

PRELIMINARY HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

THIRD DISTRICT POLICE STATION

I. NAME

Historic: Third District Police Station

Common name: Same

II. LOCATION

4715 West Vliet Street

16th Aldermanic District, Ald. Michael Murphy

Legal Description: Lands in SE ¼ SEC 23-7-21 Lands Betw. W. Vliet St. Park Front Subd & Section Lines W 196.29' of E 266.29' of N. 184' exc X-Way

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

City of Milwaukee
Fire and Police Commission
Milwaukee Police Department
809 N. Broadway
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. YEAR BUILT: 1937

ARCHITECT: Charles E. Malig

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Third District Police Station is located on the southwest corner of N. 47th and W. Vliet Streets behind a small grass lawn. The two-story, flat-roofed, L-plan, brick building rests on a raised, dressed limestone basement and was designed by Charles Malig in a simplified Art Deco style. The station is bordered on the east by the I-41 freeway and on the west by Wick Field, a popular west side venue for amateur baseball, softball and tennis games. A mixture of early twentieth century apartments and small commercial buildings is clustered along the north side of W. Vliet Street across the street from the station and the play field.

The focal point of the station's symmetrically composed main elevation facing W. Vliet St. is a central entrance bay that is enframed with fluted limestone, Art Deco style pilasters. The façade is fenestrated with regularly placed, double hung windows on the first story and six-over-six double hung windows on the second story. The exterior

is further embellished with ornamental brick spandrels beneath the windows and three Art Deco carved limestone panels, each featuring the same abstract floral design. One of the panels is located at the apex of the central entry bay and the other two are located at the far corners of the façade above the second story windows.

The side elevations facing east and west are similar in character and each is composed of the two-story, office block and an original, one-story, flat roofed, rear garage. Both of the side elevations are fenestrated with regularly placed, double hung windows. The rear elevation, composed of the one-story attached garage, is utilitarian in character and features large overhead doors that are placed to respond to the needs of the interior parking spaces. Located in the driveway along the west side of the station is the truncated remnant of the original, 1937 steel radio antenna that, according to permit records, was originally 225' tall but now stands at about one-fourth that height and appears to be non-functional.

The publicly visible exterior elevations of the station have remained nearly unchanged over the years although the double hung windows on the first story are replacements for the original wooden, six-over-six sash. Glass block has also been substituted for some of the original window sashes on the rear and east elevations. The stainless steel front doors are substitutes for the original, double-leaf entry doors that were probably made of wood. On the east elevation, an original overhead door which provided access to the basement garage was blocked off in order to accommodate grading changes to N. 47th and N. Alois Streets.

The first floor of the station was designed to accommodate offices, holding cells and a garage. The second floor was used for offices and a radio room. According to building permits, minor alterations to the interior over the years have included the installation of new partition walls and drop ceilings.

A one-story, brick, detached garage building that measures 49' x 72' in plan was built next to the station in 1968 at 4733 W. Vliet Street. A soaring, steel communications antenna is located at the rear of the structure. In addition to garage space the building was constructed to accommodate a radio repair room and a locker room. It is a non-contributing structure.

VIII. HISTORY

Police Station Architecture

The existing Third District police station at N. 47th & W. Vliet Streets is a conservative example of Art Deco style architecture which was popular from the middle of the 1920s to about 1940. The station's sturdy, utilitarian character epitomizes the cost-conscious attitudes that shaped much of America's architecture during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Art Deco style, which united industrial design with both art and architecture, got its name in 1925 from an important design conference called the Exposition des Art Decoratifs that was held in Paris. Art Deco was a sleek, streamlined alternative to the period revival styles of architecture that were very popular during the years between the two World Wars. Art Deco style buildings were typically embellished with abstract interpretations of traditional architectural details. The floral-motif panels on the façade

of the Third District station are good examples of the abstract, low relief type of carved ornament that is associated with Art Deco design.

Art Deco is closely related to the Art Moderne style of architecture that had a rather limited popularity during the same time period. Art Moderne, however, is different in that it is totally devoid of any historical references such as carved panels or fluted pilasters and was characterized by smooth walls, rounded corners and an emphasis on horizontal massing. Art Deco is particularly important in the context of American Architecture because it was a forerunner of Modern style architecture that emerged after World War II. Outstanding examples of Art Deco architecture in Milwaukee include the Milwaukee Journal Building (1924) located at 333 W. State St.; the Milwaukee Western Fuel Co. Building (1934) located at 2150 N. Prospect Ave.; and the Badger Mutual Insurance Co. Headquarters (1937) located at 1635 W. National Ave.

There has never been a specific style or building form associated with police station architecture in Milwaukee. Over the years most of the buildings constructed specifically as police stations in the city were designed to look like modest commercial buildings of their day. Designers never made any unified effort to significantly embellish the exteriors of police stations or to develop an architectural form that would be uniquely associated with their use. Just the opposite was true, however, of many other municipal and government-owned structures in Milwaukee such as City Hall, the Old Federal Building, the North Avenue Water Tower and the city's nineteenth century firehouses. Not only are the forms of those buildings easy to recognize and uniquely associated with their uses, but they also ranked as some of the city's most outstanding structures of their day.

