



DC STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FORM

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Property Name(s): American Road Builders Association Building

Street Address(es): 525 School Street, SW, Washington, DC 20024

Square(s) and Lot(s): Square No. 0494, Lots 0861, Air Rights 7002, 7003, 7004, 7005, and 7006

Property Owner(s): Five Two Five School Street Associates, LP

The property/properties is/are being evaluated for potential historical significance as/for:

- An individual building or structure.
- A contributing element of a historic district: Specify
- A possible expansion of a historic district: Specify
- A previously unevaluated historic district to be known as: Specify
- An archaeological resource with site number(s): Specify
- An object (e.g. statue, stone marker etc.): Specify
- A new multiple property/thematic study regarding: Specify
- Association with a multiple property/thematic study: Specify
- Other: Specify



Photo 1. Southwest oblique view of the American Road Builders Association Building, facing northeast.

Physical Description

The American Road Builders Building is located at 525 School Street, at the corner of 6th and School Streets in the Southwest Quadrant of Washington D.C (figure 1). It is a five story, 5 x 3 bay, Brutalist style,¹ 40,000 square foot, office building that was built in 1963. The building is of concrete construction with an elevated concrete foundation (Photos 1 and 2). Its first floor is encased predominantly in full height glass windows that are divided by thick structural concrete columns. The building's primary entrance has a recessed entry with solid glass doors accessed by a flight of tile clad concrete steps (Photos 6-8). Secondary entrances are accessed by concrete ramps or steps on the side elevations and consist of glass and metal doors. The second, third, and fourth stories all have recessed windows encased by concrete that angles inwards from the top and bottom (Photo 3). Thin concrete panels divide the individual windows and rise through the entirety of the second, third, and fourth floors giving the building a sense of verticality. The fifth floor is recessed and has a continuous balcony with a metal pipe railing (Photo 3-5). Its fenestration consists of full height windows. The building is topped by an overhanging concrete slab roof supported by rectangular structural columns.

