



Name of Property: U.S. Post Office and Courthouse
(James R. Browning U.S. Court of Appeals)

City, State: San Francisco, California

Period of Significance: 1897-1910

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme: III. Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design

Previous Recognition: 1971 National Register of Historic Places

National Historic Context: Special Study
XVI. Architecture
M. Period Revivals (1870-1940)
6. Beaux-Arts (1890-1915)

NHL Significance:

- Constructed between 1897 and 1905, the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse in San Francisco is nationally significant as a superlative Beaux-Arts public building. The Renaissance Revival palazzo form referenced antebellum public buildings, but on a much grander scale as informed by Beaux-Arts planning, and architectural and artistic articulation.
- It is difficult to overstate the architectural significance of the building when considering the quality, scale, and soundness of its construction and finish. It exhibits a complex merger of a number of artistic disciplines: architecture, sculpture, painting, stained-glass and decorative arts. The designers and fabricators incorporated rich materials collected from places around the world into a single design that truly represents a Beaux-Arts “unity of the arts.”
- The building was designed by the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury and was the most opulent and high-profile project originating out of that office at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. It is a testament to the level of skill nurtured and promoted in the Supervising Architect’s Office, particularly under the leadership of William Martin Aiken and James Knox Taylor, and is a key touchstone to a time when the nation had emerged as one of the most important and wealthiest in the world.
- The building was conceived and realized against the backdrop of the Tarsney Act (passed 1893, implemented 1897-1912), legislation that opened mainly large federal building projects to competition by private architects and firms. The Tarsney Act resulted from



decades of attack on the Supervising Architect's Office by the American Institute of Architects, which unfairly painted the talent, design process, and aesthetic judgment of the office as, at best, second-rate when compared to the private sector. The building boldly demonstrated that the Supervising Architect's Office possessed the ability and skill to produce a building on par with a handful of the most important government buildings designed by private firms under the act.

Integrity:

- The U.S. Post Office and Courthouse building is exceptionally well-preserved. Neither the program changes that removed the Federal District trial court and post office from the building, nor the damage inflicted by two major earthquakes and subsequent retrofitting, nor the exceptionally sensitive 1933 addition and 1996 repurposing of the former post office sorting room, have resulted in a loss of integrity that diminishes the building's national significance.
- Within a year of its completion, the building was tested by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and resulting fire. While interior finishes sustained damage from the shaking and the subsequent fire, the building survived largely intact. Formal repair work commenced in 1908 and by 1910 the building was repaired and fully restored to its pre-quake condition.
- A sensitive addition to the building in 1933, designed by George W. Kelham, enclosed the U-shaped court. The architect replicated the scale, massing, and organization of openings of the original building. It obscured the original ground-floor rear elevation, which contained the post office's loading bays.
- In October 1989, the building again survived a major earthquake. As an enduring testament to the excellence of the building's engineering, it suffered serious, but repairable damage during the seismic event. The repair, seismic retrofitting, and functional reconsideration that occurred in the wake of the earthquake have both reasserted the building's character-defining features and further safeguarded the building from future seismic damage.

Owner of Property: U.S. General Services Administration (GSA)

Acreeage of Property: Approximately 2.6 acres.

Origins of Nomination: GSA's Center for Historic Buildings hired a consulting firm to prepare the NHL nomination.

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:

- NHL designation will recognize one of the most significant Beaux-Arts public buildings in the United States.
- NHL designation will increase understanding and appreciation of the historical role and impact that the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury had on public architecture in the United States.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (comments received as of):

Landmarks Committee Comments:

Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

Advisory Board Recommendation: