



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

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LPB 220/89

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

Name and Address of Property: Seattle Art Museum at Volunteer
Park
1400 East Prospect Street

Legal Description: Volunteer Park

At the public hearing held on June 21, 1989, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Seattle Art Museum at Volunteer Park 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(5): It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder;

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

The Site

Volunteer Park was named in 1901 for those who fought in the Spanish American War; before that, it was called City Park. The Seattle Art Museum (referred to as SAM) is centrally located within Volunteer Park on Capitol Hill. The City permitted SAM to be sited at the premier location in the park -- on high ground, having a western exposure toward the City several hundred feet below Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. North of the museum is the Conservatory, restored in 1985. To the south stands the hulking brick Water Tower (1906). Southwest of SAM, about 200 feet, is the memorial to Thomas Burke, judge, developer and promoter of commerce with the Orient. The monument was also designed by Gould (1926). In addition to the buildings named, the site also has a comfort station to the east of the Conservatory. This structure probably originated with the Olmsted plan. To the south of the Conservatory stands a monument to William Henry Seward.

Originally at the site of the museum there was a large and elaborate gazebo. In the turn-of-the-century timber style, probably designed by the Olmsteds. The Olmsted office objected to placing the museum within Volunteer Park because they saw such post-facto interjections as violations of a complete design. They were so adamant in this position that a long-standing association with Gould was terminated. The landscape designed was made by Hoggson of Seattle. Consequently, the spare landscaping on the entry side of SAM is an early example of plantings in the modern idiom.

The site slopes down toward the east permitting windows and service access at the basement level. Mature trees and ornamental shrubs surround the building except on the west. A service drive passes along the north side to a loading dock at the basement level.

The Building

Gould set the building back from the park road so that the central entrance, on axis with the reservoir, could be viewed with sufficient distance from the road. The building spreads 236 feet north to south, and is 80 feet in depth from front to back plus a projection of 15 feet for the central mass in back. From the west (front) side it appears to be one story high, but it has a basement and sub-basement. It is clad entirely in pale sandstone arranged in alternating bands of stone 10 inches and 30 inches high. The blocks are large -- 52 inches across -- but set with very narrow joints. The result is that the massing is simple and virtually unreleased, as the modern style dictated. The entry is centrally located in a projecting, convex mass 10 feet higher than the wings. There are windows only at the entry and on the east side. The latter are located on the basement and main stories.

The upper windows are shaped with battered jambs, as in the "Jugendstil" of northern Europe. The same profile may be found locally in the doors of the earlier Exchange Building by John Graham (1930). Additions were built on to the north and east in 1955, designed by Young Richardson and Carlton with the participation of architect Carl Gould, Jr.

The public entrance is made prominent by having the entry level four feet below that of the galleries, having a mass that is ten feet higher than the wings and curving forward of the wings. The mass is divided into three bays which have doors and above them glazing covered by a grills. The grills are a very inventive design, somewhat recalling a detail from the Exchange Building.

The grills are a special feature of SAM because of the Art Modern style used, and because of the early use of aluminum. Aluminum used as a decorative material was in its infancy: it was primarily considered an industrial product where lightweight and corrosion resistance were needed. Gould and his draftsman, Walter Wurdeman, demonstrated that aluminum could be a finely finished product. Because of its newness, the specification for the building construction took great care to instruct the contractor in how to work the new material. Aluminum members also frame the windows, doors and vestibule.

The original design included only a small sub-basement for the mechanical room and boiler. During construction a change order was made to increase the sub-basement under the north wing in order to give adequate bearing for the structure in that area. Fortunately, the change resulted in additional storage space which has become filled.

Gould initially thought of the building as clad in white marble. Fuller, in keeping with his directive to make an indigenous building, suggested using pale limestone from the nearby Wilkenson Quarry. Economy was also an important factor in opting for limestone. The north, east and south facades above the basement are stucco.

