

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT

MILWAUKEE CITY HALL

(Written Spring, 1982)

I. NAME

Historic: Milwaukee City Hall

Common: Milwaukee City Hall

II. LOCATION

Street: 200 East Wells Street

Legal Property Description: Plat of Milwaukee in Secs (28-29-33)-7-2 2 Block 55 all of SD Blk 55

III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

IV. OWNER OF BUILDING

City of Milwaukee
200 East Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. DESCRIPTION

The Milwaukee City Hall is an asymmetrical, wedge-shaped building that is eight stories high. Its non-uniform dimensions attest to the irregular site with the front façade at the base of the tower measuring 57 feet, the rear façade at 112 feet, the east façade at 315 feet and the west façade at 327 feet. The central portion of the building is covered with a steeply pitched, truncated gable slate roof with a central skylight. Perpendicular to this is a steeply pitched, hipped roof also of slate that covers the rear pavilion. At the center of this roof is a cupola that rests on a small square base. The front tower, that dominates the building, terminates in a spire that rises 350 feet from its base. Both the spire and rear cupola are clad with copper.

Below grade, City Hall rests on a foundation of Wauwatosa limestone and a 20-foot band of gray granite that projects a few feet above grade. From this point to the string course of the third floor windowsills, the walls are surfaced with light tan, ashlar Berea sandstone. The remaining wall surfaces and tower are faced with St. Louis pressed brick. Originally pink in color, it has weathered to a light maroon. Pale rose terra-cotta and carved sandstone are used extensively as decorative trim in the banding, spandrels, capitals and gables throughout the entire building. A full cornice of scrolled modillions wraps all of the building.

All facades and exterior features of City Hall contribute to the building's architectural significance. The tower is the dominant architectural feature. At its base are three massive Syrian arches that form a groin vault and define the main entry. The arch surrounds and vault

ribs are trimmed with carved sandstone in a variety of beaded and roped patterns. The spandrels and banding of the upper levels are terra cotta in the form of foliated designs with cartouches, grotesques and open Gothic tracery. The upper reaches of the tower are an arcaded belfry and above that on each elevation is a Flemish gable with a clock face.

The east and west facades of the main block and the rear pavilion are rhythmically broken by a springing arched arcade. Starting from the front, the pattern is 5-3-5-3. On both facades, at the first three bays are entries that are flanked by highly polished gray; granite columns with carved sandstone capitals of grotesques surrounded by foliated patterns. Above the entries are terra cotta spandrels decorated with cherubs holding shields and cartouches. The gables that surmount these sections are an elaborate Flemish design with exuberant detailing. This detailing is also found on the Flemish gables on the rear pavilion. The remainder of the main block and rear pavilion is enhanced by spandrels and pilaster capitals of terra cotta. The seventh floor windows are defined by brick columns and the eighth floor windows by a series of smaller Flemish gabled dormers. The rear façade is extremely elaborate. It possesses the same design treatment as the other facades, but the spandrels present the most intricate terra cotta work on the building. On the second and third floors, the Common Council Chamber stained glass windows are visible from the exterior.

With the review of historic photographs and building permits, the exterior of the Milwaukee City Hall has undergone several changes. In 1914 a fire escape was installed on the east façade. In 1973 the front tower was re clad with copper. In 1929 the upper portion of the tower was seriously damaged by fire and in 1930 it was meticulously restored. In 1969 the masonry in the gables and tower was repointed and repaired, the existing wood sash and glass in windows adjacent to the fire escape was replaced with quarter inch wired glass. At some time during the 1960's a number of the basement windows were bricked-up, the iron cresting was removed from the central portion of the roof, the peaks of the large gables on the east and west elevations were truncated and most of the stone balustrade from the third floor was removed. In 1970 the dormer where the fire escape was extended in 1969 was dismantled and a larger opening was created. The dormer was then reassembled. In 1981 the original glass was removed from the double-hung sash and replaced with insulated glass or panel units. Also, the sash was painted and new storm windows were installed.

V. SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built or Altered: 1893-95

Builder/Architect: Paul Riesen, builder
Henry C. Koch & Co., architect

The Milwaukee City Hall was cited as significant as an example of monumental civic architecture and for its sustained use as the center of municipal government. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, recorded for the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1969 and named a Milwaukee Landmark in 1970.

VI. HISTORY

During the first years of its existence, the City offices and records were located in various temporary quarters. After two disastrous fires destroyed valuable City records, the Common Council voted in 1861 to acquire the Market House as a permanent city hall. With the phenomenal population growth Milwaukee experienced after the Civil War, however, it soon became apparent that the Market House was no longer adequate to house the expanding

functions of the rapidly growing City government. As a temporary measure, the City leased the east wing of the recently completed County Courthouse, to house the City offices. By 1882, however, the Common Council recognized the need to build a new city hall and began to study the matter. The traditional rivalry between the east side Juneautown and the west side Kilbourntown factions turned the site selection process into an acrimonious debate that dragged on for eight years. Finally, in 1890 it was determined to build the new City Hall on the site of the Market House.

A nationwide competition was held in the summer of 1891 to select an architect. Plans were received from eleven major firms, including six from Milwaukee. The competition was not without controversy and after a bitter council dispute, the Milwaukee firm of Henry C. Koch was selected. Koch was a celebrated local architect who had also earned a national reputation as a designer of churches, schools and courthouses. He had developed an eclectic style that combined Queen Anne and Romanesque features and, as his hallmark, incorporated Northern European touches such as curved gables. Already well known locally for his designs for Gesu Church and the Pfister Hotel, the Milwaukee City Hall climaxed a career that earned him the reputation of being one of the City's foremost architects.

Architecturally, the City Hall is significant as a visual statement of the aesthetics of Milwaukee's dominant nineteenth century German community. Limited in his design by site constraints and a strict construction budget, Koch produced a unique and dramatic interior plan while modeling the exterior after nineteenth century German Rathusers (city halls).

Since its completion in 1895, the structure has remained the seat of government in Milwaukee. Although the growth in government has necessitated the location of many City agencies in ancillary structures, the major municipal functions have maintained a presence in City Hall, including the Common Council Mayor's office, City Clerk and City Treasurer among others.

VII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends to the Historic Preservation Commission the designation of the Milwaukee City Hall as an historic structure as defined in Section 2-335 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

Our recommendation is based on the previous recognition received by this building and the areas of significance enumerated above.

VIII. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principle concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall be applicable only to the Milwaukee City Hall. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

The existing building height, rooflines, pitch, dormers, gables, cupola and spire shall not be changed or modified. All roof elevations in this case are significant to the structure's architectural integrity. The addition of dormers, skylights or solar collector panels to the existing roof surfaces, tower and cupola will not be permitted unless approved by the Commission.

B. Openings

The location, style and material of window and door openings and the number and configurations of panes shall be retained on all street elevations, except that restoration to the documented original condition shall be permitted. Additional openings or changes in the size or configuration of existing openings shall not be permitted, unless approved by the Historic preservation Commission, except that restoration to the documented original condition shall be permitted. Approval for changes with the style and period of the building.

C. Additions

All street elevations in this case are significant to the structure's architectural integrity. No additions may be made to any street elevation of the building unless approved by the Commission. This includes skywalks or overhead passages used to connect City Hall with adjacent buildings.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There shall be no changes to trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

E. Materials

Unpainted brick, terra cotta or stone shall not be painted or covered. Any repairs, including repointing of defective mortar, shall match the original in color, style, texture and strength characteristics. Masonry shall be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible approved by the Commission. The slate roofing and copper cladding of the tower and cupola shall be retained to the fullest extent possible. Replacement materials shall match the original in color, design and texture.

F. Fire Escapes

Additional required fire escapes shall be located only on the west elevation if at all practical. It shall be designed and located in a similar manner as the existing one on the east elevation to minimize its visual impact.

G. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign other than the existing one on the front of the tower shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building based upon the Commission's review of scale drawings of the proposed design and samples of the proposed materials and colors. Non-permanent flags, banners or pennants of the like that are used to commemorate a holiday, civic event or for City promotion may be erected without the Commission's approval.