

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government/Post Office

Government/Courthouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government/Post Office

Government/Courthouse

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Mixed

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls concrete

roof ceramic tile

other Limestone Ashlar

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The US Post Office and Courthouse in San Juan, Puerto Rico is a three-storey, monumental, concrete office structure occupying an entire square block on the southern fringe of the Old San Juan Historic Zone. Built in 1914, only 15 years after the US occupation of the island, the original structure was built above the foundations of the ancient city-wall which guarded the harbor-entrance to the city for 300 years. In 1940, a six-storey annex was abutted to the southern, main facade on Calle Comercio.

The original structure's overall massing consisted of 2 major volumes: a principal 3-storey and base rectangular volume which surrounded the main structure and created a u-shaped court toward the south, main facade. At the south facade, a monumental double-return stair lead up to an open court from which the entrance was accessed.

Today the 1940 addition sits precisely where the monumental entrance stair stood, nestled within the u-shaped court of the old main facade, but mostly detached from the main structure. This addition consists of a vertical, six-storey-plus-base rectangular slab structure. Additional elements of the building's actual massing include: a projecting three-storey, central frontispiece with a curve-gable on the north, Calle Recinto Sur facade; and 2 towers, one above each extreme of the 1940 addition.

The 1914 structure presents an eclectic combination of American architectural styles, including Beaux Arts Classicism, Federal influence and Spanish Revival. The tower addition of 1940 presents a late example of the architecture of the Vienna School and Avante-garde movements.

The north facade of the original structure, on Calle Recinto Sur, consisted of 15 bays, arranged symmetrically within 5 clearly defined units: a central pavillion which projects substantially from the main volume; 2 flanking 6-bay sections; and 2 slightly-projecting single-bay sections, one at each extreme of the facade. The entire composition rests on a sunken rusticated stone base.

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The three-storey projecting central module is divided into these sections: a wide central unit capped by a broken-scroll pediment; and 2 flanking, narrow units, articulated as individual vertical elements, each capped by a semi-circular gable on 2 sides. The central segment contains a double-height vertical composition consisting of 3 vertical windows per floor, a horizontal spandrel panel between floors, and a relief figure of an American Eagle above the second floor windows. At the third storey, a square window with a neo-baroque curvilinear frame is placed just above the vertical panel. The vertical is emphasized throughout the composition of this frontispiece, accentuated by the use of elongated keystones, vertical moldings, and a central finial above the scroll-pediment. The flanking 6-bay sections of the facade consist of double-height pillars defining narrow bays and supporting segmental-arched lintels and keystones. Iron railings conceal an open corridor within the first floor and waist-high decorative iron rails produce the image of a balcony at each of the glazed, multi-paneled windows of the second floor.

The single-bay corner units of the north facade project forward slightly and repeat the upper bay articulation of the adjacent 6-bay units. At the ground floor of each unit an entry portal consisting of decorated pilasters supporting a broken-scroll pediment and a cartouche, frames the entrance to the open corridors within. A flight of stone steps leads from the sidewalk level to the entrance at each of the two entries.

A full-entablature cornice decorated with rectangular and circular panels along the frieze, spans across the whole length of the building, following the volumetric modulation of the facade and interrupted only by the central gabled unit.

The principal volume of the original structure rises one diminished storey above the facade of the surrounding volume, thus only displaying a series of small, unornamented window openings hardly visible from the street. This volume is capped by a frieze and cornice similar to the lower volume but on a smaller scale. A series of 3 hipped dormers is located above the volume's hipped roof, at center.

The east and west facades of the building are identical, each consisting of a 10-bay repetition of the series of vertical bays on the north facade. The sidewalk level drops towards the south at these two facades, displaying fully, at the southern ends, the rusticated stone base which is almost concealed at the north facade. At these lateral facades one can appreciate the series of rectangular, voussoired windows which penetrates the stone base.

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The vertical tower addition dominates the southern facade of the complex. This modern addition repeats themes taken from the original building but interprets them in a simple, streamline manner. The addition is abutted to the main structure, hiding from view the front court, leaving free on either side only the 3 bays of the elevations of the peripheral volume. (see map). This tall structure consists of a 5-bay, 5-storey central unit flanked by two, 2-bay, 6-storey towers with setbacks above, all resting upon a continuation of the original structure's stone base. In addition, the tall structure is scaled-down by the following subdivisions: the ground level stone base; a two-storey main body; a two-storey upper body and a one-storey rusticated cap. A pitched, ceramic "spanish tile" roof shelters the central body of the composition while the towers rise and set-back on either side, culminating in octagonal lanterns.

The stone base of the tower is mainly articulated by the rusticated central entrance portal which supports a balustered-stone balconnette above and houses a relief figure of an American Bald Eagle at the frieze. A series of 8 additional voids punctures the base; 4 symmetrically arranged windows to the west, and 3 windows and a later, iron, delivery gate to the east.

The main "piano nobile" section of the central body of the building consists of a modern interpretation of the two-storey vertical, segmental arch bays of the north, east and west facades, articulated without keystones but with simple, shallow impost mouldings. Semi-circular decorative iron railings create false balconies at the second-storey windows, dividing the double-height bays between the first and second floors. A pair of planar string courses encircles the buildings and divides the "piano-nobile" section from the upper body above. The upper body above consists of two floors of punctured, unarticulated window openings. Another planar string-course divides this section from the single-storey cap above. The windows of the upper storey are wider than those of the lower floors, causing the rusticated wall sections between the windows to read as heavy piers. A simple cornice caps the composition and supports the tile roof above.

