

# HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

## TOWN OF LAKE WATER TOWER AND MUNICIPAL BUILDING

(Written 1990)

### I. NAME

Historic: Town of Lake Water Tower and Municipal Building

Common: Same

### II. LOCATION

4001 South Sixth Street

Tax Key Number: Part of 579-9957-110

Legal Description: LANDS IN NW ¼ SEC 20-6-22 THE NORTH 750 FEET OF THE EAST 275 FEET OF THAT PART LYING BETW W HOWARD AVE-S 6<sup>TH</sup> ST-WEP CO ROW & CMSTP&P RR ROW INCL VAC (S 9<sup>TH</sup> ST & ALLEY).

### III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

### IV. OWNER

Don Hiller, Superintendent  
Bureau of Bridges and Public Buildings  
Municipal Building, Room 311  
City of Milwaukee

### V. YEAR BUILT

1938-39

Architect: William D. Darby, Engineer

### VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Town of Lake Water Tower and Municipal Building is located at 4001 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street in a suburban residential area developed in the 1950s and 1960s. It originally stood in the center of a 20-acre site landscaped as a park in a rural setting. Much of the original parcel is now occupied by the Howard Avenue Purification Plant and a city ward yard.

The structure is composed of an octagonal, concrete-sheathed, domed, nine-story water tower that rises from the center of the roof of a one- and two-story, flat-roofed, rectangular office block at its base. The late Art Deco style structure is sheathed entirely in concrete and fenestrated with metal window units.

The façade, which faces South 6<sup>th</sup> Street, is composed of a two-story entrance pylon containing the double leaf entrance doors surmounted by an Art Deco-style iron grille emblazoned with a plaque containing the word "Lake." Original Art Deco-style lanterns flank the entrance. Flanking the entrance pavilion are projecting, symmetrical, three-bay, one-story, flat-roofed wings fenestrated with bands of aluminum windows separated by compound molded piers.

The north and south elevations are identical and consist of three-bay, one-story, flat-roofed wings flanking a recessed central entrance. The west elevation, or rear, has projecting, one-story, flat-roofed wings with overhead roll up doors.

The water tower portion of the building is the dominant element of the design. Its octagonal exterior is clad in concrete ornamented with grooves and shallow reveals to visually emphasize its verticality. The tower has banks of metal windows up to the fourth story level with a single, long, narrow, glass block filled window on each side extending through the seventh and eighth story levels. Above the ninth story level the domed steel top of the water tank forms the roof of the tower.

The interior of the base of the tower originally contained the town offices and council chambers, the health department, the police department, the municipal garage, and the water works. The tower shaft contains the steel structure supporting the 1,000,000-gallon water tank. The office portion of the base now houses offices used mainly by the Health Department and the Bureau of Engineers. The interior is simply finished in plaster with modest late Art Deco influence evident in the detailing of the cornices and iron railings. Square, terra cotta colored Arts and Crafts tiles are used extensively for wainscoting throughout. Some spaces have oak wainscoting. The floors are mostly terrazzo. Many of the original, modern style, metal light fixtures remain in use.

The principal alterations to the exterior include various alterations to the entrances in the mid-1960s and the replacement of many of the window units in 1979. The interior has been relatively little altered.

## **VII. SIGNIFICANCE**

The Town of Lake Water Tower and Municipal Building is architecturally significant as a unique structure combining the functions of town hall and water tower. It is perhaps the best-known visual landmark on the far south side of Milwaukee because of its visual prominence and interesting late Art Deco design.

## **VIII. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Town of Lake Water Tower and Municipal Building was constructed in 1938-39 to house both the town's new water system and its municipal offices. It was constructed by the Town of Lake primarily to provide the rapidly urbanizing town with a safe, modern water system of its own to stave off the expansion of the City of Milwaukee's water supply lines into the Town of Lake. This latter possibility was evidently viewed as an unwanted form of economic imperialism and a prelude to annexation by the Town of Lake's rural residents. It also provided more commodious and efficient quarter for carrying out the Town's rapidly expanding governmental functions and served as a community center for cultural, civic and social events.

The construction of the Water Tower occurred near the end of the Town of Lake's existence as an independent governmental unit. The Town of Lake was established in 1838 by the

Territorial Legislature as one of the two original subdivisions of Milwaukee County. Within two years the Towns of Franklin, Greenfield, and Oak Creek had been created out of portions of the Town of Lake reducing its boundaries to the area enclosed by Greenfield Avenue, South 27<sup>th</sup> Street, College Avenue and Lake Michigan by 1840.

Town government was a simple affair in rural Wisconsin for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Town meetings were held at least once a year to decide important civic issues, while a small group of supervisors and a town clerk administered the limited functions of the town's government in the interim. Other than collecting taxes, establishing schools, and maintaining certain roads, there was relatively little for the town officials to do. As a result, there was no need for large or elaborate municipal buildings. The rural town halls were seldom little different than the one-room school houses that dotted rural Wisconsin of the period - - small, plain, one-room, frame structures furnished with benches for the voters who came to the infrequent town meetings.

With increasing urbanization in the early twentieth century, as suburban housing tracts spread into the town, it became necessary for the Town of Lake to provide more services. Taxes and license fees had to be collected on a more regular basis and fire, engineering, highway and health departments were established at the old town hall at the southeast corner of Howell and Howard Avenues. By the mid-1930s the growth of town government and the pressing need for a safe, dependable, central water supply system to replace the private wells then in use throughout the town mandated the construction of new town facilities. The town officials decided upon the unique solution of combining the water tower and the new municipal offices into a single building. William D. Darby of West Allis was selected as the designer for the new structure.

On December 23, 1937, with Federal Public Works Administration funds in place to defray the construction cost, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new structure occurred. On January 20, 1940 the structure was formally dedicated and occupied at a cost of \$1,325,000. The building served as the seat of government until April of 1954 when the town's remaining 9.5 square miles were annexed as Milwaukee's 19<sup>th</sup> Ward. Since that time, the building has housed various City of Milwaukee offices as well as serving briefly as a temporary public library.

## **IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Town of Lake Water Tower and Municipal Building, 4001 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street, be designated as a historic structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria one, five, seven and nine of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e).

## **X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES**

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal 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. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

### **A. Roofs**

Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch.

## B. Materials

### 1. Concrete

- a. Unpainted concrete should not be painted or covered with other materials except such transparent sealers as may be necessary to protect the concrete.
- b. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with other materials.
- c. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible.

### 2. Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed.

## C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panels, sash, surrounds and sills except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window or new stock door sizes.
2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung or casement sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

## D. Trim and Ornamentation

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

E. Additions

The north, east and south elevations are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions are not recommended and require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevation.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign 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.

G. Site Features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building.

H. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designed so as to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the building.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the building. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the historic appearance of the water tower as viewed from South Sixth Street.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions and the individual building components such as wall panels, piers, and fenestration that are in close proximity to the historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the water tower.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the water tower as a distinct freestanding structure. The profiles of parapets and building elements that project and recede from the main block should express the same continuity established by the historic structure if they are in close proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials that are visible from the public right-of-way and in close proximity to the water tower should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of the cladding materials used on the historic structure. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.