development at the turn of the century. Daniel Burnham established the prototypical organization based on his experience supervising barracks of draftsman for the design of the Columbian Exposition, and integrating their work with that of a corps of engineering and planning specialists. (Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects*, p. 345).

The new aesthetic that emerged after the fair - that of the idea of the skyscraper as a "palace of commerce," resulted in steel and reinforced concrete frames of tall buildings disguised in traditional, namely classical, architectural dress. This was contrary to the philosophy of the Chicago School of architecture espoused by Louis Sullivan and reflected in some of the designs of Burnham & Root. Consequently, a rich eclecticism in architectural styles persisted alongside of the new technological advances that made the skyscraper possible in the late 19th century into the twentieth century.

Although it was built five years after his death, John W. Root's influence was seen in Detroit in the Romanesque language of the Majestic Building, designed by D.H. Burnham & Co. in 1896 (demolished c. 1962). This magnificent Romanesque Revival style building at the corner of Woodward and Michigan Avenues was executed in collaboration with Detroit architect Mason & Rice. The Ford Building, an eighteen-story building at Griswold and Congress streets built in 1909, and the Dime Building, a twenty-three story U-shaped building with a central light court built in 1910 on the northwest corner of Griswold and Fort Streets, were subsequent commissions of D.H. Burnham & Co. in Detroit that are still extant. Their designs followed the Renaissance classicism that the Columbian Exposition popularized.

In addition to the practice of architecture, Burnham greatly influenced the development of the modern city as the chief practitioner and promoter of the City Beautiful movement, which grew out of the precedent set by the White City. Burnham was a major contributor to the Senate Park Commission's plan for Washington, D.C. presented in 1902. Undertaken for the civic improvement of the capitol city, the plan resulted in the repositioning of the train station (Union Station) as the gateway to the city and the creation of the Mall, in addition to extending L'Enfant's plan. Edward H. Bennett, formerly working in the studio of architect George B. Post in New York City, became Burnham's assistant and collaborator in 1903, and is credited along with Burnham for the Plan for San Francisco (1906, also with Willis Polk) and the Chicago plan (1909).

Burnham issued his first study of Chicago in 1896, and the completed plan in 1909. His comprehensive plan for Chicago created a new monumental civic center, a regional transportation network, and a plan for the reclamation of the lakefront. Burnham and Bennett were invited to tour Detroit by the newly appointed City Plan Commission under Mayor Philip

Breitmeyer in 1910. Burnham passed away in 1912; Bennett continued as a designer of cities in the City Beautiful vein under his own moniker. He was commissioned to make a preliminary plan of Detroit, completed in 1915, which resulted in the actualization of the Cultural Center, Outer Drive, and Rouge Park, although other far-reaching aspects of Bennett's plan did not materialize. The idea of locating a civic center on Grand Circus Park emerged from Bennett's Plan, but the population was insistent on keeping the park in passive recreational usage.

Burnham's influence on city planning had wide-ranging influence and appeal, both within existing urban areas and developing cities worldwide. His well-known dictum, "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men's blood." echos through urban design studios today.

After Burnham's death in 1912, the firm's name became Graham, Burnham & Company. Ernest R. Graham was Daniel Burnham's assistant as far back as the Columbian Exposition in 1893, and remained with him in the firm of D.H. Burnham & Company. The David Whitney Building, although credited in a promotional booklet published before the building was completed to D.H. Burnham & Company, was likely a product of the successor firm of Graham, Burnham & Company, unless the design itself predates the name change. The firm continued later as Graham, Anderson, Probst & White.

Architectural Description:

The David Whitney Building is an eighteen-story office building located on Park Avenue between Washington Boulevard and Woodward Avenue. Roughly pentagonal in plan, it conforms to the shape of its site, which is a result of its location at the major radius center of Judge Woodward's 1807 Detroit street plan - Grand Circus Park. Because of this, it has three major elevations, each with an individual entrance. Consequently, the building in its presence radiates from the park, as does the street plan. Its main (north) facade is physically attached to the steel and glass Grand Circus Park People Mover Station platform at mezzanine level. The broad concrete and brick sidewalk in front is obstructed by the large concrete pillars supporting the track. The west and east elevations of the building are at the wide right-of-ways of Washington Boulevard and Woodward Avenue, respectively, paved in the late 1970s in brick. Its southwest end is separated from the Washington Arcade, now the Himelhoch Building, south of it on Washington Boulevard by an alley; the east elevation is adjacent to the Washington Arcade on Woodward Avenue.