Over the years the city's police stations tended to be rather simple in terms of their exterior architectural design. When the city built its first new police station in 1857, a Milwaukee Sentinel article on August 18th of that year described the structure as "plain but substantial." Further reflecting a preference for architectural simplicity, some of the city's other early police stations were located in existing structures that had been built for light manufacturing or office purposes.

One of the most interesting structures built for the police department was the Second District station that was completed in 1890 according to the designs of local architect Herman P. Schnetzky. Designed in a simplified Romanesque Revival style, the three-story brick structure remained in use until 1954 and was demolished in 1960 to make way for an exit ramp of the I-94 expressway. Today, the most architecturally distinguished building associated with the Milwaukee Police Department is the Safety Building (1930) located at 831 W. State Street that is a good example of the Art Deco style and liberally embellished with ornamental stone carving.

Police Department History

During the 1830s and early 1840s when Milwaukee was a small settlement, law enforcement in the community was the job of an elected Marshall and a few constables who patrolled the streets to keep the peace. When Milwaukee was formally incorporated as a city in 1846 the position of City Marshall was created. The authority of the Marshall and his constables was rather limited and in the rare event of a serious crime, such as burglary or grave bodily harm, the case was turned over to county authorities for investigation.

For several years, that system was more than adequate to serve the young and orderly city, but as the community grew by leaps and bounds during the early 1850s, so too, did the demand for police services. In 1855 Milwaukee's Common Council began a new era of law enforcement in the city when they formally established a regular police force on October 4th and appointed the first Chief of Police, William Beck. The first police station was located on the south side of E. Wisconsin Avenue between N. Water St. and N. Broadway in a basement office.

In 1856 the police force numbered 21 officers plus the chief. Two of the officers were station keepers and the rest were assigned to beat patrols throughout the city's seven different wards. As Milwaukee continued to grow, it became increasingly difficult for Chief Beck and his officers to provide police service to the city's newer, far-flung neighborhoods with just the downtown station. To provide better service, the Chief asked the Common Council to establish a branch police station on the south side, which would be called the Second District and another on the West Side that would become the Third District. Today there are a total of seven stations scattered throughout the city.

The first West Side station, which eventually became known as the Third District, opened in a former match factory during August of 1878 on W. Walnut Street between N. 6th and N. 7th Streets. The facility became outdated rather quickly and in 1886 a new Third District police station was built on the north side of W. Galena Street between N. 9th and N. 10th Streets. It, too, had a relatively short service life, and in 1914 it was declared "unsanitary" by the State Board of Control that also advised it be abandoned. A new station was then built in 1918 at the corner of N. 12th and W. Vine Streets and the old Galena Street station was remodeled to house the city's old Police and Fire Alarm System. In 1928 an addition was made to the Vine Street Station but its day were numbered

During the depths of the Great Depression in 1934, the city decided to build a new, larger facility for the Third District which is still in use today at the corner of N. 47th and W. Vliet Streets. The station was officially dedicated on September 10, 1937 on a site that was part of multi-acre parcel that the city had used for many years as its north side landfill. Research of the station's building permit file indicates that the architect, Charles E. Malig, may have had to restrain the design for the building in order to meet his budget. The first permit for the station, which was granted in 1935, specified a structure costing \$135,000. That permit was later cancelled and on July 20, 1936 a new permit for the existing station was taken out but the estimated cost of the structure had been pared down to \$125,000.

As it stands today, the Third District at N. 47th and W. Vliet Streets is the oldest branch station still in use by the Milwaukee Police Department. No major events in the history of the police department or city government have occurred there although the building was used to film scenes for the Hollywood movie, *Dillinger*. At this point, the station's future is uncertain because it will be replaced by a new, state-of-the-art, \$20 million facility that is to be built on the site of the old Uptown Theatre at N. 49th St. and W. North Ave.

Architect

The station was designed by Charles E. Malig, who worked for 38 years as a staff architect for the City of Milwaukee's Dept. of Buildings and Bridges. Mr. Malig's design

credits include South View Hospital (1924) located at 2320 W. Mitchell St., Johnston Emergency Hospital (1930) located at 1230 W. Grant St., and most of the police and fire stations built or remodeled in the city between 1911 and 1949.

Private firms designed many municipal structures, but during the Great Depression when construction work had nearly ground to a halt, city government took a more active role in the design and construction of public buildings, including the Third District station, in an effort to keep people working. The most outstanding Depression-era building designed by City of Milwaukee employees is Rufus King High School (1932) located at 1801 W. Olive St. that is a splendid example of the Art Deco style.

Mr. Malig's architectural training began with his enrollment in college engineering and design courses. He then became an apprentice to several Milwaukee architects before moving on to his position with the City of Milwaukee. Mr. Malig also served as a director and instructor at a local school for engineering and architecture, the Rheude and Heine College, which dissolved many years ago.

Mr. Malig and his wife Kate lived nearby the Vliet Street police station at 2251 N. 51st St. in an area that is known today as the Washington Heights neighborhood. After his mandatory retirement at age 70 in 1949, Mr. Malig moved to a new house at 7222 W. Burleigh St. where he lived with his wife until his death in 1960 at the age of 81.