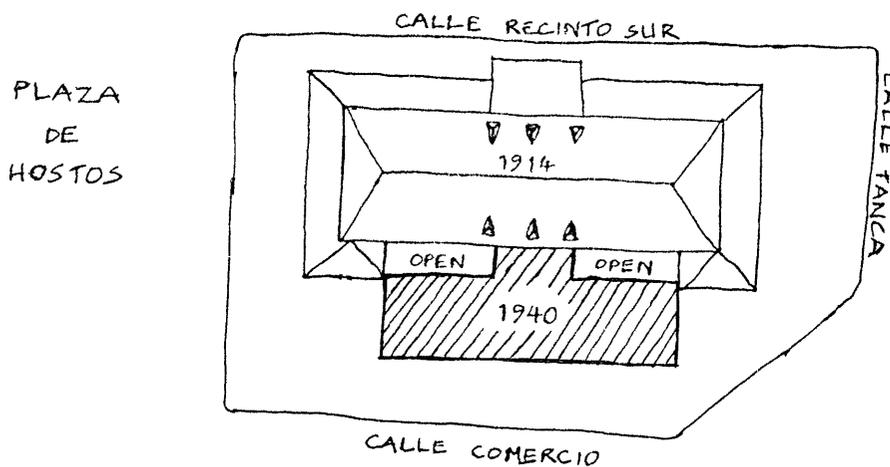
The fenestration of the towers is simple and unarticulated, thus emphasizing the vertical. The towers rise one-storey above the central section of the facade, and then set-back to a rectangular, solid volume with chamfered corners, and punctured by a vertical series of small, square ventilation holes. These volumes are also covered with "spanish tile" and are capped by vertical, octagonal light-house lanterns. Above the 4 corners of the main shaft of the towers, futuristic, industrial-like art-deco final ornaments stand out as symbols of progress and technology.

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8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1914-1940

Significant Dates

1914

1940

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

Architect/Builder

Wenderoth, Oscar

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Located at the southern fringe of the old, walled, Spanish city of San Juan, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse was the first large-scale federal building on the island, built only 15 years after the Spanish Province became a US Territory.

Massive in volume relative to its low-scale, Spanish-Neoclassical surroundings, the federal structure clearly represented the new order and paved the way for modernistic development of the city's waterfront fringe, where the wall stood for 300 years. The building clearly depicted the architectural trends in the USA and broke with those prevalent during Spanish rule.

The 1914 building is truly a melange of styles integrating American-Spanish-Revival, Sullivanesque and Beaux Arts Neoclassical Revival, and thus reflecting the eclecticism of American Architecture of the late XIX and early XX centuries. It presents a good example of American institutional architecture of the period and was the first and largest of such structures in San Juan.

By the late 1930's lack of space was solved by the addition of a tower element at the main facade. The addition, begun in 1938 and completed in 1940 in a style tending from Vienna School Art Nouveau to Art Deco, increased the already monumental structure.

Although the new building eliminated completely the original monumental entry stair, the tower was placed in such manner as to only touch the 1914 building in three points (see enclosed map). All architectural elements of the original volume, other than the main stair and portal, remain within the two light wells created by the placement of the volumes.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Figueroa, Loyda, Breve Historia de Puerto Rico, ed. Edil, Río Piedras, 1979
Picó, Fernando, Historia General de Puerto Rico, ed. Huracán, Río Piedras, 1986
Carbonell, Jorge and Aníbal Sepúlveda, San Juan Extramuros, SHPO, San Juan, 1987

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

US Federal Court Archives, P.R.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 1 acre

UTM References

A 19 | 804690 | 2043720
 Zone Easting Northing

C _____ | _____ | _____

B _____ | _____ | _____
 Zone Easting Northing

D _____ | _____ | _____

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Entire block bounded to the North by Calle Recinto Sur, Calle Tanca to the East, Calle Comercio to the South and Calle San Justo to the West.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The property's boundaries are the streets that give form to the block entirely occupied by the building and its gardens.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

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With the assistance of Ms. Sonia I. Rivera, Community Planner, GSX, N.Y., N.Y.

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The 1940 addition is of special significance in itself, as it is historic also and presents the best example of Vienna-School influenced architecture in Puerto Rico. The modernistic interpretation of classical elements results in a facade similar to that of the Postal Savings Bank in Vienna of 1905, incorporating Art-Deco, futuristic symbolism in the lanterns and ornaments of the tower. The overall massing of the towers is reminiscent of Joseph Hoffman's designs (e.g. Palais Stoclet) and of the set backs of US city skyscrapers of the early XX century.

For many years the federal tower was the second tallest building in Puerto Rico (second to the Banco Popular Art Deco building across the Plaza de Hostos) and is still the second tallest within the old city of San Juan. Together with Banco Popular Building, the Federal Office Building remains as one of the two major examples of Pre-Second World War European Avante-Garde movements.

Although the juxtaposition of the original building and tower addition is admittedly odd, the complex not only displays the progression of modern architectural styles of the XX century, but also presents the evolution of the civil architecture imported to Puerto Rico by American Architects.

The scale and architecture of both buildings, their location, and the lanterns atop the towers have made the buildings landmarks of the San Juan waterfront.

The complex served as the US Federal Government center for over 50 years and continues to be the center of the US Judiciary and Postal systems in Puerto Rico. Many important decisions of the application of federal laws and programs to Puerto Rico have been rendered in its courtrooms. Many federal relief programs and social services were originated here for the development of the island.