The Pepper Building

Local Historic Landmark #136
101-104 West Fourth St. Winston-Salem
Construction Date: 1928
Landmark Designation Date: 12/19/2016

The Pepper Building is one of Winston-Salem’s finely crafted Art Deco-style building. Built in the boom of the Roaring Twenties, the six-story building embodies the wealth and exuberance of the era.

The Pepper Building was named for its initial owner, Thomas Pepper. Along with his business partner and fellow tobacco warehouse owner J.B. Vaughn, Pepper acquired the Fourth and Liberty Street property in 1887. After five years of joint ownership, Pepper acquired Vaughn’s interest in the property and in January of 1893, commissioned civil engineer Gustaf Bottiger of Pennsylvania to design a new commercial building. The product of the commission was a Romanesque Revival-style building known as the Phoenix Hotel. The hotel would eventually be destroyed in a 1928 fire after which the Pepper family commissioned the current building, which was completed in October of the same year. Winston-Salem architects Willard Northup and Leet O’Brien designed the building. Although several years apart in age, both architects were educated in Pennsylvania before returning to North Carolina, a state both men had lived in during their younger years.

After a few years as business partners, both men departed for service in WWI. Upon reuniting in 1924 following the war, the men continued their business partnership. Northup and O’Brien’s practice was renowned for its work in consolidated schools during a period of flourishing state and local investment in public education. Both architects were key figures in the North Carolina American Institute of Architects, with Northup acting as one of its key founders and O’Brien acting at various points as the treasurer-secretary, vice-president and the president of the organization.

The six-story Pepper Building is emblematic of Northup and O’Brien’s strict attention to detail. In their design of the building, the architects utilized smooth-cream terra-cotta to add detail against the building’s variegated brown and sandstone brickwork. The utilization of terra-cotta set against brickwork can be seen in one of O’Brien’s earlier Winston-Salem high-rises, the O’Hanlon Building. Fluted terra-cotta was used to frame storefronts while geometric Art Deco patterns were used to embellish the second-story window sills. Adding to the building’s air of grandeur, brick pilasters emphasize its verticality while terra-cotta embellishments ring its capital.

Ownership of the building has changed hands multiple times over the years. In 2016, the Pepper Building was acquired by Pepper Property Investments, LLC with the intent of rehabilitating the property to accommodate a hotel and a ground-floor restaurant.

This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission’s web site: http://www.ForsythCountyHRC.org