

**on the**

**Second Ward High School Gymnasium**



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Click here to view letter from the SHPO regarding the [Second Ward H.S. Gymnasium](#)

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Second Ward High School Gymnasium is located at 710 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Charlotte, N.C.

2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:

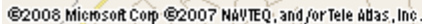
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

701 East Second St.

Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Telephone: 980-343-6050

4. A map depicting the location of the property.



- designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Second Ward High School Gymnasium possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The Second Ward High School Gymnasium is the only surviving building from the campus of Second Ward High School, the first public high school for blacks in Charlotte, N.C.

2) The Second Ward High School was the locale for sporting and non-sporting events that contributed mightily to the cultural milieu of Second Ward High School.

3) The Second Ward High School was designed by A. G. Odell, Jr., Charlotte's principal proponent and practitioner of Modernist style architecture in Charlotte in the mid-twentieth century.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Second Ward High School Gymnasium meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark". The current appraised value of the Second Ward High School Gymnasium is \$885,700. The property contains 10.69 acres and is exempt from the payment of Ad Valorem taxes.

Date of preparation of this report:

March 4, 2008

Prepared by:

Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Stewart Gray

## **A Brief History of Second Ward High School Gymnasium**

The years of unprecedented prosperity immediately following World War Two witnessed substantial improvements to the physical facilities of the Charlotte Public Schools. Benefiting from voter approval of bonds for school construction, the Board of School Commissioners moved aggressively to meet the increased demand for classrooms engendered by the post-war “baby boom.” Among its capital projects was the building of a new gymnasium for Second Ward High School, a school exclusively for African Americans that had opened in 1923 in the Brooklyn or Second Ward neighborhood as Charlotte's first public high school for African Americans.<sup>1</sup>



**The Second Ward High School Alumni erected this marker to commemorate the history of Second Ward High.**

Leaders of Charlotte's African American community consistently lobbied for better schools for black children. On September 22, 1947, the Negro Parent Teacher Association Council, headed by Mrs. Willie Mae Porter, appeared before the School Board and expressed dissatisfaction with conditions at Second Ward High School.<sup>2</sup> Kelly Alexander took a similar stance as spokesman for the Charlotte Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) He told the Board on August 23, 1948, that it should “correct any inequalities in facilities and educational opportunities” provided for African American students.<sup>3</sup> Several months earlier, on February 25, 1948, the N.A.A.C.P. had asked



that summer school be made available to black children, as was already being done for whites; and the Board of Education had consented to this request.<sup>4</sup> Finally, on October 25, 1948, W. H. Moreland, Frederick L. Wiley, and Earl Colston of the Improvement Club for Negro Schools came to the Board and offered to raise half of the money to build an athletic field at West Charlotte High School.<sup>5</sup>

African Americans no doubt applauded the decision of the Board of Education on October 27, 1947, to approve plans for the new gymnasium at Second Ward High School.<sup>6</sup> Advertisements for bids from contractors were issued in January 1948, and construction began the following May.<sup>7</sup> Blythe and Isenhour was the general contractor; A. Z. Price Co. oversaw the heating and plumbing; and Hunter Electrical Co. was responsible for the electrical components.<sup>8</sup>

The architect of the Second Ward High School Gymnasium was A. G. Odell, Jr.<sup>9</sup> The flamboyant son of a Cabarrus County textile executive, Odell studied architecture at Cornell University and came to Charlotte in 1939 to establish a one-man office. By the time of his death in April 1988 Odell oversaw the operations of one of the largest and most influential architectural businesses in North Carolina. "In a society where class connection still counted for much, young Odell had automatic entry to the offices of the area's mill owners and businessmen," writes historian Thomas Hanchett.<sup>10</sup> When Odell arrived, Charlotte's buildings were overwhelming conservative and revivalist in appearance and had been so for decades. "Most architecture in the area can best be described as pseudo-neoclassical, with elements of design copied from buildings elsewhere that had already incorporated copied elements of classic design," remembered M. H. Ward, one of Odell's early associates.<sup>11</sup> Odell set out to change that circumstance.



