

DRAFT

FINAL REPORT

The Proposed Vinton Building Historic District

By a resolution dated February 2, 2005, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Vinton Building Local Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The Vinton Building Local Historic District consists of the single twelve-story building addressed as 600 Woodward Avenue, located at the northeast corner of Woodward Avenue and Congress in the heart of downtown Detroit. Abutting on its north is a continuous row of older, four-to-five story buildings; the block is dominated by the twenty-four story First National Bank Building on the southeast corner of Woodward and Cadillac Square.

Boundaries:

The boundaries of the proposed Vinton Building Local Historic District are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north, a line drawn 40 feet north of and parallel to the south lot line of Lot 57 of Part of Section 1 Governor & Judges Plan, L9 P424-5, extended east and west;

On the east, the centerline of the north-south alley located between Woodward Avenue and Bates Street; and

On the south, the centerline of E. Congress Street; and

On the west, the centerline of Woodward Avenue.

History:

The Vinton Building was built in 1917 for Robert K. Vinton, grandson of the founder of the Vinton Company, a major Detroit building contractor (1858 - 1916). It was designed by the Detroit architect Albert Kahn. The building's history spans the period of Detroit's exponential growth created by the burgeoning automobile industry, halted by the Great Depression, revived to serve as the Arsenal of Democracy, and then going into decline.

Walter A. Vinton established a carpentry business on Detroit's



lower east side in 1858. Born in Utica, New York, he came to Detroit with his family in 1853. Detroit remained a city of wooden buildings until the late-nineteenth century, so Vinton began receiving commissions for residences and frame business blocks. In 1868, however, Vinton's firm began receiving commissions for larger structures. Many of the largest and most prominent buildings in the city were built by the company, including The Detroit Opera House (1869), the Detroit City Hall (1871), and religious structures such as the Woodward Avenue Baptist Church and the First Congregational Church. By 1881, according to *Industries of Michigan - City of Detroit* published in that year, the Vinton Company was ■.. now the oldest carpenter and builder in the city.●

Its three-story, 34' x 90' carpentry workshop employed 120 to 150 hands in that year. Business revenue was \$75,000 during the preceding year.

In 1895 the elder Vinton turned over active management of the firm to his son, Guy Jay Vinton, and the company was incorporated. The younger Vinton expanded the firm's operations to general contracting, equipping the company to handle even the biggest jobs. The Vinton Company was comprised of eleven complete departments, permitting the firm to undertake the entire work of any contract, from turning the first sod to the decorating and furnishing of the completed structure. The Vinton Company factory, located at Woodbridge and Beaubien streets, occupied an entire block by 1910 and had a work force numbering nearly fifteen hundred employees.

Albert Kahn's association with the Vinton Company began when the firm built the Palms Apartment Building in 1901 (by Mason & Kahn) and the Belle Isle Horticultural and Aquarium structures three years later. Between 1905 and 1915, Vinton served as the principal building contractor for Kahn's early factory commissions (the Packard, Hudson, Hupp and Chalmers automobile factories) and for several of Kahn's downtown Detroit structures, ie., the Grinnell Brothers Music Store (Woodward Avenue), the Detroit Free Press Building (on Lafayette near Griswold), Detroit Trust Building, and the Detroit Athletic Club.

In 1916 Robert K. Vinton commissioned Kahn to plan a high-rise commercial structure on Woodward Avenue at Congress. Robert, born in Detroit on April 9, 1892, attended the University of Michigan but did not complete his course work due to the death of his father, Guy Vinton, on December 23, 1910. He came back to Detroit to assist in managing the interests of the Vinton Company, of which he was secretary-treasurer. By the time the Vinton Building was erected in 1917, the business operations were confined to real estate and business investments. The firm had large holdings in Detroit real estate, including two hotels, several apartment houses, and the Vinton Building. Rosa Vinton, widow of Guy J. Vinton, was the president of the company.

The Vinton Building ■was built in the record time of six months● by the George A. Fuller Company, building contractors. Situated on the northeast corner of Woodward Avenue and Congress, the twelve-story building was to be of ■modern fireproof construction.● Intended primarily for offices, the top eleven floors were designed for subdivision for tenants, ■.. allowing for equipment exactly suiting the demand of office-seekers.● One attraction of the building that was advertised in *The Detroit* on August 6, 1917 was that every office had outside windows. It was to be ready for occupancy on August 15, 1917.