Detailing was kept to a minimum and occurs at the entry and the wing tips. The entrance mass is capped by detailing of four-layered planes in low relief. Some early sketches showed panels to be sculpted by Dudley Pratt, who was Gould's favored artist in his architecture, but they finally were not included. At the ends of the wings the facade comes forward a few feet. These elements contain niches, shaped in plan like flattened parabolas. The surface of the niches are sculpted like oversized fluttering found on Greek columns. (This motif was used on the earlier Seattle Times Building by R.C. Reamer in 1930.) Each niche forms the backdrop for a basin/fountain. These basins are unique for they were cast in aluminum and turned on lathes of great size such as those used to make ship's propellers. These fountains are not currently in use (in 1989).

From the exterior two additions are visible: the Gould Room on the east side south of the center line (designed by Young, Richardson and Carlton, 1955); an additional gallery at the middle of the north side; and additional administrative spaces on the northeast corner.

The structure, including walls, columns, beams, floors and flat roofs, was made of reinforced concrete. The structural module (north to south) is 12 feet 6 inches. There is some evidence that particular care was given to design the roof so that earthquakes would not crack the roof and walls. Special care was made because the roof is interrupted by large skylights. The skylights are spanned by steel trusses.

The Interior

Traditionally, museums were planned like renaissance palaces, where circulation required going to one room after another in a strictly linear fashion. Gould developed a new way, consistent with his new architecture, to arrange rooms such that a variety of sequences and pathways could be planned for each kind of exhibit. Generally, the main floor plan is arranged symmetrically about the east-west axis, thus allowing the number of galleries to be divided in half. Then, to each side of the centerline, he planned galleries in ranks: beginning with two rooms of medium width (24 feet) directly accessible from the foyer, then a rank of three large rooms in the middle (each 32 feet by 24 feet) and accessible from the garden court, and finally on the east a narrow room (16 feet by 65 feet) accessible from two of the middle galleries. The multiple access points allowed further sub-division of galleries and a hierarchy of spaces appropriate for each show. This planning device was particularly well suited to SAM, because initially it had almost no permanent collection. The hierarchy was clearly readable outside, where the north and south facades stepped back toward the east.

Gould also gave thorough design consideration to each public room. Beginning immediately inside the three doorways is a foyer which has its axis perpendicular to the approach. The space is shallow and wide (12 feet by 64 feet) and very tall (28 feet) -- the foyer is about four feet below the level of the galleries. From design drawings we know that the foyer was carefully studied by Gould. His final resolution was to adopt a scheme of slick, curving surfaces covered in elegant, shiny materials: gold-glazed terracotta in horizontal bands 18 inches apart, silver foil on the ceiling and terrazzo flooring. Bronze terrazzo strips are arranged in a radiating pattern and divide fields of stone and cast terrazzo. Green scagliola (artificial marble effect) was used on the large pillars that frame the gateway to the space beyond. The foyer is flooded in daylight coming through the large west facing windows. Gould also provided lighting fixtures of his own design. Left and right of the foyer there are stairs leading to the front galleries through portals made of layered planes. These stairs are curving toward the foyer in a proper neo-classical way.

From the southeast corner of the foyer a stair leads to the basement where the library and auditorium are accessible by the public. The remainder of the basement is for offices and curatorial functions. The library contains tables, chairs, bookcases, lighting fixtures and decorative features designed as part of the original work. To the north of the library is the former Board of Trustees room. It is lined with wood veneer and banded in the same pattern as the foyer. This handsome room is now shielded from public view because it is used by the staff.

Going straight ahead (toward the Garden Court) there are three sets of steps contained by columns 18 feet high and 2 feet wide. These columns visually relate to those at the entry, but they are rectangular and are relieved only by planes on the narrow edges. The surfaces are made of green scagliola.

The architecture of the Garden Court is so cleverly arranged that it seems to be not a room but truly an outdoor court. The Court, the largest space at 35 feet by 64 feet and 24 feet high, is still skylighted (unlike the galleries where the skylights have been obscured). The Court theme is set by the random-sized slate flooring, the same material as used outside on the walks. The walls are imitation travertine with horizontal joints in deep relief at 18 inches on center. At the top of the walls is a band 4 feet high that has a four-layered relief, a common theme inside, which is simply cut off -- without molding or cornice. The skylight panels extend beyond sight of the walls. This artifice gives the impression of endless skylighting -- a daringly different aesthetic for a ceiling plane. The portals on each side of the Court also seem like garden gates. They are wrought iron -- elegantly designed and worked -- and they may be closed (each opening is 7 feet 6 inches wide by 12 feet high). The gates were donated by Eugenie Atwood Fuller and designed and fabricated by Samuel Yellin of Philadelphia.

