

Historic Designation Study Report



East Side Public Library

1910 East North Avenue

*City of Milwaukee
Department of City Development
Fall, 2002*

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

EAST SIDE PUBLIC LIBRARY

I. NAME

Historic: East Side Public Library
Common name: same

II. LOCATION

1910 East North Avenue

3rd Aldermanic District, **Ald. Michael D'Amato**

Legal Description: Murray's addn in SW ¼ sec 15-7-22 block 210 lots 10 to 18 incl exc s 10'
lot 10 for street

III. CLASSIFICATION Structure

OWNER: City of Milwaukee
c/o Ms. Kathleen M. Huston, City Librarian
814 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53233

V. DESIGNATION REQUESTED BY: Andre Baerri

VI. YEAR BUILT: 1967-69¹

ARCHITECTS: Darby, Bogner and Associates²

¹ Milwaukee Building Permit #189604 dated December 14, 1967. Filed at Development Center, 809 North Broadway, Milwaukee.

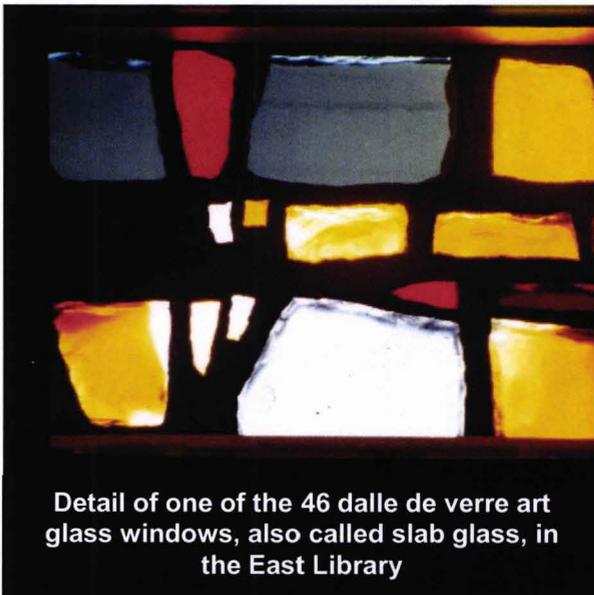
² Ibid.

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Most buildings reviewed for local landmark designation in Milwaukee are much older than the East Library, a late International Style building that was begun in 1967. The city's preservation ordinance, however, does not stipulate a minimum age as a criterion for designation so contemporary style buildings are eligible for local landmark consideration. A modern style building is evaluated for its potential architectural and historic significance in the same manner as a much older structure.

The International Style is one of the major genres of modern architecture. The best examples of the style are valued today because of their unique role in the development of modern architecture and also because the style is no longer used for new construction. The East Library, built when the style had declined in popularity, is a very busy branch of the Milwaukee Federated Library System located one block west of the bustling Eastside crossroads of Farwell, North and Murray Avenues. Small, one and two story commercial buildings constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries surround it.



Detail of one of the 46 dalle de verre art glass windows, also called slab glass, in the East Library

Description

The East Side Public Library stands on the northeast corner of East North Avenue and North Cramer Street about fifteen feet from the public sidewalks behind a small, concrete plaza. The property includes a large surface parking lot at the rear of the building. The single story structure designed in a late International Style of architecture is composed of a flat, plate roof supported by exposed, laminated wood beams that in turn rest on simple brick walls. In plan, the building measures approximately 91 feet by 151 feet. The main elevation facing East North Avenue and the rear elevation facing the parking lot are basically the same in composition and each features a set of double leaf, aluminum entry

doors flanked by floor-to-ceiling bays of clear glass windows set into aluminum frames. The east and west sides of the building are devoid of any windows in the monolithic brick walls, but the 16-inch-tall spaces between the roof beams above the brick are glazed with 46 modern slab glass which is a French technique called *dalles de verre*.

The western two-thirds of the interior is a single large, open space. Bookshelves are arranged around a central reference and reading area. The eastern third of the building is divided into small offices and meeting rooms. The ceiling throughout the building is made completely of wood and finished with v-joint wooden boards between the laminated beams. The appearance of the ceiling was slightly altered when acoustic ceiling tiles were installed between the beams over much of the v-joint boarding. With the exception of the ceiling tiles, the building otherwise appears to be in original, unaltered condition both inside and out.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The East Side Public Library is an example of a municipal structure designed in the late International Style of architecture. Its 46 slab glass windows are good examples of modern art glass, but the building itself is not presently known to possess any other architectural or historic significance.

VIII. HISTORY

The International Style is one of the earliest and most important forms of modern architecture that emerged during the twentieth century. International Style structures do not imitate or recall past styles and, to some observers, these buildings may appear boxy, simplistic and completely abstract with flat roofs and plain wall surfaces. The best examples of the style, however, possess a unique elegance partly because they were designed with centuries-old techniques to make an objective determination of the optimal massing as well as the sizes of windows, doors and other major features.

