



Built to Last

No. 8

Baltimore Trust Company Building

10 Light Street, Baltimore (1929, Taylor & Fisher; Smith & May, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

Baltimore's only "setback" skyscraper, the Baltimore Trust Building is fine example of the Art Deco commercial style in America. The interior features mosaics by Hildreth Meier, who designed many decorative features for New York's Radio City Music Hall and St. Bartholomew's Church.

The Baltimore Trust Company Building is an epilogue to the post-1904-Fire commercial building boom in Baltimore. Its fateful completion on the eve of the stock market crash of October 1929 and virtual abandonment for nearly a decade thereafter made the building's Art Deco style—a style suggestive of progress, luxury and modernity—a pathetically ironic emblem of Baltimore's shattered Depression-era economy.

The 1928-9 Baltimore Trust building replaced the 1901 Parker & Thomas-designed International Trust Company Building that had survived the Great Fire of 1904. After a series of mergers, the Baltimore Trust Company gained ownership of the Light Street Property in 1910. While many companies elected to relocate a few blocks to the west of the traditional Calvert Street financial and commercial corridor after the Great Fire, the rare survivors (most notably the Mercantile Trust & Deposit and Alex. Brown & Sons buildings) maintained their old headquarters in the district, supplementing them, as needed, with rental office spaces or, as in the case of the Mercantile, an

additional office building closer to Charles Street. By 1928, when the Baltimore Trust Company chose to rebuild, its lot on Light Street (between the traditional financial center on Calvert and the newer one on Charles) had become prime real estate.

While it may seem like a stretch to link the 1928-9 Baltimore Trust Building to the Great Fire of 1904, ornamental panels on the building make the connection to the Fire manifest. These panels attest to the enduring rhetorical viability of the Fire as a representation of the city's self-proclaimed virtues of dauntless progress, revitalized prosperity and triumph over adversity. It also seems likely that the Baltimore Trust panels specifically served to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Fire, which would have coincided with the grand opening of the Art Deco skyscraper.

The need for additional office space was the pragmatic reason for replacing the 1901 structure. In doing so, the company also gained the opportunity in Baltimore to make a unique statement of progress and modernity in its choice of the Art Deco style. The flurry of new construction in the decade or so after the Great Fire left the downtown area, by the end of World War I, well-stocked with mid-rise Beaux-arts commercial buildings, such that relatively few were being built in this area in the 1920s. Those that were being built tended to follow the



Baltimore Trust Company from the southeast. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

classicizing stylistic lead of landmarks such as Parker & Thomas, Hale & Rogers's B & O Railroad Company Building (1905-6) or Parker, Thomas & Rice's Baltimore Gas and Electric Company Building (1916). A great deal of this Beaux-arts character was lost in the rede-

(continued on page 2)

Baltimore Trust Company Building (continued)

velopment of Charles Street in the 1960s.

In Baltimore, as in most major cities in the post-World War I period of immigration, labor organization and social unrest, Beaux-arts classicism was the preferred architectural language of the establishment. The Baltimore Trust Company Building maintained the historicizing preference of the Beaux-arts tradition, albeit with references to the Gothic cathedral in exterior formal and decorative elements and in the newly abstracted, geometricized formal vocabulary of the Art Deco style. While it did not turn its back on traditions such as the use of sculpture to specify meaning or axial planning or historicist formal references, the Baltimore Trust Building moved that tradition in Baltimore one or two giant steps forward.

Sadly, the stock market crash of October 1929 drove the Baltimore Trust Company into bankruptcy and the building was vacated less than a year after it opened. It remained virtually empty until 1940, when the economic resurgence of the manufacturing sector to support World War II gave rubber company manager Raymond J. Funkhousner adequate investment capital to purchase the building for rental office space and adequate clientele to make his investment worthwhile.

The Baltimore Trust Building was cutting-edge design. It was the tallest building in Baltimore when it was built and remained so for several decades. Stylistically, it was the first tall building in the city to eschew the Beaux-arts “attenuated palazzo” formula institutionalized there by Parker & Thomas at the turn of the 20th century, following the Great Fire of 1904. It is contemporary with the Art Deco skyscraper archetype, New York’s Chrysler Building (1928-30), as well as with Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue’s Nebraska State Capitol (1920-32), with which it shares a remarkably similar sculptural style.

Furthermore, there is a direct link between the Baltimore project and the decorative programme of the Goodhue building: artist Hildreth Meiere participated in both. The Baltimore building pre-dates both Radio City Music Hall (1931-6) and the Empire State Building (1930-1).

In form and conception, the Baltimore Trust building draws on slightly earlier models for its version of Art Deco, most notably Raymond Hood’s American Radiator Building in New York (1924). The similarity between the two buildings is the most striking because they share the use of an abstracted Gothic vocabulary to emphasize the height of the setback units of the building mass. The Gothic treatment drew on the historic associations of the Gothic style with soaring height and structural ingenuity expressed in concert with massive masonry. Towers in Gothic buildings provided historic sources to inspire dynamic massing and embellishment of the skyscraper’s vertical format. The description of skyscrapers as “Cathedrals of Commerce” referred, in large part, to the co-opting of the historic style associated with religious monuments by designers seeking a historic matrix for modern tall building design.

The profusion of sculptural embellishment of the Baltimore Trust Building firmly links it to the skyscraper generation of the still-historically grounded 1920s. Not only does its use of Gothic architectural forms convey grandeur and tradition, but the mural mass of the walls acts as an attenuated easel for the display of sculpted symbols, both local and general in reference, that express the values the building and its patron wished to represent to the public. This reliance on symbolic ornament referring to literary sources or historical events allows the Baltimore Trust Building, in spite of its then-startling height and streamlined massing, to function as an updated version of its Beaux-arts

neighbors and not a rejection of the historicist tradition which they had carried forward through the previous generation of architectural innovation.

The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:

www.cr.nps.gov/habsbaer/habs/

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore’s Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore’s Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore’s Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district’s Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore’s rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul’s Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district’s growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore’s Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore’s tremendously rich architectural heritage.