Passing through them to the north or south, there are low, narrow transitional spaces which have ceilings in the four-layered motif and original ceiling lights. Beyond them one reaches the three major galleries and smaller rooms. These rooms were carefully studied to provide primary locations for hanging art works -- usually six in each room -- by arranging entrances not on axes with each other and by angling the corners. Apparently, Gould had gained considerable experience in arranging galleries when he designed (1926) the Henry Gallery at the University of Washington (the first building on the west coast built "de novo" as a museum).

For the galleries Gould selected building materials which were either commonplace or advanced for his time. The walls had a wainscot 2 feet high and above it monks cloth (replaced by safer material) over fir boards. The wainscot boards have beveled joints on which line up details of air grills. The most advanced material for the time is the flooring. Still in use and tinted by layers of wax, the pressed fiberboard (later known as Masonite) was so new as to be virtually experimental. The electric lighting system, now abandoned, was designed to use new General Electric

lamps and lamp-fixtures. These lamps provided whiter light at lower operating temperatures than anything before. Advances in the technology soon overtook the initial installation.

In addition to the large skylight over the Court, the six major side galleries had skylights. The skylights remain, but they now are blanked off in the interest of conservation of the artworks.

The smaller galleries on the east side are vaulted with "flattened" arches that have banding in the Art Deco style. The rooms are daylighted by windows, because these were originally planned as study rooms. They are now used for display of stone, terra cotta and metal figures.

The newer rooms toward the southeast are: at the basement level a reception room, at the main level a display gallery which lately has been used for curatorial purposes. There is a new gallery addition on the north side; offices fill the space below it.

During 1988 major repairs and restoration have been accomplished.

SIGNIFICANCE

Summary of Significance

There are many factors which qualify the Seattle Art Museum as a City landmark:

Persons of historical importance connected with the building -
The architect for SAM, Carl F. Gould, was one of the early masters of architecture in Seattle. He created the master plan for the University of Washington and designed the first twenty buildings there between 1915 and 1935. He founded the School of Architecture in 1915. His commercial, industrial and residential designs number over 400.

Dr. Richard Fuller was director of the Museum and Chairman of the Board. His singular financial and artistic contributions are immeasurable.

Building involved in significant cultural contributions -
As the central building of the Seattle Art Museum for almost 60 years, the building's cultural contribution to the City and the region is significant. Several collections at SAM are of international stature. SAM is the largest museum in the five northwestern states.

Building is architecturally significant, and illustrating technological or material advances -
When completed in 1933, SAM was the first Museum in the United States built in the "Art Moderne" style. It is recognized as a masterpiece in Deco design and ranked among the 100 greatest buildings constructed between 1885 and 1935. The building is significant for the use of several materials that were experimental at the time or were nearly unique in this region.

Gould specified several experimental materials and systems which have become commonplace: pressed wood fiber flooring; aluminum windows, doors and decorative features; an advanced lighting system; a ventilation system that regulated humidity.

Outstanding work of Carl F. Gould -

Although Carl F. Gould's commercial, industrial and residential designs number over 400, SAM is considered the magnus opus among the long list of his distinguished works.

The building has acquired regional prominence for the architectural innovation of its architect, for the high quality of his design, and for the durability of the structure.

The siting is also significant -

SAM is prominently sited in Volunteer Park, and is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood and City. The entire park is listed on the National Historic Register.

The story of how such a rich beneficence came to Seattle in the depth of the great depression is also part of SAM's significance. The story begins in the early years of the twentieth century when the Fine Arts Society of Seattle was formed. The purpose of the Society was to promote artistic and cultural awareness in this new and burgeoning city. Soon after Carl F. Gould's arrival in Seattle in 1908, he became involved in the Society. He rose to president in 1914. After his term in office he remained active, principally as chairman for mounting exhibitions. He began the Northwest Annual show of contemporary regional artists. In 1926 he again led the Society and expanded its mission. He reorganized it as the Art Institute of Seattle, which took space in Horace C. Henry's Home and Galleries (vacated in 1926 when his collection moved to Gould's newly designed Henry Gallery at the University of Washington).

