



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

400 Yesler Building Seattle, Washington 98104 · (206) 684-0228

LPB 112/88

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

Name and Address of Property: The Bon Marche
1601 Third Avenue

Legal Description: A. A. Denny's 6th Addition, Block 52, lots
1-12

At the public hearing held on April 6, 1988, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Bon Marche as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following criteria of Ordinance 106348:

Section 3.01(2): It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the city, state, or nation;

Section 3.01(3): It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, city, state or nation;

Section 3.01(4): It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction;

Section 3.01(6): Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the city.

DESCRIPTION AND SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Bon Marche Department Store occupies the entire block from the Pine Street to Olive Way and from Third Avenue to Fourth Avenue. The building's footprint measures 250 by 360 feet. The original

four stories and basement provided more than twelve acres of floor space, with five selling floors, a series of sub-basements for stock, heating, and ventilation systems, and above the fourth floor, three lofts provided space for elevator machinery, shops, and auxiliary store services. As the only whole block development in Seattle at the time, the Bon Marche undoubtedly projected a most imposing, monumental aspect to pedestrians. However, the architect's manipulation of the facade through layering, ornament, and street level amenities softened the effect of its massive, box-like form and bulk.

This building adapted modernistic design principles to the problems of the retail store. In contrast to earlier department stores, such as Frederick and Nelson (1918) at Fifth and Pine, and the J.S. Graham Co./Doyle Building (1919) at Second and Pine, both inspired by Beaux Arts Classicism, the later Bon Marche was greatly simplified into a box with chamfered edges. It had no overhanging cornices or classical details, but instead low relief geometric and naturalistic designs derived from the twentieth century Western European decorative movement, Art Deco. Faced in beige limestone, the building's angular form predominates. However, a complex, richly textured ornamental vocabulary in the window spandrel sections, at the parapet level, and along the four block long cast-copper marquee provided for an exceptionally interesting retail block. This retail building recognized progressive and new styled modernism while not totally abandoning the more traditional, highly ornamented architecture of the Beaux Arts period.

The building shares features with several other downtown buildings designed by the John Graham Company during 1929-1930. The hexagon and floral/triangular designs that define the staircase sections of the Bon Marche are identical to those above the main entrance of the Exchange Building on Second Avenue at Marion Street. The copper marquee along the First Avenue facade of the Exchange Building is similar in character to that of the Bon Marche's marquee. Another department store built for Fraser-Patterson in 1930 on the site of the early Bon Marche (Second and Pike) is of essentially the same "modernistic" design as that of the Bon. Its decorative motifs are abstractions of native Northwest water, evergreen, and bird images.

From a retailing standpoint, the Bon Marche's ground level entrances and display windows were probably the most significant "billboards" and pedestrian enticements. Nine customer entrances were provided, two on Pine Street, two on Olvie Way, two on Third Avenue, and three on Fourth Avenue. Delivery entrances were housed on Third Avenue at mid-block. The major design element was a cast ornamental marquee extending the entire length of the building and outward over most of the sidewalk to shelter pedestrians. Its surfaces were richly patterned with underwater motifs, consisting of fish, snails, seahorses and scallops. Outside of downtown, the 1930 National Fisheries Building in Montlake, also by Graham, is similarly decorated with seahorses, scallops, and fish.

Above the marquee, octagonal medallions inset with floral baskets were placed along the rectangular stone patterned facade. The eight-sided geometry of these floral medallions echoed the shape of the building itself, with its four sides and four chamfered corners. The building's windows were either one, two, or three sectioned double hung sash type, and, with the exception of the single corner windows, were recessed from the facade by layered moldings surrounding the three floored spandrel section. Major windows at the second floor level had low relief lintels decorated with groundcover leaves, ferns, and vines. The spandrels between the third and fourth floor windows generally had shields, crosses, and spirals. The spandrels under the three top most single pane windows that define the corners of the buildings was decorated with floral, laved octagons differing from those above the ground level, which had curved corners.

With the exception of the midblock entrance on Fourth Avenue, major entrances were embellished above the first floor by one-and-a-half-story high recessed balconies with octagon and spiral motif metal grillwork framed by floral patterned lintles similar to those lintels used elsewhere above the second floor windows. These entrances, which also housed staircases, included small segmental arched windows between floors and were delineated by a surface treatment of hexagons and floral triangles - a pattern that can also be seen at the Second Avenue entrance to the Exchange Building.

According to a 1929 architectural rendering, the central entrance on Fourth Avenue was to have been treated as a major focal point by manipulating the depth of that facade and making the vertical piers more pillar-like, with ornamental capitals that would have risen above the parapet frieze. The central bays of each side of the building would have extended higher than the top edge; on Fourth Avenue, five bays of windows would have been pushed forward from the facade and the fluted piers defining these bays would have emphasized the vertical in a similar fashion as do the piers along the north facade of the Exchange Building. The added height of this section would have drawn attention to its role as a ceremonial entrance. The final schematics and execution simplified the facade treatment, eliminating or reducing the broken facade surface, the vertical orientation, and the decorative piers. It did, however, cap the building with a very rich floral frieze broken, at intervals, by oriel windows.

