

## Nathan C. Wyeth and the "Greco Deco" Style Part Two: The Municipal Center

By Linda Lyons

*Editor's Note: This is the second 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."*



Nathan C. Wyeth

This series focuses on three buildings constructed between 1939 and 1942, all designed by the District of Columbia's municipal architect, Nathan C. Wyeth. The **Municipal Center**, now known as the Henry J. Daly Building, is the subject of this article. The **Recorder of Deeds Building**, at 515 D Street NW, was featured in the March 2001 *Trans-Lux*; the **D.C. National Guard Armory**, at 2001 East Capitol Street SE, will be featured in the September 2001 issue. Together, the three buildings constitute a treasure of



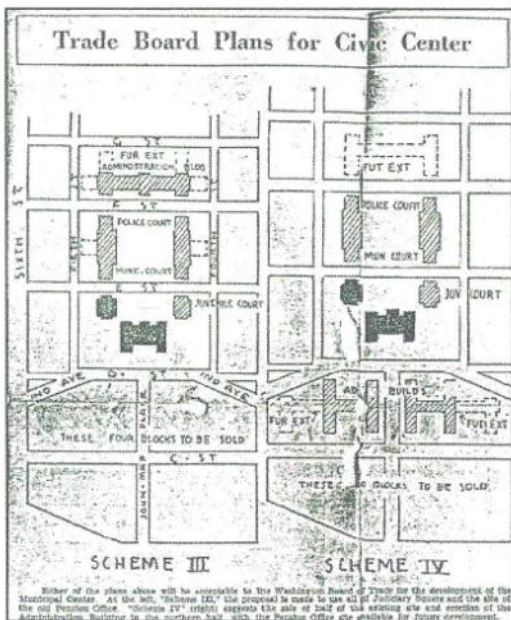
Rendered elevation from the office of Nathan C. Wyeth, showing the eastern building of the pair of buildings designed for the new Municipal Administration Offices. To the left is the Old D.C. Court House. (*Pencil Points* September 1939.)

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the Art Moderne style in this city, even as they differ significantly from what we usually think of as typical examples of Wyeth's work. Wyeth was best known for his accomplishments in the traditional, and often monumental, Beaux Arts style.

So what do we find in the Municipal Center: a skillful adaptation of Classical idiom to Art Deco sensibility - or vice-versa? Certainly this cubic form is reminiscent of a Greek temple. Windows are grouped vertically to suggest pilasters or columns and the whole is ornamented with incised geometric designs at the cornice, recognizable string courses, and fluted piers with bas-relief capitals on the portico. Yet on this building we also find machine-age aluminum worked to excellent decorative effect in corrugated swell-front panels, stylized plant motifs, and sunray and thunderbolt patterns. I should mention also, that much was made of the building's state of the art mechanical systems when it opened.



In February 1935, the Washington Board of Trade indicated that it would support either of the two "schemes" shown in this sketch for development of the proposed Municipal Center. Under the scheme on the left, the Old Pension Building would have been demolished and the Municipal Center constructed on the site. Under the scheme on the right, the Municipal Center would be constructed at its present location on Indiana Avenue. Both schemes, however, envisioned the demolition of the Pension Building, now the home of the National Building Museum and, in 1935, the home of the General Accounting Office.

The building also contains typical New Deal art that depicts the benefits of government services to the people in the form of two outstanding ceramic friezes in its courtyards. To the east is Hildreth Meier's "Health and Wel-

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fare,” which portrays the public health and welfare benefits offered to the citizens of the nation’s capital.



In the west courtyard is Waylande Gregory’s “Democracy in Action,” in which life-size figures depict the functions of the D.C. Police Department, Fire Department, and Department of Motor Vehicles. It was not without controversy when its design was first revealed because of one scene showing policemen in the act of grabbing a criminal by the neck and hitting him with a club. However, artistic freedom prevailed, and the frieze is unchanged.



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Exterior to the building we find some sculptures that are not so well known. At the northwest corner of the building is the Police Memorial Fountain, rendered in John Joseph Earley's unique polychrome mosaic panels - very much of the period. In the vast plaza that separates this building from the courthouse to the west, are two sculptured panels depicting Urban Life that are modest in scale and had some difficulties in execution. To the east of the steps up to Indiana Avenue are classical figures representing commerce, sanitation, hospitals, and courts sculpted by John Gregory. To the west is a panel that was only completed and installed in 1978 because of damage to the stone when it was being carved by Lee Lawrie. It symbolizes light, water, and transportation.

Some things never seem to change - although maybe they have lately. On the left below is a *Washington Star* photo of "Auto License Buyers" of March 30, 1943, with a photographer's note saying that it was made shortly after 10 a.m. On the right is "Motorists waiting to pay tickets & buy tags," March 29, 1976, captioned "Motorists wait in line outside the Municipal Center and inside to pay their outstanding tickets so they can purchase new tags."

