

Philadelphia Register of Historic Places
Our Lady of Loreto Roman Catholic Church

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Our Lady of Loreto, is a free-standing masonry structure, rectangular in plan, located mid block on the southeast side of Grays Ave between 63rd and 64th Streets. The front façade of building is set 13 feet back from the curb of Grays Avenue and measures approximately 30 feet wide and 115 deep. The main floor of the church is one half story above grade, allowing for a full height basement.

The front facade is completely symmetrical, dominated by a center tower that projects beyond the plane of the facade. The tower is square in plan with rounded outside corners on the front face. Two sets of concrete stairs run perpendicular to the street, lead to intermediate landings. From the landings the remaining two risers run perpendicular to the façade, ending at a landing in front of the central wood and glass entrance doors. A continuous iron railing leads to the front entrance doors. The recessed entrance at the center of the facade contains wood and glass double doors. The recess on either side of the doors curves inward in a quarter circle, reflecting the curves on the corners of the tower. Rectangular stained glass windows set in steel frames flank the front doors.

The front facade is composed of cast stone panels in two hues: a soft pink for the first five feet of the facade switching to a warm yellow for the upper part. Two cast stone panels, at the level of the stair landings, are inscribed. On the left side, the date of dedication "1938" on the right side "Frank Petrillo Architect/ Richard R. Neely Associate."

Immediately above the front doors a circular medallion in low relief contains the words "Our Lady of Loreto" arranged in a circle, flanked by a set of stylized wings. Above the doors on the front face of the tower recessed panel contains a large clay tile mural. The tiles are approximately 6" square. The design includes a number of figures with the image of the Madonna and Child at the center surrounded by angels or putti set on a background of clouds. Mixed in with the figures are three images of aircraft, including a hot air balloon, a biplane and a propeller-driven airliner. The background of the mural is a geometric blue and green pattern.

The masonry tower is surmounted with a set of horizontal metal fins that is capped with a stainless steel open work crucifix. The crucifix has two sets of arms, one parallel to Grays Avenue, the other perpendicular to the street allowing the form of cross to be perceived from all angles, including from the air. The openings on the side walls of the tower are filled with glass block.

The back and side walls of the church are made of a dark red "clinker" brick, the rough finish and dark red color providing a strong contrast with the smooth forms and light colors of the cast stone front facade.

The side walls of the church include four rectangular stained glass windows on each wall. The style of the windows is neo-Gothic. Each window retains its original dedication plaque recognizing the donors. On the east wall, starting from the front facade the windows depict the following scenes: The Sacred Heart; St. Rose of Lima; St. Maurus; the Holy Family. Windows on the west wall, from front to back: the Holy Child Jesus; St. Jude; Mater Misericordia. The window closest to the altar is dedicated to St. John Bosco, died 1888,

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contains a realistic portrait of the saint, who was dedicated to providing education for the poorest of children. The windows on the front facade of the church are slightly smaller than those on the side walls. The window on the left side of the front façade is dedicated to St. Aloysius "In memory of the boys who died in the 2nd World War." The window on the right depicts the Baptism of Christ.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Our Lady of Loreto Roman Catholic Church possesses multiple areas of significance for the architecture and history of Philadelphia, as described in City of Philadelphia Ordinance [Section 14-2007 (5)]. It fulfills criteria (a) (c) (d) and (j). It is a unique and complete expression of the "Art Moderne" style applied to a place of worship. It is the most visible landmark of Southwest Philadelphia's first-generation immigrant Italian-American community, who struggled to build the church during the depths of the Great Depression. In addition, it is a distinctive blend of art and architecture, featuring a large tile mural on the front façade depicting the Madonna and Child along with images of aircraft. Finally, it is one of the few churches in the country dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto, the Patron Saint of Aviators.