Architecture



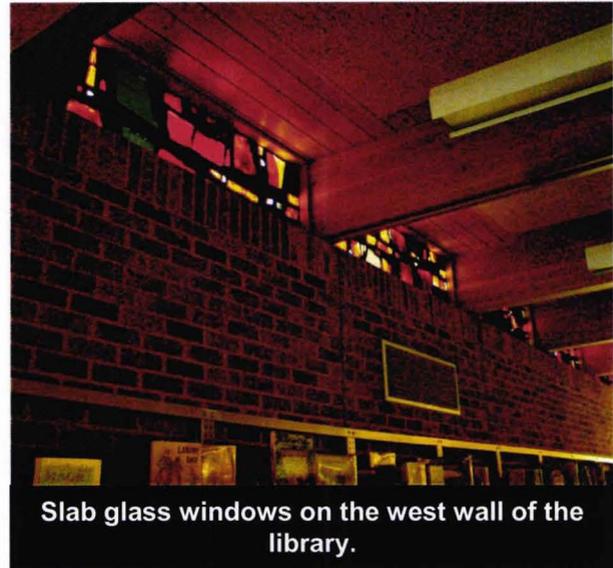
One of the world's icons of International Style architecture is the German Pavilion in Barcelona, Spain (built 1929, dismantled and lost 1930; reconstructed on its original site 1981-86.) It may have inspired the architects who designed Milwaukee's East Library.

The style came into being before World War I in Europe but did not attract much attention until the early 1920s. After that the new style spread throughout the western world reflecting one of history's most dramatic shifts in architectural tastes. The International Style peaked in popularity during the 1950s and was employed mainly for commercial and industrial structures, but in its early days during the 1920s and 30s several of its best examples were houses. Some of the architects who championed the style include Mies Van der Rohe, Eiel and Aero Saarinen, Le Corbusier and Louis I. Kahn.

One of the pivotal American projects associated with the development of the style is the twin tower apartment complex in Chicago at 860 and 880 N. Lake Shore Drive (1951) designed by Mies van der Rohe. Almost two decades later, the East Library was built as the International Style was fading from popularity and being replaced by new expressions of modern architecture. The library, however, is not an outstanding example of its style. The building lacks the pleasing massing, proportions and crisp details associated with benchmark examples of International Style design such as the Mies van der Rohe-designed German Pavilion (1929) in Barcelona, Spain.

On the other hand, the library's 46 slab glass windows located between the ceiling beams are very good examples of a modern French art glass technique called *dalle de verre* that means,

literally, flagstones of glass. The French derived it from an Early Christian-era (ca. 313-450) window-making technique that employed chunks of colored glass set into stone or clay. The first American-made dalle de verre windows, also called faceted glass, were introduced during the mid-1950s and they peaked in fashion during the 1960s and 70s. The windows are made with hand-hewn chunks of colored slag glass one inch thick or more. They are held together in a matrix of textured concrete or epoxy grout that is usually strengthened with metal reinforcing rods.



The East Library windows were designed and made by the Conrad Schmitt Studios in Milwaukee, one of the nation's premier decorative arts firms. German-born artist Guido Brink was employed by Conrad Schmitt Studios during the 1960s to perfect the design and construction of slab glass windows, however it is not known if he worked on the East Library project.³ Today, the dalle de verre technique has declined in popularity, but it is still used for constructing church windows just as it was 1,500 years ago.

Architects

Research has revealed little about the architectural and engineering firm of Darby, Bogner and Associates. During the late 1960s their office was at 8801 West National Avenue in West Allis. The firm also designed the Tippecanoe Library (1970) in the Bay View neighborhood at 3912 South Howell Avenue where they worked with the artist Guido Brink to install his sculpture *The Spirit of Manitou* that is still inside today. At the present time the firm's design work is not known to have had a significant impact on the character of the city.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The East Side Public Library is only a modest example of late International Style architecture. In the event the building is altered or razed, the art glass windows should be salvaged and possibly reused elsewhere in the City of Milwaukee. Apart from the windows, at this time the building does not appear to meet any of the criteria for designation in the city's historic preservation ordinance.

REFERENCES

Milwaukee building permit records. Milwaukee Development Center, 809 North Broadway.

Henry Russell Hitchcock. *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983.

(More)

³ Annemarie Sawkins. "Guido Brink: The Spirit of a Painter." Essay by the Assistant Curator at the Haggerty Art Museum for the exhibition *Guido Brink: 50 Years of Painting*.

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www.blenkoglass.com Website of the Blenko Glass Company, Inc. in Milton, West Virginia, one of the nation's first to produce Dalle de Verre (slab glass).