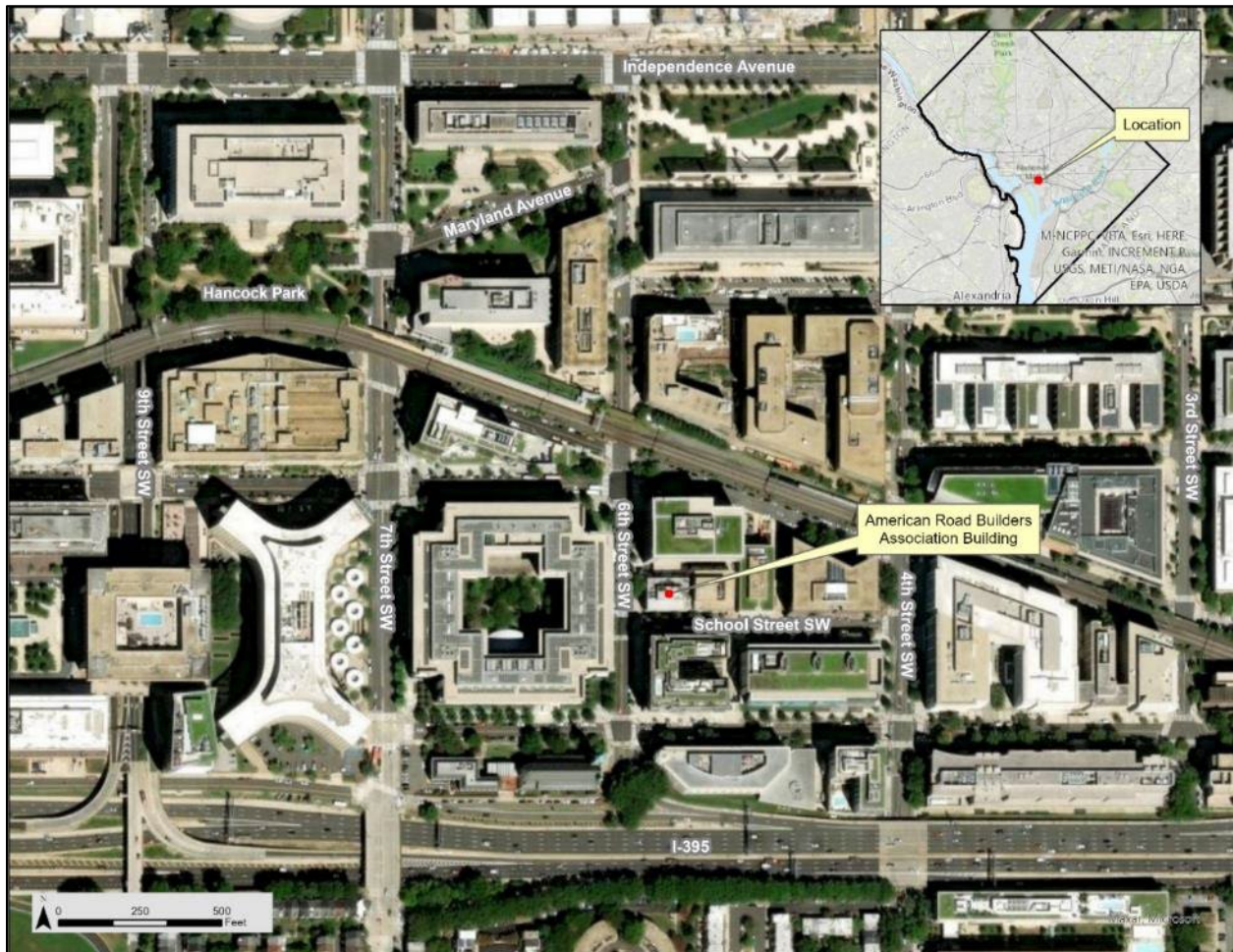


Figure 1. Location Map

¹ Brutalist architecture is an architectural style that focuses on bold, structurally innovative forms that use raw concrete as the primary building material. Materials are often left unfinished creating an industrial aesthetic.



Photo 2. Northwest oblique view of the American Road Builders Association Building, facing southeast.



Photo 3. View of the upper levels of the north and west elevations, partially obscured by adjacent buildings, facing southeast.



Photo 4. View of the street setting of the building with the north and west elevations partially visible, facing southeast.



Photo 5. Partial view of the front (south) façade with recessed entrance on the first floor, facing north.

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Photo 6. View of the primary entrance recessed on the front (south) façade, facing north.



Photo 7. Detail view of the primary entrance, facing northwest.



Photo 8. Detail view of the primary entrance, facing northeast.

Historical Narrative

Southwest Washington, DC, also known as the Southwest quadrant, is located south of the United States Capitol and the National Mall and north of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. The area was settled by Europeans in the seventeenth century and the earliest formal development of the Southwest quadrant began with Pierre Charles L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the Capital City which touched off a period of land speculation in the area.² L'Enfant's plan called for a canal that would connect the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers along Tiber Creek, thereby generating significant commercial activity that would be supplemented by wharves and warehouses on the rivers. However, the proposed canal was not finished until 1850 by which time Baltimore and New York City had monopolized much of the available trade. Nonetheless, numerous wharves were built along the Southwest quadrant's shore, and the area became home to commercial shipping and industry on a smaller scale, providing the District with produce, seafood, ice, wood, coal, and other essentials while also offering employment opportunities.

Following the Civil War, the Southwest quadrant grew rapidly into a dense residential area with a deep-rooted community including newly emancipated Black Americans as well as European immigrants. Many of the Southwest residents labored for the government or for the nearby railroad on the wharves or in associated manufactories along the railroad corridor. Conditions there as in other American cities in the second half of the nineteenth century were unsanitary, created in part by overcrowding and by the District emptying its raw sewage into the Potomac River.

By the late nineteenth century, reformers invigorated by the City Beautiful Movement looked to the Southwest quadrant and began to advocate for improvements to sanitation and housing. At

² Elizabeth A. Moore and Charles W. McNett, "Archaeological Survey of the Southwest Quadrant of the District of Columbia," (Washington, DC: 1992), 89.

this time, a significant number of people in the Southwest quadrant lived in alley homes located behind larger public facing buildings. These alley houses shared space with stables and workshops and lacked basic amenities such as running water, proper sanitation, and drains.³ During the late nineteenth century hundreds of these alley homes were condemned, and by 1918 alley dwellings were outlawed, although they would continue to be built by Washington's poorest residents for decades.