In 1950, the addition of three selling floors was also designed by the same John Graham firm and it was generally sensitive to the original design. However, the popularity of ornament-less contemporary architecture, and cost measures that may have prohibited the carved limestone decoration of the original, are factors that probably influenced its simplified treatment. The architects' eliminated the parapet level frieze and nearly all carved lintels and spandrel decoration on the upper floors. They did reconstruct and continue the hexagonal and floral pattern-work for the staircase/entrances. New spandrels were simplified with

crosses instead of the more elaborate shields, crosses, and spiraling vines. Also during the 1950 renovation, the corner windows were infilled. This step, along with the additional height of the building, makes the latered building appear more massive and less gracefully scaled than the original. The quarry stone for the addition was matched as closely as possible to the original, but it is of a slightly lighter, pinker tone and consequently, one can determine the places where the older and newer sections were merged and which windows were filled in.

Although a number of modifications have occurred to the interiors, the main shopping floor remains essentially as it was designed. Architectural features of particular interest include a wavelike, layered ceiling treatment, floral decorated, octagonal shaped pillars, a handsome wood framed elevator wall with crystalline capping, and chevron and geometric metal staircase railings.

The Bon Marche of 1929 represents a significant milestone in marketing, in the development of a home grown business into a major Northwest retailing establishment and in the solid grounding of the downtown commercial district in the Pike/Pine corridor.

The opening of the Bon Marche at Third and Pine Street ushered in a new period of growth; the occasion was marked by the printing of a celebratory brochure describing the store's rise from a small dry goods business in Seattle's Belltown section in 1890 to its new store building at Second Avenue and Pike Street where, with many expansions, it remained from 1900-1929.

Cable cars jangled as they slued around the curve from Pike Street to begin their ascent of the Second Avenue hill. Pedestrians jumped off the track for their lives. Passengers grabbed frantically for their hats. Plodding horses became suddenly skittish as the clanging vehicles moved by. Now and then a vagrant cow stopped in the middle of the tracks to nibble a tuft of grass, placidly unaware that it was obstructing traffic. On the corner, ladies in long skirts swept the threshold of the newly built store building as they moved in and out. This was Seattle in 1900. The store was the new Bon Marche, just moved from its old location in Belltown to what was then the margin of Seattle's business district. (Quoted from publicity brochure published in 1929)

At the turn of the century, Seattle's primary retail district was south of Madison Street and certainly it was a risk to establish such a business at the north end of the downtown. But the founder of The Bon Marche, Edward Nordhoff, was a man accustomed to risks.

Nordhoff, born in Germany in 1858, immigrated to Holland and then to France where, in the 1870's he found work at the Louvre Department Store in Paris. During his employ, he learned of the acclaimed integrity of a rival emporium on the Left Bank - the Maison a Boucieaut au Bon Marche. "Someday, he said, "I will have

a store. It will be a store like the Bon Marche, so friendly and so willing to serve, that people will think it more their store than mine."

Arriving in America in 1876, Nordhoff worked for Marshall Field in Chicago and as the manager of Willoughby and Robie. Because of poor health, he moved West, ultimately settling in Seattle with his new wife, Josephine Bremman. In May, 1890, they opened a small dry goods store in Bell Town, which many people at the time thought was destined to become the business center of Seattle. The first home of the Bon Marche was a small frame building at First Avenue and Cedar Street; the couple invested \$1,200 in savings to stock the store. The 1929 brochure points with pride to the fact that the original \$1,200 is all the capital The Bon Marche ever had. Six building projects were financed, including the 1929 building - all on the original \$1,200 investment.

Even the Financial Panic of 1893 proved advantageous. At a time when every penny was of value, Nordhoff brought the first supply of pennies to the city. Until that time, there had been no pennies in circulation in Seattle, and change was given in the nearest nickel. Nordhoff's "penny economies" and 69 cent or 98 cent sales brought people to his store for what little savings they could achieve.

In 1896, the Bon moved to a one-story building at Second and Pike, nearer to the heart of the business district. In 1899, Nordhoff died of tuberculosis and the business was continued by his wife and his brother Rudolph, who had come west from Buffalo, New York. The Alaska Gold Rush and the Spanish American War kept the Seattle economy booming and the Bon grew and expanded to meet this growth. Sales increased from \$338,000 in 1900 to \$8 million in 1923. In 1902, a three story addition to the one story building was completed. In 1907, another 60 feet on Second Avenue was acquired and in 1912, the six story building added. In 1910, the rest of the block was acquired and in 1912, the six story terra cotta Bon Marche was completed on the corner of Second and Union Streets. The building was referred to as the McDermott Building after Frank McDermott, Josephine Nordhoff's second husband and president of the company for many years. The 1912 expansion made the Bon Marche the third largest "cash store" in the county, according to some accounts.

