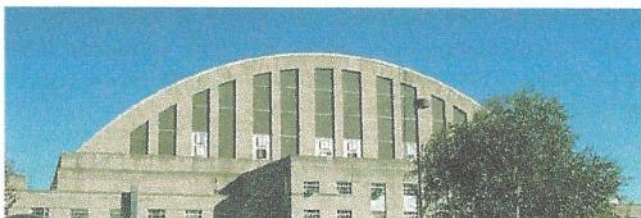


Nathan C. Wyeth and the "Greco Deco" Style

By Linda Lyons

Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of articles based on Linda Lyons' Presentation "Art Deco and Art Moderne Municipal Buildings: The Work of Nathan C. Wyeth, Municipal Architect 1934-1946" delivered at the conference "Preserving Municipal Architecture: Two Centuries of Building by the City for the City."



Last but not least among the municipal buildings designed by Nathan C. Wyeth was the D.C. National Guard Armory. The Guard was in desperate need of a building because their then current armory, the old National Hotel at 6th and Pennsylvania, had been purchased by the District to be included in the new Municipal Center. One problem was choosing a site for the new building. Planners and District officials favored a site near the east end of East Capitol Street, where it would become part of a huge recreational development. However, some members of Congress had other ideas, favoring other sites or no construction at all. From the beginning, it was intended that the structure have a large drill hall that could host important civic and national functions and seat thousands of people. At last, the six-block site was approved and acquired.

A model of the building approved in September of 1939 outlines the basic structure. The central drill hall with its "'union station' roof," as it was called, was to be surrounded on all four sides by the headquarters of the various Guard units.

The drill hall would contain 350 by 200 feet of clear space. Galleries set back on all four sides would have a capacity of about 4,000 people, while

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movable seating could handle 6,000 more. The basement, entered directly from the south side of the building, would have space for storage, target ranges and other facilities and could accommodate such large equipment as anti-aircraft guns. Wyeth originally designed the structure to be made of economical brick, but citizen protests and a ruling of the Commission of Fine Arts changed that to limestone. The designs were completed in 1940 and the building itself was finished in February of 1942. But for the D.C. National Guard, the quest for a new building was not over, World War II had begun, and it was the FBI, not the Guard, that occupied the building until the middle of 1947.

The Armory is the most utilitarian of the three Wyeth-designed buildings, yet it is not inelegant. We can see it as a series of streamlined cubes surrounding that "union station roof" of the drill hall. Ornament is uncomplicated; the cornices of the cubes are simple horizontal lines, paralleling the horizontal lines that link the metal windows.

The north and south entrances are given more attention, with vertical stacks of windows, separated by decorative metal spandrels, and carved titles over the doorways. The most important north entrance gets the major symbolic ornament, an incised stylized eagle just below the flagpole.

But overall, it is the skillful massing of this vast structure that impresses the viewer - invoking a Moderne sensibility while getting the job done.

