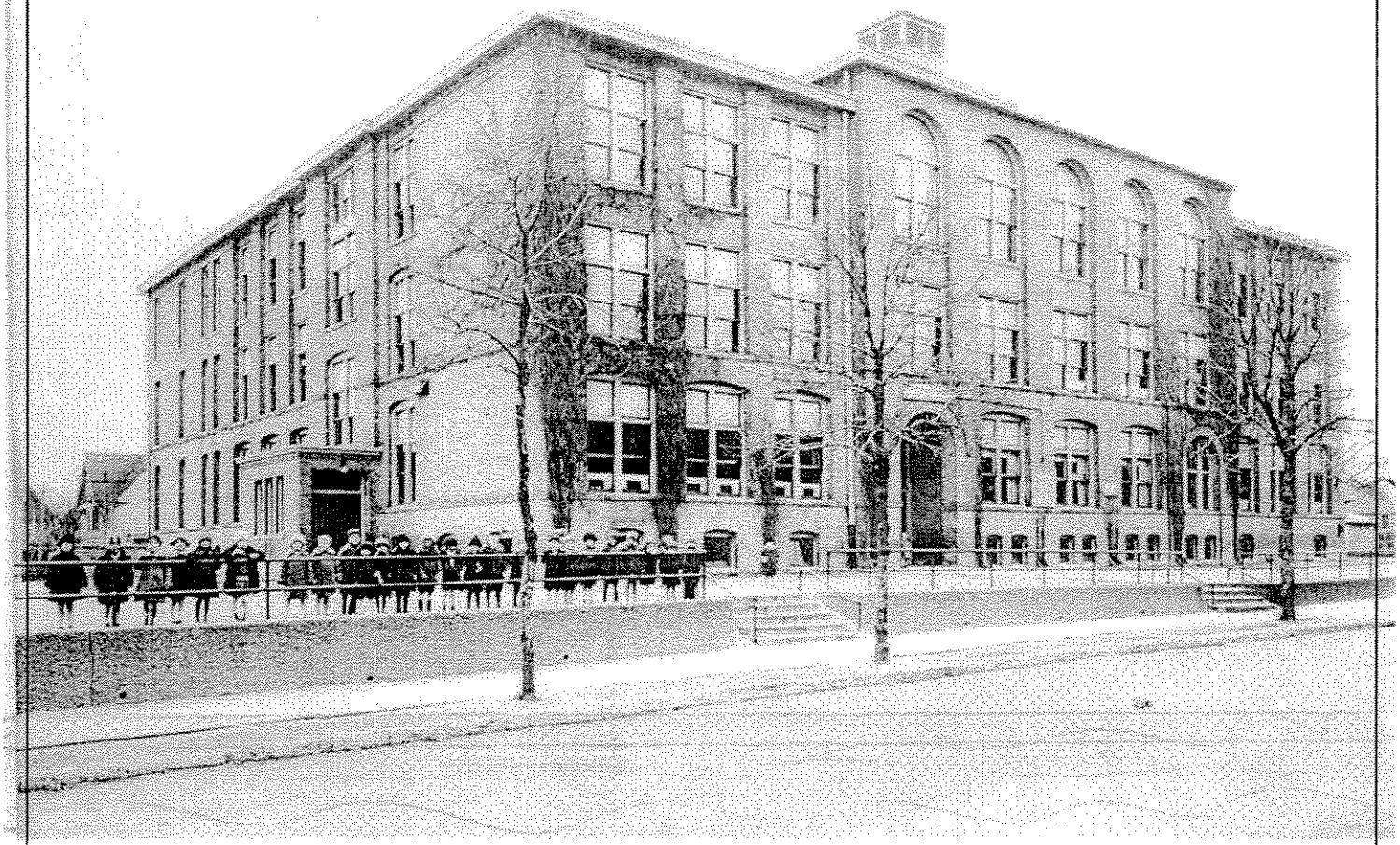
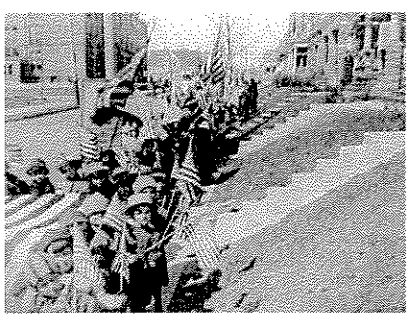
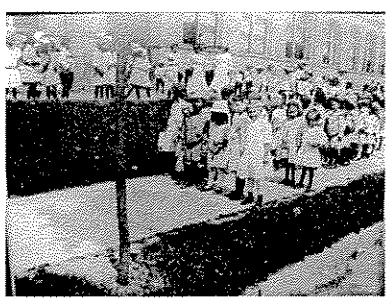
Survey of Thirty-Seventh Street School
Milwaukee Public School Building Inventory