Urban Renewal

By the middle of the twentieth century, the Southwest quadrant, known then as the Old Southwest, was home to thousands of working-class and low-income Black and Eastern European immigrant residents. Housing in some areas continued to lack electricity and/or running water, the outcome of decades of urban disinvestment and absentee landlordism. The movement of the middle and upper classes out of cities and into suburbs worried city leaders who saw their tax base eroding. The mindset of the time was to reimagine urban centers from the ground up to bring suburbanites back to the city. This belief became known as "Redevelopment Theory" and underpinned urban renewal projects across the country.

In 1945, the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) was created by Congress to oversee the process of urban renewal throughout the District. The 1952 National Capital Planning Act gave the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) more control over comprehensive regional planning and new development and charged it with developing a comprehensive plan for the region that would embrace new construction, transportation, parks, and natural resources.²³

In 1953-54 the RLA began NCPC's approved urban renewal plan for Southwest with acquisition by eminent domain and demolition of approximately 4,800 buildings in the neighborhood. Between 1954 and 1959, a team led by New York real estate developer William Zeckendorf also put forward a plan for the redevelopment of the Southwest quadrant. The plan emphasized the wholesale demolition of existing buildings which would be replaced by Modernist architecture,⁴ parks, automobile friendly streets, mid-rise apartments, and townhouses that would help connect the Southwest quadrant to the rest of the District. Ultimately, Zeckendorf was unable to finance his vision for the Southwest quadrant and he went bankrupt. In the ensuing years, smaller developers competed for individual building commissions in the Southwest quadrant. As a result, the Southwest quadrant's development lacked a unified vision, though elements of Zeckendorf's plan, such as the use of Modernist architectural styles, remained in place, guiding the redevelopment of the Southwest quadrant.⁵

The NCPC urban renewal plan of the mid-20th century, described above, replaced much of Old Southwest's dense street grid with superblocks lined with Modernist style multi-story commercial, residential, and government buildings; major routes such as 7th Street SW remained. The 1957-1970 construction of the Southwest Freeway/Interstate 395 was another significant component of the project. The Southwest Freeway runs east-west through Southwest, bisecting a portion of the quadrant between E and G Streets SW. This effectively created a barrier through

³ Moore and McNett, 14. <https://swna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/P02-of-6-Historical-Analysis.pdf>.

⁴ Modernist architecture is an architectural style popular in the mid-20th century with a focus on the rational use of space and function and an emphasis on form, structure, and materials rather than ornament. Concrete, glass, and metal are common materials in Modernist architecture.

⁵ Moore and McNett, 36. <https://swna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/P02-of-6-Historical-Analysis.pdf>.

Southwest and limits north-south movement to 4th Street SW, 7th Street SW, and the 9th Street Expressway. By the time the urban renewal project was completed in the early 1970s, it had displaced approximately 1,500 businesses and 23,000 low-income and/or Black residents and replaced them with approximately 13,000 middle and upper-class residents living in approximately 5,800 new housing units.²⁴

The American Road Builders Association Building

In 1962, under its new Executive Director Phil Doyle, the RLA attempted to incentivize development of its newly cleared land by replacing architectural competitions and fixed or “negotiated” land prices with public bidding coupled with RLA design control.⁶ Five tracts in the trapezoidal block bounded by School Street SW, 4th Street SW, Virginia Avenue SW, and 6th Street SW were among the first to be offered under this system. Three of the five tracts were awarded in November 1962 to private entities for office building sites at prices ranging between \$10 and \$7.50 per square foot, which was a heavily discounted rate.⁷ These entities were the American Road Builders Association, Eastman Kodak, and the Otis Elevator company. The remaining two tracts were held back by the RLA pending another round of public bidding.⁸

The American Road Builders Association completed its Brutalist style building on the southwest corner of School Street SW and 6th Street SW in 1965, according to historic aerials. The building, designed by the architecture firm of Mills Petticord and Mills, was the first office building completed in the Southwest quadrant’s urban renewal area, followed by the Otis Elevator Company building completed in 1968. Eastman Kodak ultimately did not construct an office building on School Street SW.⁹

The American Road Builders Association, a national association of transportation engineers, contractors, manufacturers, and government officials, was organized in 1902 to advocate for the general betterment of highways and the construction of highways capable of connecting major cities to each other.¹⁰ During the early 20th century, the group led advocacy efforts for improved highways across the country and fostered a nationwide dialogue amongst transportation planners.