On the ground floor in 1919, according to the city directory of that year, was located the William

Penn Restaurant and the cigar shop of Jonathan B Girard. Occupying the second floor was Alldis & Company, real estate and insurance, and the Provident Land Company; on the third floor was the Prudential Insurance Company of America. On the 4th floor was the R.L. Spitzley Heating Company and Fisher Tool and Supply Company. The fifth floor housed the Detroit General Engineering Company, the Inter Insurance Exchange of Auto Owners, and the Michigan Auto Owners Insurance Company, while floors six through ten were filled with law offices, realty companies, engineering companies, insurance companies, and the Detroit Lumber Dealers Association. Tenants on eight included the Steward & Fry Realty, developers of Rosedale Park, and the Palmolive Company, makers of soaps.

The Vinton Company had its offices and realty company on the eleventh floor, along with the Detroit Baptist Union, in which Vinton was involved. The twelfth floor was occupied by the realty and land companies of James G. Pierce, including the Pierce Realty Company, Majestic Land Company, Woodward Groveland Company, Riverford Hills Land Company, and several others. In general, the building's early tenancy reflected the professional services one would expect to find in the downtown of a city like Detroit, undergoing exponential growth in the second decade of the twentieth century.

By 1924-5, the Vinton Building had been sold to the Guaranty Trust Company, a financial institution. The first floor occupancy had changed to Capitol Clothes Shop and Harry A. Hyman's men's furnishings store in the southern storefront, and St. John Arbors Company restaurant on the north side. In the lobby was Frederick O. Reed's cigar stand. The second floor was occupied by the Guaranty Trust Company of Detroit, and accountants, lawyers, real estate agents and manufacturers agents occupied the rest of the building. The land companies of James G. Pierce continued to occupy the twelfth floor.

By 1930 (city directory), the Holdreith Chop House was in the basement of the Guaranty Building and the Guaranty Trust Company of Detroit and Guaranty Investment Company occupied the first floor. The mortgage department and trust department of Guaranty Trust were on the second floor. Vacancies were beginning to appear, indicative of the hard economic times, but land companies still occupied the twelfth floor.

The Guaranty Trust Company, like so many other financial institutions, was a casualty of the Great Depression. It was no longer in the building by 1932-33, although the building was still referred to as the Guaranty Building. The first and second floors previously occupied by Guaranty Trust were vacant, and lawyers dominated the tenant list. In 1934, the basement was occupied by Glaser's Restaurant; by 1938, the basement was vacant, the first floor was occupied by George & Henry, a men's furnishings store, and the Building Services Employees' International Union Local #153, Detroit Theater Janitors Union Local 79, and the Cemetery and Greenskeepers Union Local 154 occupied the second floor. Law and real estate offices were joined by collection agencies in the offices above. Freud and Company, a real estate and land company specializing in far-east side subdivisions, together with other Freud holdings, among them the Cadillac Development Company and Marshland Boulevard Land Company, were located on the sixth floor in 1938, along with the Herschfeld Company, steamship agents. By the late 1940s, the building was known as the Michigan Bank Building; it was last occupied as the Law Center Building. It is now vacant and slated for private redevelopment.

Architecture

While Albert Kahn is best known world-wide for his concrete-frame manufacturing buildings, he did not consider their spare exteriors suitable for public structures. In spite of the modern appearance of such pioneering buildings as Packard #10, Kahn was no minimalist; in the twentieth century divide between progressive architecture rooted in tradition and an architecture representing a break with the past, he stood far closer to Goodhue than to Gropius.

It would make a fascinating study to trace the use of historical styles in Kahn's work from the Tudor/Elizabethan he seems to have taken with him from Mason's office, to the elegant Art Deco of the Fisher Building. Even factory office buildings from the very end of his life reflect classical precedents, even if their portico-like entrance facades are bare of ornament.

One of the threads running through the Kahn works is the use of Romanesque details, mostly in what might be termed buildings of secondary importance. It is difficult to find the sources of this manner without extensive research, but it appears that Kahn admired Richardson greatly, which could account for an interest in the Romanesque. Although Louis Sullivan offered Kahn the position vacated by the just-fired Frank Lloyd Wright, it appears from later quotes that Kahn had little interest in the work of either of Chicago's great architects; nonetheless, he was certainly aware of their works. On the other hand, Chicago's Daniel Burnham had made a major appearance on the Detroit scene just about the time that Kahn began to design tall buildings with the Ford, Dime, and David Whitney Buildings. All of these influences may have had a part in forming the design of the Vinton Building.

