

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

MILWAUKEE CENTRAL LIBRARY

(Written Fall, 1982)

I. NAME

Historic: Milwaukee Public Library and Museum

Common: Milwaukee Central Library

II. LOCATION

Street: 814 West Wisconsin Avenue

Legal Property Description: Plat of east half of the NW ¼ Section 29-7-22 Vol. 24, P. 11, Block 174, all of SD block

III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

IV. OWNER OF PROPERTY

City of Milwaukee
c/o Arthur Strickland
Milwaukee Public Library
814 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53233

V. DESCRIPTION

The Central Library is a massive complex that comprises a full block on the western edge of the central business district. Built in 1895-1899 as the Public Library and Museum, the original building was a U-shaped structure with an open court on the north end. Subsequent additions through the first half of the 20th century have doubled the size of the library, but the principal historic facades have retained their original form and integrity.

The library is a structure of monumental proportions that is three stories high and rests on a raised basement. The main façade that faces West Wisconsin Avenue measures 293 feet, the west façade on North 9th Street measures 228 feet and the east façade on North 8th Street when originally built measured 149 feet. In 1909 an additional nine bays were constructed on the east façade extending it to mid-block. Ferry and Clas, architects of the original building, were commissioned for this work. Their use of identical materials combined with the exactness of proportion, detail and design of all architectural elements makes it virtually impossible to distinguish this latter construction with the original. Therefore, the 1909 addition to the library is to be considered as part of the historic architectural fabric and is of equal value to the original construction.

The walls are faced with light gray Bedford limestone laid coursed ashlar. The extensive applied ornamentation is the same stone shaped into columns, pilasters, capitals, balusters, window surrounds and a variety of foliated forms. The roof is a flat tar covered surfaced with a low dome rising from the central pavilion on the main façade. The eagles that flank the dome are of stone and copper.

All of the facades are symmetrically designed and reflect the academic principles of Neo-Renaissance architecture. The raised basement, which varies in height on each façade, serves as a pedestal. Above this the first floor is rusticated stone work in horizontal banding. A string-course of egg-and-dart and wave moldings separates the first and second floors from which spring a rhythmic procession of engaged columns and pilasters in Corinthian order. This is surmounted by a full entablature and running balustrade with acanthus leaf modillions in the cornice.

The main façade is divided by a central pavilion flanked by recesses that are flanked by end pavilions. At the base of the center pavilion the main entrance is located. This is defined by three round-arched portals. Above this is a recess that is fronted by a balustrade and two freestanding columns. On the east façade are three additional entries with front and rear ones topped with limestone pediments.

With the review of historic photographs and building permits, the exterior of the Milwaukee Central Library has been minimally altered. In 1964 marble overlay panels were installed on the west wing between the windows. In 1968 some of the cornice balustrade was replaced with a parapet. In 1977 an extensive refurbishing of the exterior was undertaken. The masonry was sandblasted, repaired and tuckpointed. Several of the basement windows on the east façade were blocked in with limestone blocks and the windows on the second floor of the east wing of both the West Wisconsin Avenue and North Eighth Street facades were altered by removing the original double-hung sash and replacing them with fixed glass. The round-arched area above each window was filled in with limestone blocks. Also, at some point all of the original front and side entry doors were replaced.

VI. SIGNIFICANT

Date Built or Altered: 1895-1899, 1909

Building/Architect: George Bowman Ferry and Alfred C. Clas, architects

The Milwaukee Public Central Library was cited as significant for its role in the education and the dissemination of information to the public, as a product of the “City Beautiful” movement and the rise of modern city planning and as a significant architectural work of eminent architects, George Bowman Ferry and Alfred C. Clas. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, recorded for the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1970 and named a Milwaukee Landmark in 1969.

VII. HISTORY

What is now known as the Central Library was originally built as the Milwaukee Public Library and Museum. The Milwaukee Public Library traces its origins to 1878 when it was chartered by the State legislature. Prior to that, the city was served by private library associations, such as the Young Men’s Association, which had been founded in 1847. With the establishment of the public library, the Young Men’s Association’s 10,000 volume library became the nucleus of the new public collection, which was housed in rented quarters in the Academy of Music building at West Wisconsin Avenue and North 4th Street. The emphasis upon education that characterized nineteenth-century Milwaukee’s predominantly German population resulted in rapid growth for the institution, which quickly outgrew its original space.

The origins of the Milwaukee Public Museum are similar to those of the library. Milwaukee's well-educated, German-born population manifested its interest in science by forming private associations. Among the most prominent of these was the Wisconsin Natural History Society founded by Professor Peter Englemann of the German-English Academy.

In 1882 the State legislature responded to public pressure and chartered the Milwaukee Public Museum to establish a permanent home for collections such as that of the Natural History Society, which was subsequently donated to the museum. With the addition of other private collections and a broadening interest into areas other than natural history, the museum soon needed a larger permanent home.

By 1893 the city had determined that the library and the museum should be housed in publicly owned buildings built specifically to accommodate them. After considerable deliberation, it was decided that a nationwide architectural competition should be held to select a satisfactory design for a single, large structure that could house both institutions. The winning entry by the firm of leading architects George Bowman Ferry and Alfred C. Class was selected from the seventy-four submissions received.

The Ferry and Clas scheme reflected the emerging national taste for monumental, white, classical public buildings designed in the eclectic manner of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This style of architecture was popularized by the World Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 where many of the major pavilions were lavish essays in freely interpreted classicism. The new library contrasted sharply with the other major public buildings being erected in Milwaukee at that time such as the City Hall and the Federal Building, which were ponderous, dark structures of medieval inspiration. The new library was the first full-blown example of Beaux-Arts classical design in Milwaukee and had a profound effect on the city's architectural orientation. Although medieval-inspired designs remained popular, especially for residences, probably because of sentimental associations with the homelands of the city's predominantly German and eastern European population, increasingly after 1893 major buildings were constructed with classical design features. The library itself was recognized national for its architectural excellence with medals at the Columbian Exposition (1893), the St. Louis Exposition (1904) and the Paris Exposition (1905).

The construction of the opulent new library on West Wisconsin Avenue focussed renewed attention on the shabby residential area to the north. It became the cornerstone of a bold plan to create a monumental new civic center at the western edge of downtown. The realization of that plan eventually resulted in the construction of the Safety Building, the Milwaukee County Courthouse and the widening of Kilbourn Avenue. The beginning of Milwaukee's experimentation with "City Beautiful" planning concepts such as these can be traced to the siting and design of the library.

The library has remained in continuous use for its intended purpose. Major additions were made in 1909 and 1955 that more than doubled the size of the building without compromising the original design. In 1963 the museum relocated to its own building and its former space was converted to office use.

VIII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends to the Historic Preservation Commission the designation of the Milwaukee Central Library 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 in the areas of significance as 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 Public Library. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.