Professor Braezeau
American Architecture 459

Paul Demcak
Jorge Ruiz





MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDING INVENTORY
HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLANNING UNIT
DEPARTMENT OF CITY DEVELOPMENT
CITY OF MILWAUKEE

BUILDING HISTORY

1.BUILDING ADDRESS:

A. Present: 1715 N 37th St.

B. Historic: none (37th and Galena, Wrights Street Guide Supplement of 1930)

2. NAME OF BUILDING:

A. Present: Thirty-Seventh Street School

B. Historic: Nineteenth District School, Number 2

Sources: *Where We Go to School*, 68th Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools, June 1927

3. LEGAL PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:

Cold Spring Heights In NW 114 & SW ¼ SEC 24-7-21 Block 4 Lots 11 to 13 Include & Lots 19, 20, 21

4. DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:

1903

Sources: Original Plans at Maintenance Facility, 1124 N 11th St.

5. ARCHITECT:

George Birnbach

Sources:

- Original Plans (1903) and Specifications (August 19, 1902) both at Maintenance Facility, 1124 N 11th St.

6. BUILDER, CONTRACTOR, MASON, ETC:

No information available

7. ORIGINAL COST OF CONSTRUCTION:

-Grounds: $20,730

-Building: $79,500

Source: *Where We Go to School*, 68th Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools, June 1927

8. ARE THERE ORIGINAL PLANS FOR THIS BUILDING? IF SO WHERE?

The Original Plans are located at the Maintenance Facility, 1124 N 11th St.

9. ARE THERE HISTORIC PHOTOS OF THIS BUILDING? IF SO WHERE?

One Photograph from *Where We Go to School*, 68th Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools, June 1927

Three Photographs from The Library of the School

10. HAS THIS BUILDING BEEN ALTERED? CITE PERMIT RECORDS, FIRE INSURANCE MAPS, VISUAL ANALYSIS:

Building Permit #14492 of August 17, 1911. To erect two additions each to west ends to present school building. Cost: $21,000. Architect: D.C. Ottesen. Contractor: Taddey Masonry, August Holsten Corp. Lesser alterations were made to modernize and meet code requirements.

11. DATE OF INVENTORY:

November 28, 2001

12. NAME AND PHONE NUMBERS OF SURVEYORS:

Paul Demcak 264-8565
Jorge Ruiz 964-3790

13. GENERAL EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION

a) Style

Neo-Classical Influence

b) Materials of main portion of building

Brick. Face brick of best quality Milwaukee mud brick or Watertown or Janesville cream brick, presently painted

c) Materials of foundation

Exposed area brick (as above) below grade rubble stone work

d) Materials of trim

Cut stone sills, galvanized iron cornice with tinned gutter, wood frame and sash windows, and brick work

e) Materials of roof

Originally slate, currently composition

f) Roof shape

Low pitched hip roof with flat roofed additions

g) Number of stories

Three with raised basement

h) Plan configuration

U shaped plan

i) Condition (excellent, good, fair, poor)