It is uncertain when Kahn began to use Romanesque detail, but the practice was well-established by the time the Vinton Building was designed, appearing in such structures as the Detroit Athletic Club Garage, now demolished. Likewise the use of a round-arch window to cap a multi-story vertical row of windows was used by many architects, perhaps rooted even in Victorian commercial buildings which might have no emphasis on vertical bays, but still might have round-topped windows only on the top floor, with rectangular windows used below. Well-published buildings like Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium in Chicago used vertical bays of windows terminating in an arch long before Kahn entered the architectural profession.

The immediate predecessor to the Vinton Building in Kahn's output is the Kresge/Kales Building of 1915 at Adams and Park. There, a larger and taller structure groups the vertical windows into bays two windows wide, the culminating arches being thus of larger size and scale. The Kresge/Kales also shares the device of a shallow gable at the top of the main facade, a device Kahn used in many settings and over a period of years. (These largely undetailed gable/pediments appear on low-rise factories as well as taller buildings like Kiefer Hospital.) The Kresge/Kales Building seems to mix decorative elements and has a vaguely classical feel to it; an interesting and successful design, it is nonetheless a way station on the way to the Vinton Building.

The Vinton Building is a twelve-story office tower of modest size and scale. It occupies a corner site with forty feet of frontage on Woodward Avenue and a depth of one hundred feet along Congress.

Promotional materials of the time noted that every office had exposure to direct sunlight and that there were no light wells simply put a good face on the fact that the building is only forty feet deep, and with elevator and service core arranged along the northern wall, there is no need for light courts or, in fact, space for them.

Built of light grey brick and terra-cotta, the design does follow the ■classical• formula developed by Sullivan for tall buildings; a base consisting of ground-floor storefronts and a second floor of easily accessible secondary public-access space expressed on the exterior by the horizontal separation of that floor from both the ground floor and the floors above, and the use of slightly taller windows. The ■shaft• is then expressed by vertical rows of windows, slightly recessed between the dividing piers, and terminated in the arch-topped windows of the top story. A string course at the level of the spring of the arches and the ornament of the arches themselves divide the ■shaft• from the ■capital• which is designed with a little height of masonry parapet decorated with evenly-spaced roundels, and capped by a cornice of small-scale Lombard arcading. On the front facade, the arcading follows the line of the shallow gable, giving a sense of termination to the tall, narrow facade and providing space for a panel●now missing●containing the word ■VINTON.● The corners are softened but also emphasized by inset terra cotta in a barley-twist pattern.

Kahn has created here a textbook example of a successful design in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century search for a valid expression of the tall building. He has reduced the design to its essentials and used the historical ornament to serve the design, not to control it. In this relatively small building, the grouping of the windows into recessed vertical rows capped by round-arched windows serves to express the height of the tall building while also providing a device which terminates the verticality without being abrupt. The shallow gable●too shallow to suggest that it is actually the end of a roof●successfully gives the front facade a feeling of completion without dominating the composition. Purists might argue that the design fails to express the steel frame within, as there are two or three windows to every structural bay. That is, however, the only criticism that might be leveled in the context of the principles articulated by the Chicago School, other than the use of period ornament. Valid criticism or not, the same departure from ■principle• can be found in works of Chicago architects as well.

Above the ground floor, the building has changed little over time. Some of the terra-cotta ornament is missing, but otherwise the design is intact. The ground floor has been refaced several times, most recently in a 1980s tax-credit project which attempted to suggest the original storefronts.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets criteria C as provided in the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act and in local ordinance. These criteria refer to resources:

C. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board: The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Edward Francis, Lucile Cruz Gajec, Marie M. Gardner, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members

of their staff are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

Vinton Building: Bibliography

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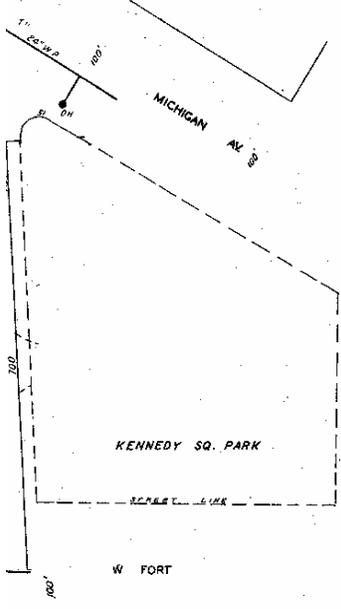
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Boundaries of the proposed district are outlined in heavy black lines

VINTON BUILDING HISTORIC DISTRICT



Campus Martius