The David Whitney Building is constructed of steel resting on caisson foundations extending down to bedrock. Originally designed to reflect a decorative base, a tall shaft and a decorated top, the exterior of the building was significantly altered in 1959 to create a more modern appearance. Its first story was originally sheathed in light stone but has been resurfaced with dark granite panels. Above the first floor the exterior is sheathed in white glazed brick. Terra cotta ornamentation expressing the Italian Renaissance style once graced the fifth floor, the fifteen through eighteenth floors, and the cornice line; it was all removed in 1959. Above the original cornice on the Park (north) elevation of the building, at the parapet, was decorative

cresting, above which rose a highly ornamental rectangular name plate bearing the name of the building, "David Whitney Building," and above it a decorative cartouche. Photographs show a flag flying from a pole projecting from center of parapet. Presently, there is a neon sign bearing the name of the building, installed when the other changes were made; the tall flag pole is still present, although minus the flag. Also rising above the top of the building is screening for HVAC units.

The Park (north) facade is five bays wide; the entrance, composed of a revolving door and a single door to its right, is located in the center bay. Two evenly spaced, large bronze framed storefront windows flank each side of the entrance. The side elevations of the building are seven bays wide, their entrances located towards their southern ends.

Fenestration is similar on the three prominent elevations of the David Whitney Building, and is set deeply within the surface of the wall. Floors two through four still contain their original decorative apron panels and window surrounds, although granite strips were added around each of the three-story window bays. Their Chicago-style arrangements - a single opening containing a central window flanked on each side by a narrower window - are divided by pilasters rising up through the parapet. Within each opening, the center fixed pane window unit is framed with a Greek fret pattern on the faces of its surround, dividing it from the outer, double-hung sash, narrower windows. Ornamental apron panels divide floors two through four horizontally, the panels framed by a running Greek fret; these panels have a recessed panel with surrounded by an egg-and-dart pattern within.

Floors six through fourteen are in their original condition. Each bay is divided in two by a brick pilaster rising up through the parapet, and each half of the divided bay contains one double-hung sash window, beneath which is a recessed brick decorative apron. Originally on the fifteenth floor, separating each pair of windows, was a cartouche. Floors sixteen through eighteen, the upper floors, have been altered to remove any semblance of the original groupings of windows. Instead, narrow pilasters extend from the floors below through the parapet.

Both the interior and exterior of the David Whitney Building were designed to maximize the beneficial effects of natural light. Originally sheathed in light stone, white glazed brick, and white terra cotta, the exterior of the building was a preface to the white enameled brick and glazed terra cotta surfaces reflecting natural light within.

Entrances from Park Avenue, Washington Boulevard and Woodward Avenue lead to a central atrium lobby or rotunda which rises seventy-one feet, or four stories, above the entrance level to a glass skylight. The atrium lobby is surrounded by arcaded corridors leading to shops on the sides and elevators in the rear which line the perimeter of the building. The atrium lobby is faced with white glazed terra cotta. There is a balustrade at the second level of the arcade and pilasters rising from the second level through the third level. The pilasters are capped with an entablature which is surmounted by semi-circular arched openings at the fourth level. Ornate terra cotta medallions decorate the spandrel area; each arch contains a key console. The third level contains

dark-colored terra cotta spandrel panels visually supported on decorative consoles. The south wall of the atrium contains the seven elevators, each with ornate brass doors and decorative terra cotta work surrounding the doors at each floor level. The interior of the lobby has not been altered, except for some alterations to individual storefronts.

The upper fourteen stories contain offices surrounding the open light court above the atrium skylight. This center light court of over 3,000 square feet in area is open to the sky at the top, allowing the offices facing the court to be almost as well-lighted and ventilated as those facing the street. Italian marble was used to line the corridor floors and walls throughout; corridor doors and frames were mahogany. Within the individual suites were mahogany or oak woodwork and maple floors. The interior of the office area has not been altered except for changes in the offices themselves.