In the same year, Professor Richard Fuller, a newcomer to Seattle, joined the Art Institute as an officer of the Board. He had acquired a collection of Asian artifacts which ultimately would need a place for display. He also wanted a place suitable for the display of regional artists' works. In 1931 Fuller and his sister received a substantial inheritance. Soon thereafter they offered \$250,000 toward the building of a museum that would be given to the City. About August 1931, Architect Gould, friend and fellow board member of Fuller's, was named the architect for the new building.

Gould had gained considerable experience in arranging shows while acting as curator for the Fine Arts Society and the Art Institute. His experience in planning for galleries was acquired when he designed the Henry Gallery at the University of Washington. The Henry Gallery was the first totally new building for exhibiting art built on the west coast. Furthermore, during his apprentice years (1903-1905) while working for McKim Mead and White, he participated in the design of the great museum for Brooklyn, New York.

Gould began work on the museum immediately, even before the public announcement of the Fuller's gift. Gould's early schematic designs were grand in scope -- a building three times larger than that built. Moreover the designs -- there were at least eight sketch plans -- used an elaborate neo-classical idiom. In September 1931, the stylistic idiom took a totally new expression after Fuller declared that the museum should appear approachable by the public. By that, Fuller meant that traditional styles were imposing, imperious and stand-offish toward the public. Also in September, Fuller announced his gift of \$250,000 with the expectation that matching gifts from the community would follow.

Gould turned toward the Art Moderne style, his first attempt in the new idiom. In that he was assisted by the young and talented Walter Wurdeman. (Wurdeman, a UW graduate, went on to Los Angeles about 1935 to join his classmate, Welton Becket, to form a very successful firm.) By December 1931, Gould's firm had developed an elaborate scheme, having three stories and a grand entry, and an estimated cost exceeding \$500,000. Contrary to Fuller's expectations other contributions were not forthcoming: membership of the Art Institute was not sufficiently broadly based and the economic condition of the entire country was poor. Gould, therefore, responded with a design for a project much reduced in scope and cost. This design was approved in January 1932. The project was bid within the budget of \$225,000, and was awarded to Gjarde Construction Co. Work on the museum began in May 1932; at about the same time the name was changed to the Seattle Art Museum.

Immediately there were discussions concerning the choice of stone to be used on the exterior cladding. Fuller advocated a local material in order to support local industry. Gould found that a part of the Wilkerson Quarry, located near Mt. Rainier, could supply a hard, nearly white sandstone, and that was approved. The interior of SAM was built with several materials that were experimental for that time. These are described in the first part of this nomination. SAM was dedicated in August 1933. Dr. Fuller became Director as well as continuing as chairman of the board. The painter Kenneth Callahan was the first curator.

Since the Seattle Art Museum opened in June, 1933, it has increased immensely in membership, in services provided to this City, and in national stature of its collection, notwithstanding its expansion into an additional building downtown in 1991. SAM insists that the institutional importance of Gould's building remains undiminished. It will contain the internationally prominent Asian Collection.

The Seattle Art Museum at Volunteer Park meets the criteria for historical designation. It was the first permanent home for SAM. It remains the preeminent institution for the visual arts in the region, both in the shows which it mounts from its own collection and those which it brings to Seattle. The design of SAM was innovative in museum planning and its use of modern materials in a modern idiom. SAM ranks with the best in the region for buildings built in the 1930's. The building has been described as the magnus opus among a long list of distinguished work by its architect.

The features of the Landmark to be preserved, include:

The entire exterior of the building, including the roof, and the portion of the landscape/site that is in accordance with the Hoggson Plan of 1933, and the following interior features: the entire main floor, and the public areas of the ground floor, including the corridors, the auditorium, the classic gallery, the former Board of Trustees Room, and the library.

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Karen Gordon
City Historic Preservation Officer

KG:dlv

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