During the late 20th century, the American Road Builders Association left the building. Today, the group is known as the American Road and Transportation Builders Association and maintains its headquarters a few blocks to the east at 250 E Street SW. The American Road Builders Association Building currently houses a charter school known as the Washington Global School as well as a Subway chain restaurant.

Mills Petticord and Mills

The architectural firm of Mills Petticord and Mills was responsible for the design of the American Road Builders Association Building. Based in Washington, DC, Mills Petticord and Mills was a prominent firm that produced several noteworthy examples of Modernist architecture around the city. Founded in 1938, the firm was composed of architect Alan B. Mills, architect

⁶ Robert J. Lewis, “Renewal Area Sites Sold on Bid Basis,” *Evening Star*, November 22, 1962, 37.

⁷ Robert J. Lewis, “Renewal Area Sites Sold on Bid Basis,” *Evening Star*, November 22, 1962, 37.

⁸ Robert J. Lewis, “Renewal Area Sites Sold on Bid Basis,” *Evening Star*, November 22, 1962, 37.

⁹ “Leasing Agent,” *The Washington Daily News*, October 2, 1964, 42.

¹⁰ “News of the Motoring World,” *Evening Star*, December 4, 1938, 49.

George Petticord Jr., and engineer Alan Mills Jr. During the 1950s and 1960s, the firm focused on commercial work, specializing in bank and office building design. In 1957, the firm received a Board of Trade award for a bank modernization project at 1200 15th Street, NW. Additional projects included an office building erected for the Peoples Life Insurance Company at 25th Street NW and New Hampshire Avenue NW in 1959. The firm also acted as the supervising architects for the construction of an addition to the Smithsonian National History Museum in 1963 and designed the Law Library at George Washington University in 1970. Alan B. Mills passed away in 1963 and George Petticord Jr. retired from professional service in 1979, ultimately dying five years later in 1984. The death of Mills and retirement of Petticord brought an end to the firm.

National Register Eligibility Evaluation

For a property to be listed in the National Register it must possess both historic significance and integrity. As documented above, the American Road Builders Association Building has been evaluated to possess sufficient integrity to convey its historic significance. To be considered significant, a historic property must meet one or more of the four National Register significance criteria, discussed in detail below.

Following the standards set forth by the Secretary of the Interior, eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places is evaluated under the following criteria:

- A. Resources that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

These criteria, with additional guidance from *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, were used to assess the National Register eligibility of the American Road Builders Association Building.

National Register Criterion A

The American Road Builders Association Building was evaluated for local significance under National Register Criterion A for Community Planning and Development. The American Road Builders Association Building's potential period of significance spans from 1962 when the association purchased land from the RLA to 1965 when the building was completed.¹¹ Francesca Russello Ammon's study the *Southwest Washington, Urban Renewal Area*, completed in 2004 for the Historic American Buildings Survey, provides a foundation for the evaluation of the property within the context of Modernism and mid-20th century urban planning. According to Ammon, the urban renewal program in Southwest DC "represented the most comprehensive and ambitious approach to urban redevelopment in the nation intended to be a prototype in national urban

¹¹ Ammon, 2.

renewal.”¹² It was—and remains today—the Capital City’s most sweeping effort to redevelop an entire neighborhood. Private commercial development, such as that proposed for L’Enfant Plaza, as well as residential development, was envisioned as early as I.M. Pei’s designs for New Southwest.

However, the mechanism by which the RLA sold parcels to private developers and asserted design control underwent changes over time in response to external and internal forces, and the public bidding process does not appear to be a major factor in the redevelopment of Southwest. The unique public bidding process offered the American Road Builders Association a chance to acquire affordable land near the Capitol and to generate revenue through office space. Though the American Road Builders Association played a role in development and betterment of the highway system across the country, its occupancy of the building at 525 School Street SW does not appear to be significant to its contributions; therefore, the potential period of significance does not extend to the association’s occupancy of the building. Overall, the building is not significant under Criterion A.

National Register Criterion B

The American Road Builders Building does not appear to be eligible under Criterion B as a resource associated with the lives of persons significant in our past. While offices for the American Road Builders Association were located within the building, research has not revealed specific information about the significance of the occupants of these offices.