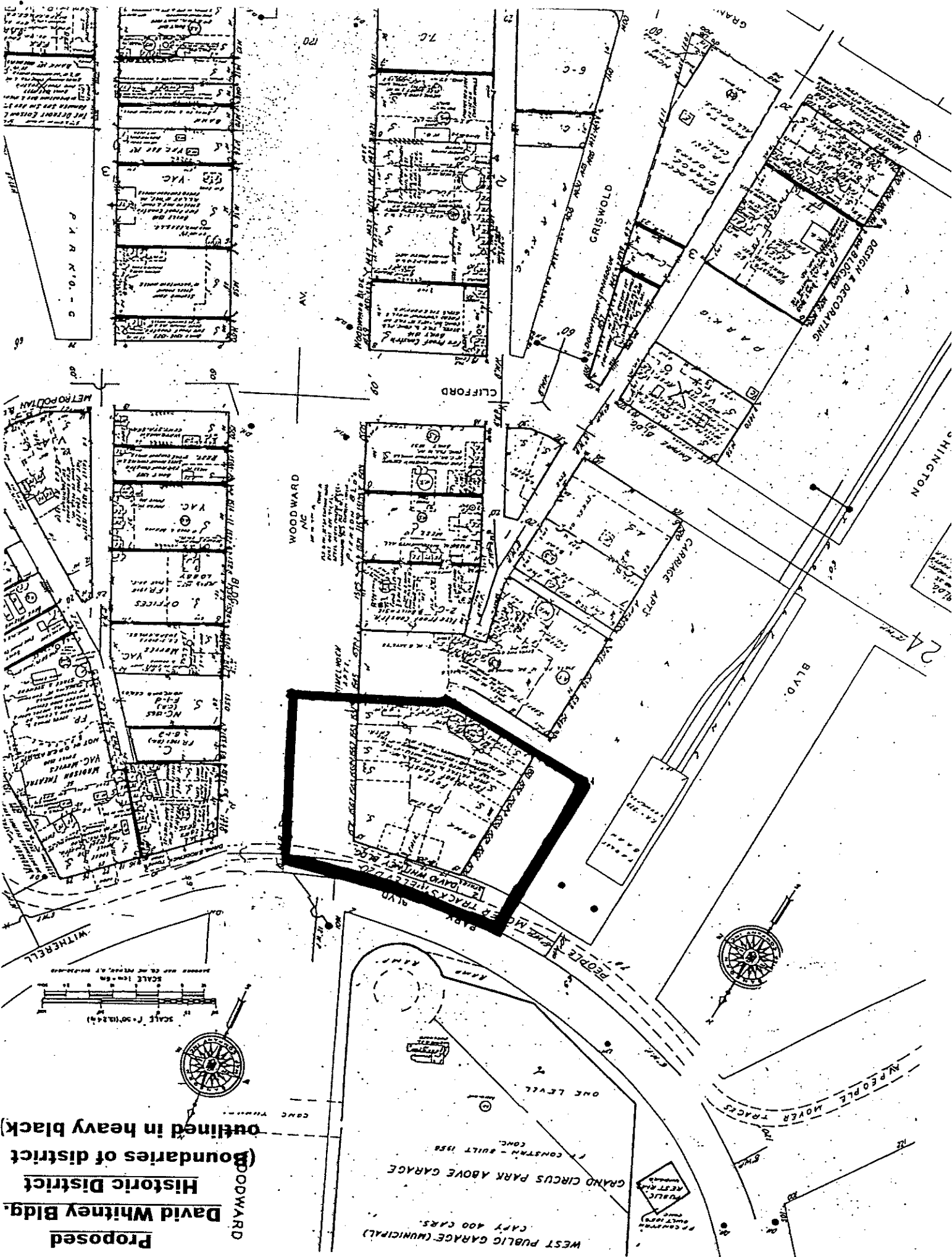
Criteria: The proposed historic district would appear to meet the first, third and fourth of the criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state 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; (4) Notable works of a master designer or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Gordon P. Bugbee, Beulah Croxford, De Witt Dykes, Lucile Cruz Gajec, Marie M. Gardner, Calvin Jackson, and Florence (Peggy) LaRose. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district, with the design treatment level of "rehabilitation." A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

Proposed
David Whitney Bldg.
Historic District
(Boundaries of district
outlined in heavy black)



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