Pittsburgh's Federal "Post Office, Courthouse and So Forth"

The Pittsburgh Press described Saturday, October 13, 1934, as "crisp, cool and fair," an "ideal football day" for 70,000 fans to watch the Pitt Panthers beat Southern Cal 20-6. But an adjacent column told a different story: a "brisk, chilling wind swept Grant Street and the crowd stood shivering through the ceremonies, coat collars drawn close to necks" for the dedication of the new Federal Post Office and Courthouse.

Grant Street was filled with attendees but they left the chairs provided to seek "the sunny side of the street."

The main speaker was Postmaster General James A. Farley, former Roosevelt campaign manager and Democratic National Committee chairman. He marched to the dais amid a "shower of torn newspapers and telephone directories," a working man's ticker tape parade. Farley gave a partisan speech aimed at the national radio hook up, blasting the Republican senatorial incumbent who ultimately lost the election. The newspapers scolded Farley for this bit of politicking, since, after all, the Republican candidate was from Pittsburgh, and hometown noteworthy Andrew W. Mellon (1855-1937), a Republican, had appropriated the money, helped to choose the architects, and overseen most of the building's construction in his role as Secretary of the Treasury.

In fact, in Pittsburgh, Mellon and his brother Richard Beatty Mellon (1858-1933) had what one might call their own private Works Progress Administration. Between 1923 and 1937, they commissioned or were major investors in half a dozen buildings in the city. Four hundred men were employed during the construction of the Post Office building alone.

The new building didn't escape the eye of local popular cartoonist Cy Hungerford, as seen in the October 13, 1934, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

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The “Post Office, Courthouse and So Forth,” as it is labeled on the 1930s architectural drawings, was a massive $8 million ($115 million today) building covering 14 acres of floor space. A mile of conveyor belts distributed mail to the sorting floor from waiting railcars and mail trucks. Three sets of tracks long enough to accommodate 28 rail cars sat behind closed doors, and a ramp accommodating 47 mail trucks had access to the ground floor.

The designers, New York architectural firm Trowbridge & Livingston, were among a select group of architects trusted by wealthy New Yorkers to deliver suave, appropriate buildings for banks, hotels, and offices. Trowbridge & Livingston designed three of their handsome, classically derived buildings in Pittsburgh for the Mellon family. The “Temple of Finance,” the main Mellon banking room at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and Smithfield Street, was built in 1923 with architect Edward Purcell Mellon (1875-1953). In 1930, the same team designed the Gulf Building, founded by William Larimer Mellon. The oil company occupied the city’s tallest building from 1932 to 1970.

The design of the Federal Post Office and Courthouse has been dubbed “starved Classicism” because, while it shares the symmetry and classical vocabulary of older turn-of-the-century buildings, what were columns on earlier buildings are here merely pilaster strips. The capitals are not floridly carved bouquets of greenery, but instead bullseye disks. The geometry of the building, emphasized by its sturdy materials of granite and limestone, is its strength.

The interior fittings beyond the massive, almost industrial first floor, were geared toward the courthouse facilities. Marble-lined hallways and brass fittings costing nearly $500,000 were meant to emphasize the majesty of the law. The original Federal courtrooms on the 8th floor have murals by Howard Cook (1901-1980) and Stuveysant Van Veen (1910-1977). Both artists had long careers in the arts and were often published in journals and exhibition catalogs. Cook’s 1936 Steel Industry is a sweeping painting of a working mill in browns and greys, while Van Veen’s 1937 Pittsburgh Panorama portrays the city in a softer light.

Recently, the building underwent a $73 million dollar retro-fitting designed by the architectural firm of Shalom Baranes Associates, under the auspices of the U.S. General Services Administration. Inserting glass and metal atriums in the rear elevation between the prongs of the building’s capital-E plan added six new courtrooms. They are handsomely fitted with traditional wood paneling, but are actually high tech, with lighting that dims automatically when not in use, computerized climate control, and audio-visual hook-ups. Joining the 1930s murals are three Brian Shure paintings dating from 2004 and a Leah Cook tapestry—all decorating the light and airy atriums on the new courtroom floors.

The building is now the subject of a documentary (with interviews filmed at the History Center). The film will debut at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s conference in Pittsburgh October 31-November 5, 2006.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at Carnegie Museum of Art in 2006.

[2] David Aiken Reed (1880-1953) was a member of his father’s law firm Reed, Smith, Shaw & Beal before his Senate term from 1923-1935.
[3] The first money appropriated in 1919 preceded Mellon’s tenure as Secretary of the Treasury; Mellon was appointed in 1921.
[5] Edward Purcell Mellon was the son of Thomas Alexander Mellon (1844-1899) and grandson of Thomas A. Mellon (1813-1908), nephew of A.W. and R.B., and cousin to W.L. (see next note).
[6] William Larimer Mellon (1868-1949) was the son of James Ross Mellon (1846-1934) and a nephew of A.W. and R.B., and cousin to E.P.