Through all this expansion, those in charge of the Bon Marche kept in mind that no business, no matter how well conducted, could progress unless the city and the surrounding country also progressed. Early in its history, therefore, the Bon Marche inaugurated the policy of buying and selling Northwestern products in preference to those made elsewhere, frequently at a sacrifice of profit. Realizing also that diversification was desirable, the store encouraged the establishment of new industries in Seattle and the Northwest, including knitting mills, quilt factories, furniture factories, fixture works, textile mills and clothing factories.

Before the First World War, the Bon, again cramped for space, took options on the block bounded by Pine, Olive, Third and Fourth Avenues. Finally, in 1929, the new \$5 million store was opened. By this time, the company had been purchased by Hahn Department Stores, predecessor to Allied Stores. The new store sufficed until the 1950's when the additional floors were added and a multi-storied parking garage appeared across Third Avenue connected to the store by a skybridge.

When the Second World War brought thousands of new people to the area, the management, noting the ring of suburban cities, began expanding. The 1950 Northgate store initiated nationally the concept of retailing in shopping center malls. In 1976, the corporation officially changed its name to "The Bon" and despite its continuing expansion -- the Bon operates more than 30 stores in a five state area -- the corporate offices are maintained in the 1929 downtown Seattle store.

Wilbur J. Fix, President of The Bon Northwest, says of the store's history:

The heritage of the Bon Marche, the little store in the frame building in Belltown that grew into The Bon of today, is an inspiration to all of us who work here. As it developed through years, it became an integral part of the character and economy of not only Seattle, but Tacoma, Spokane, and many other communities across Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Utah.

Apart from its social and economic impact upon the Northwest, the Bon Marche at Fourth and Pine is significant both from urban design and architectural standpoints. As the first full block development in Seattle, it demonstrated that such large scaled projects could be responsive to their environment, and that through the manipulation of facade and the provision of pedestrian amenities, a building could be imposing without being intimidating. The street level display windows, the marvelous ornamental marquee, and the richly textured stylized bas reliefs provided continuous interest to the pedestrian. The building's 1950 additions are less satisfactory, particularly for having removed the ornate frieze of the original cornice and replaced it with a plain edge. Nevertheless, the additional floors matched closely the general characteristics of the original design, the original store, and the diamond patterned surfacing above the entrances.

Architecturally, the building is an early and excellent example of the modernistic style applied to a retail establishment. The other examples in Seattle, J.C. Penney's and W.F. Woolworth, were completed after the Bon Marche. J.C. Penney (original Fraser-Patterson, 1930), was probably designed by the same staff that worked on the Bon Marche and the Exchange Building (1929). Woolworth's, designed in 1940, is a much later effort by out-of-the area designers working with the "corporate image" that was

projected in similar buildings across the country. Of particular interest and in keeping with the Bon Marche management concern with bolstering Northwest products and industry, every structural unit of the Bon Marche which could be procured in the Pacific Northwest was bought here. Fixtures and furniture were made in local factories. The indirect lighting system was made in Seattle and installed by Seattle labor.

John Graham Sr., architect of the Bon Marche, was one of Seattle's most prolific designers of large scale commercial and office buildings. Born on the Isle of Man and apprenticed to an architect in England, Graham arrived in Seattle at the turn of the century and designed a number of residential and small commercial buildings individually and later in the partnership of Graham and Meyers. By 1922, he had established himself firmly as a designer of efficient, up-to-date space finely detailed in the then popular Beaux Arts classical tastes of the day. However, the majority of his work, executed in the late 1920's, took on the more contemporary modernistic styling of East Coast cities. Among his major works in Seattle are the Bon Marche, the Exchange Building, the Roosevelt Hotel, the Government Fisheries Building, the Dexter Horton Building, the Bank of California, the Frederick and Nelson, the Joshua Green Building, the University Methodist Church, the Plymouth Congregational Church, and the Deanery of the Episcopal Diocese of Seattle. In Tacoma, he designed the Medical Arts Building, now the City Hall. He was the architect for the Ford Motor Company prior to his retirement in 1945.

The features of the Landmark to be preserved, include:

the entire exterior of the building, including the marquee and the roof; and the decorative ornament of the first floor ceiling, columns, elevator wall surrounds, and two sets of stairs and stair railings.

Issued: April 11, 1988

Karen Gordon

Karen Gordon
City Historic Preservation Officer

KG:mlk

cc: Robert Weaver, Chair, Landmarks Preservation Board
Alan Oiyee, DCLU
Ken Mar, DCLU
Terry Partington
Anne Lawler
William Bain

F&ED
69.36