The style that has come to be known as Art Moderne is a blend of the decorative elements of the Art Deco, with the "streamlining" made popular by 1930s industrial design, and the influence of International Modernism's use of modern materials and simple architectural forms. "Soft or rounded corners, flat roofs smooth wall finish, without surface ornamentation and horizontal bands of windows create a distinctive streamlined or wind tunnel effect which characterizes the Art Moderne style."¹ Because the popularity of the Art Moderne style coincided with the Great Depression, very few buildings were completed in this style. Buildings sponsored by the Public Works Administration, such as government facilities and early airports are some of the few exceptions. Our Lady of Loreto is a complete expression of this style. The use of modern materials is a prominent feature of the front facade, including glass block and stainless steel in the tower and cast stone on the front façade. The use of streamlining is notable in the curved corners of the tower and rounded edges around the main entrance. Decorative elements moderate the flat planes of the front facade, such as the medallion over the entrance, such as cast stone, glass block and stainless steel.

Our Lady of Loreto is unique in the Philadelphia in the thorough use of the Art Moderne style applied to a religious building². While other religious buildings of the time include the stylized and streamlined elements, most retain an overall historical style, such as gothic or Classical Revival. The choice of the style suggests that even with limited means, the parish wished to make a fashionable, forward-looking architectural statement, in keeping with the theme of aviation.

The building stands as testimony to the determination of the working class Italian-American community of Southwest Philadelphia to build a church during the depths of the Great Depression. Most members of the community were first-generation immigrants from southern Italy, principally Calabria, Puglia, the Abruzzi and Naples and came to Southwest Philadelphia to work at General Electric, Westinghouse and Fels Naptha.

The ethnic parish was established in 1932³; the church's first home was two-story corner storefront located at 2343 South 63rd Street. Plans for a church started almost immediately; in 1935 the property for the future church was purchased for \$4,000. In 1937 blessed medals of Our Lady of Loreto along with pamphlets⁴ were distributed as an appeal to aviators throughout the country, requesting offerings to "build a worthy shrine." A letter from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia dated October 26, 1937⁵ indicates that the revised bids for construction had been reviewed and that the parish had \$14,000 on hand. From

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the information in the letter, the bid for construction could be inferred to be \$30,000, as the Parish was required to have 65% of the total cost of construction in hand before construction began. The combination of style and economy can best be appreciated by the contrast of the smooth front façade, made of pastel-colored cast concrete panels, or cast stone, and the side walls which are made of a dark, rough "clinker" brick. These bricks were typically discarded, because they had become distorted, and hence difficult to lay, by exposure to excessive heat during firing in the kiln. Their use suggests one form of economizing in the cost of construction.

Upon its completion in 1938, the church has been heavily used by the community, with up to five masses held every Sunday. All church services were held in Italian. Over the next thirty years a Rectory, Convent and School were built to serve the growing parish. (The latter buildings are not included in this nomination)

The architects of the church, Frank Petrillo and Richard Ross Neely, are listed in the Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project⁶, although relatively little is known about Frank Petrillo. His 10 listed projects are all in West Philadelphia, and comprise a variety of stores, houses, and apartment buildings. More is known about Richard Neely (1892-1949). Although born in Philadelphia, he trained in Ireland returning to Philadelphia in 1915. During his career he formed collaborations with a number of leading Philadelphia architects, including, Edmund Gilchrist, William Martin and Horace Trumbauer, and during the 1930s, Frank Petrillo⁷.

Endnotes

¹ John Blumenson. Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600–1945. New York W. W. Norton, 1981, p. 79.

² Our Lady of Loreto is the only church building to be described as "Art Deco" out of a survey of over 1,000 places of worship in Philadelphia. The survey was compiled by Historic Religious Properties Program of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia between 1988 and 1999. The survey does not include the term "Art Moderne," which is a more exact description of the style of Our Lady of Loreto. Art Moderne could be considered a subset of the more popular Art Deco style, but is characterized by more highly geometric forms and more extensive use of decorative elements.

³ Letter from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia Chancery Office dated October 5, 1932 addressed to Rev. Matthew J. Amateis.

⁴ Pamphlet produced by the Parish of Our Lady of Loreto, 1937

⁵ Letter from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia Cathedral Office dated October 26, 1937 addressed to Rev. Matthew J. Amateis from Rev. Joseph M. Corr.

⁶ The Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project is an on-line database <http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab> that includes listings of over 12,000 architects engineers and contractors that practiced in the Philadelphia area.

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⁷ Sandra Tatman, and Roger Moss. Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700-1930. Boston G. K. Hall & Co., 1985.