Very good

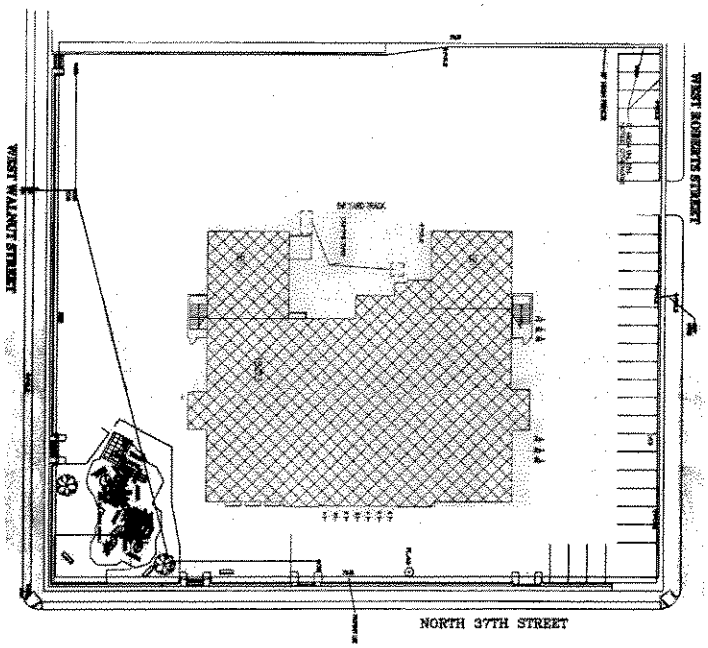
j) Site (playground, landscaping, etc.)

The building is slightly set back and centered in a playground

14. NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The front of the building faces east, situated approximately 35 feet from the street, centered on a lot covering most of a city block. The building is set on a fenced and paved playground with a retaining wall allowing for a nearly level yard where the street and sidewalk grade falls to the south and east. Parking spaces are located to the north boundary. The building occupies approximately one quarter of the lot space.

The school is located in a residential area on a secondary city street faced by two and a half story wood frame houses. The western portion of the block has the same type of houses fronting on 38th Street. Landscaping is absent save for a few plantings in an unpaved play area in the southeast portion of the playground.



The building is U-shaped. The two nearly square additions of 1911 were added to the west side deepening the light court. The original foundation was rectangular in shape with a raised basement. This allows for mechanical sections of the building to rise above grade in the court but not to block light to other floors. There are rectangular vestibules

serving as entrances adjoining both sides of the building under the stair bays rising to mid first story. The three stories of brick and joist construction are capped with a hipped roof. The structure is of cream city brick. The brick, of even color, is laid in common bond in close joints in a strong mortar of good fresh lime and clean sharp sand in good proportions, according to the original specifications. The roof currently consists of composition shingles. The raised foundation is of the same brick as the upper floors above grade and rubble foundation below grade. There are cut stone sills likely close in color to the rest of the building. The cornice is constructed of galvanized cast iron with tin gutters.

The nearly 140 foot symmetrical facade is divided in three parts. The center section is a rounded arch pavilion. This most dramatic design element consists of five two-story arches that function as piers with recessed windows. The arches of the central area make a contrast to the straight elements of the flanking bays. Two arches incised into corbelled rectangular projecting planes flank the pavilion. The main entry is to the left and a window is to the right. The upper two stories of all three sections are unified in design by the use of recessed window bays. The recessed window bays and the vertical pier elements alternate to create a colonnade effect to the flanking sections. The segmental arch windows of all sections of the first floor rise above smaller basement windows of the same design. The vertical elements are lessened by the horizontals of the low-pitched roof. There are no chimneys except for the service stack in the courtyard to interrupt this effect. Rising at the apex of the hipped roof is a rather squat louvered vent that is also hipped.

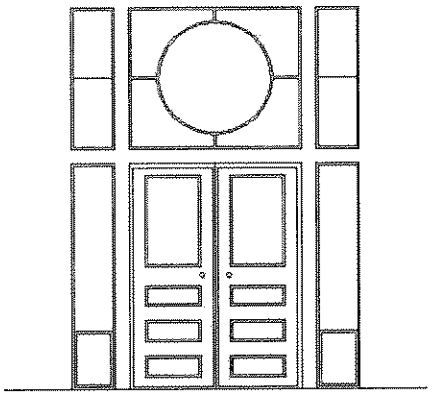
The sides of the building were executed in an asymmetrical and functional plan. The 1911 additions put the projecting staircases off center. The windows of the sides of the additions are not configured in recessed bays, as are those of the original portion. The flatter surface slightly counters the wider expanse of unbroken wall surface to the opposite side of the façade. The back central façade, while repeating in part the arcade, is marred by the mechanicals, however, the courtyard functions well in allowing light to the inner portions of the building.