National Register Criterion C

The American Road Builders Association Building was designed by the Washington, DC-based architecture and engineering firm of Mills Petticord and Mills and built between 1964-65. Formed in 1938, as Mills and Petticord, the firm expanded in 1951 when Alan Mills Jr. joined as supervising engineer. Over the course of the firm’s existence, Mills Petticord and Mills were responsible for the design of several buildings around Washington DC including the Reserve Officers Association Headquarters Building (1960), an office building at the corner of 21st Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW (1965), and the Law Library at George Washington University (1970) among other projects.

The American Road Builders Association Building is an example of the Brutalist style of architecture known for its use of raw (“brut” in French, hence the name “Brutalism”), exposed concrete. Brutalism emerged in the 1950s in Post-War Europe as a response to the need to rebuild quickly and efficiently in the aftermath of World War II. In the United States, adherents of Brutalism took advantage of the flexibility of concrete to create austere, functional buildings that fulfilled their purpose without reliance on applied decorative motifs. Brutalism/Modernism was the preferred style of the RLA because it signified modernity and economic efficiency, perceived as virtues in government. In the American Road Builders Association Building, concrete, steel and glass are the primary building materials. Concrete is used to provide a rhythmic composition of recessed windows with angled concrete returns. Although intact and retaining integrity, within the context of Southwest DC, which features many outstanding examples of Brutalist architecture, the American Road Builders Association building is an

¹² Ammon, 2.

unexceptional, ubiquitous example.¹³ Therefore, the building does not rise to the level of exceptional significance under Criterion C for Architecture.

National Register Criterion D

The American Road Builders Building was not evaluated under Criterion D, as this Criterion generally applies to archaeological sites.

Integrity Assessment

The American Road Builders Association Building has undergone limited changes since its construction. The building retains important character-defining features including its sense of vertical massing, its original entryway, fenestration, and its fifth-floor balcony. The building's setting has not been substantially altered. The building no longer functions as an office space; and its current use as a school differs significantly from its historic use as an office building. The American Road Builders Association Building retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship, but has lost integrity of feeling and association.

Conclusion

Applying the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, the American Road Builders Building is recommended not eligible for inclusion on the National Register under either Criterion A for Community Planning and Development or Criterion C for Architecture.

Sources

Ammon, Francesca Russello. *Southwest Washington D.C. Urban Renewal Area Historic American Buildings Survey*, 2004.

Dyer-Carroll, Stephanie. "DC State Historic Preservation Office Determination of Eligibility Form for Federal Office Building 10B; Wilbur Wright Building." Washington, DC, no date.

"Leasing Agent," *The Washington Daily News*. Washington, DC. October 2, 1964.

Lewis, Robert J. "Renewal Area Sites Sold on Bid Basis," *Evening Star*. Washington, DC. November 22, 1962.

Moore, Elizabeth A. and Charles W. McNett. "Archaeological Survey of the Southwest Quadrant of the District of Columbia." Washington, DC, 1992. Available online at <https://swana.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/P02-of-6-Historical-Analysis.pdf>.

"News of the Motoring World." *Evening Star*, Washington, DC. December 4, 1938.

Robinson & Associates, Inc. "DC Modern: A Context for Modernism in the District of Columbia, 1945-1976, Historic Context Study." Washington, DC, 2009. Available online at

¹³ Robinson & Associates, Inc., "DC Modern: A Context for Modernism in the District of Columbia, 1945-1976, Historic Context Study," (Washington, DC: 2009), 45.

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<https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/DC%20Modern%20Historic%20Context%20Study.pdf>.

“Would Revise Federal Aid,” *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, Ogden, Utah. December 25, 1927.

PREPARER'S DETERMINATION

Eligibility Recommended Eligibility Not Recommended

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A B C D

Applicable Considerations:

A B C D E F G

Prepared By: Erin Leatherbee, Matthew Shoen, and Jenny Fulton, Preservation Planners, VHB
Date: January 15, 2025

DC SHPO REVIEW AND COMMENTS

Concurs with Recommendation

Does Not Concur with Recommendation

David Maloney
District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer

Date:

Reviewed by:
DC Government Project/Permit Project Log Number:

Return to:

Mr. C. Andrew Lewis
Senior Historic Preservation Specialist
DC Office of Planning/DC State Historic Preservation Office
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024
andrew.lewis@dc.gov
Phone: 202-442-8841

Drop Box: <https://www.hightail.com/u/DCArchaeology>