The stylistic elements of the building derive mostly from free adaptation of classical influence to the task of designing a large functional public building. The symmetry of the primary façade, massing, and articulation seem most indebted to Neo-Classical tradition. The string courses and cornice unify the disparate parts of the building reinforcing the idea of classical tradition as does the layered treatment by floor.

The most prominent alteration to the building, as previously noted, was in 1911 in the two additions to the two wings on the west sides. Other alterations were more in the form of modernization. In 1933 the toilet rooms were redone, smoke screens were added at the foot of the stairs, and the vestibule at the north end exit was redone. In 1937 a new one hundred foot chimney replaced the original service stack.

Other changes in 1962 included fire proofing by dropping the ceilings in the stairways and third story assembly hall. Suspended sheet rock replaced wood ceilings covering the top arched transom portion of the handsome windows. The vertical muntins, that divided the transom into three lights were blocked by solid single panels. This reduces how the rounded top of the window arcade relates to the first story arch window and entrance.

Original



Existing

It's not clear when the current transom and doors of the main entrance were installed. Originally the doors, transom, side lights, and wooden panels were recessed further back under the protection of the opening. While the present configuration, set in the arch itself is of good quality, it is interesting to contrast these to what the architect originally designed. This configuration except for the round window is similar to the original design of doors from hall to stairs on all levels of the interior. While these changes do diminish the aesthetic and intent of the architect, they are minor and reversible.

Research up to the present point in time could learn little of the architect, George Birnbach. The Architectural Index of the Wisconsin Architectural Archive lists a Birnbach & Kirsch with no further information. The 1903 City Directory lists his office at 120 Wisconsin Ave. #1040 and his residence at 673 28th Street. The specifications of the building dated a year earlier name him alone as architect giving his address as 91 Wisconsin Street. Directories of earlier and later give no further leads on this architect who must well have had a professional reputation or important contacts in order to be awarded a contract to design for Milwaukee Public Schools.

The annual reports of the school system proved to give little information on the school other than evidence of rapid expansion of the neighborhood. Increased enrollment caused not only the construction of the original portion (1903-1904) but the two additions in 1911. The school district boundary was also adjusted to the north. Several blocks were removed from the school district and added to another in order to cope with rising enrollment.

During the time, the neighborhood is largely occupied by native Milwaukeeans of German ancestry. One can imagine the growth of west side neighborhoods in this most German of American cities was more dramatic, as the city could not expand any further to the east, as areas to the north were becoming filled, pushing to the communities that became either inner ring suburbs or were annexed by the city at various dates.

Perhaps not surprisingly, for a school named after a numbered street, there were no persons that achieved fame associated with the school that came to light during the survey. What did come to light is that there were only a few school principals that served over the better part of the century: Henry D. Hill (1904-1938), W. Maurice Swain (1938-1964), and Chester Schultz (1964 to at least publication of *Our Roots Go Deep, 1974*). The long tenure of these people, rare in the current school system, speaks of the stability in both prosperous and difficult times of the surrounding middle class to upper middle class neighborhood closely bordered to the west by the long popular Washington Park. This well built school is maintained in contrast to many of the residences of the area that have fallen into disrepair with the loss of jobs in this once strong industrial city.

LIST OF RESOURCES

1. Building permits at the Development Center 809 N. Broadway 1st floor.

2. Deeds at County Courthouse, Register of Deeds, Real Estate.

3. Architectural Index at the Wisconsin Architectural Archive.

4. Original Plans and Specifications at the Division of Facilities and Maintenance Services.

5. Biographical Indexes at the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

6. State Historical Society Index at the Central Library.

7. Society Blue Books at the Central Library.

8. City Directories at the Central Library.

9. Computer Searches for Biographic Material at the Central Library.

10. Milwaukee Public Schools Annual Reports for various years including: "Our Roots Grow Deep" June, 1927.

11. Personnel at 37th Street School including Jim Washington, School Engineer.

12. Historic Pictures from the Library at 37th Street School. (1909, 1916, 1917).