**Second Ward Tigers Basketball Team**

Odell took his lead from the thinking of such revolutionary post-World War One European architects as Le Corbusier. From about 1920 until shortly before his death in 1965, Le Corbusier was an untiring proselytizer for what he called the "Radiant City." To his way of thinking, urban designers should break completely with the past. Le Corbusier had no sympathy or interest in the preservation of existing buildings or neighborhoods. "Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture," he proclaimed.<sup>12</sup>



**A. G. Odell, Jr.**

Le Corbusier envisioned people living in high rise apartments surrounded by lustrous skyscrapers separated from one another by large expanses of manicured open space and dramatic fountains. Urban cores should be hygienic, antiseptic, and ordered -- not cluttered, begrimed, and haphazard. The tradition of mixing functions in a single structure or neighborhood was an anathema to Corbusier. The city of the future would be divided into discreet sections devoted to specific purposes -- working, living, leisure -- connected

to one another by expressways. Le Corbusier also called for a new vocabulary of building design. "We must start again from zero," he insisted.<sup>13</sup> His new architecture became known as the International style. "A house is a machine for living in," said Corbusier.<sup>14</sup> The fundamentals of the International style centered upon the exploitation of new materials, especially reinforced concrete, strengthened steel, and large expanses of glass, to create grace, airiness, and to allow great amounts of sunlight to penetrate the interior of structures. Some suggest that Corbusier wanted all buildings to look like luxury liners. The proponents of the International style "maintained that a well- designed building could be beautiful without the addition of expensive trim that obscured its functional shapes and structure," Hanchett explains.<sup>15</sup> Another center of International style philosophy was the Bauhaus in Germany, where influential designers like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe held sway.

A. G. Odell, Jr. became Charlotte's principal champion of the International style and devoted his considerable talents and energies to reshaping the local urban landscape. For good or ill, he largely succeeded. Odell embraced the architecture of "tomorrow" and had nothing but disdain for the revivalist buildings he observed on the streets of Charlotte. Describing what he saw when he arrived in Charlotte, Odell declared: "There was nothing here . . . that illustrated the honesty of stone as stone, steel as steel, glass as glass. Everybody was still wallowing in the Colonial heritage."<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Odell's Second Ward High School Gymnasium, one of his first International style public buildings, exhibits none of the traditional ornamentation of "yesterday" and expresses instead by its unadorned geometric shape a veneration of modern technology.

The Second Ward High School Gymnasium opened in January 1949.<sup>17</sup> Now part of the Metro School of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School System, it is the only surviving part of what was once the 14-acre Second Ward High School Campus. Second Ward High School closed in 1969, and the principal classroom building was demolished soon thereafter. "It was a terrible thing to see them tear it down," proclaimed Barbara Simpson, a 1957 graduate.<sup>18</sup> "When they closed it, it was like taking a meal off the table. It hurt," said another former student.<sup>19</sup> According to County Commissioner and State Senator Jim Richardson, "It was like losing part of yourself."<sup>20</sup> The Second Ward High School Gymnasium has great meaning for the thousands of African Americans who attended Second Ward. Entering the gymnasium, one can almost hear the cheers of the countless crowds that came there to support the Second Ward "Tigers."

1. *Charlotte Observer*, 8 July, 1985. For an enumeration of the many construction contracts approved by the Charlotte Board of School Commissioners, see *Charlotte City Board of Education Records 1890-1960 UNCC Manuscript Collection 1*, housed in Special Collections, Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Hereinafter cited as *Education Minutes*. For a comprehensive overview of Second Ward High School see William Jeffers, ["Historical Overview of Second Ward High School."](#) for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (2008).

2. *Education Minutes*, 22 September, 1947.

3. *Education Minutes*, 23 August, 1948.
4. *Education Minutes*, 25 February, 1948.
5. *Education Minutes*, 25 October, 1948.
6. *Education Minutes*, 27 October, 1947. The approval was contingent upon subsequent review and approval by Dr. Elmer Garinger, Associate Superintendent, and Dr. N. L. Engelhardt, Engineering Consultant for the Charlotte Public Schools.
7. *Education Minutes*, 26 January, 24 May, 1948.
8. *Education Minutes*, 23 February, 1948.
9. Mary Snead Boger, *Charlotte 23* (Bassett, Va: Bassett Printing Corporation, 1972), 226. *Education Minutes*, 7 October, 27 October, 1947; 26 January, 23 February, 25 February, 1948.
10. Hanchett, Thomas W., n.d. "Charlotte Architecture: Design Through Time Part 2." [landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept.2](http://landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept.2).
11. *Charlotte Observer*, 22 April, 1988.
12. Rybczynski, Witold, n.d. "The Architect Le Corbusier." [time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/lecorbusier](http://time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/lecorbusier).
13. Quoted in Rybczynski.
14. Quoted in Rybczynski.
15. Hanchett.
16. Quoted in Rybczynski.
17. *Education Minutes*, 14 January, 1949.
18. *Charlotte News*, 9 December, 1976.
19. *Charlotte Observer*, 30 August, 1983.
20. *Charlotte Observer*, 2 September, 1994.

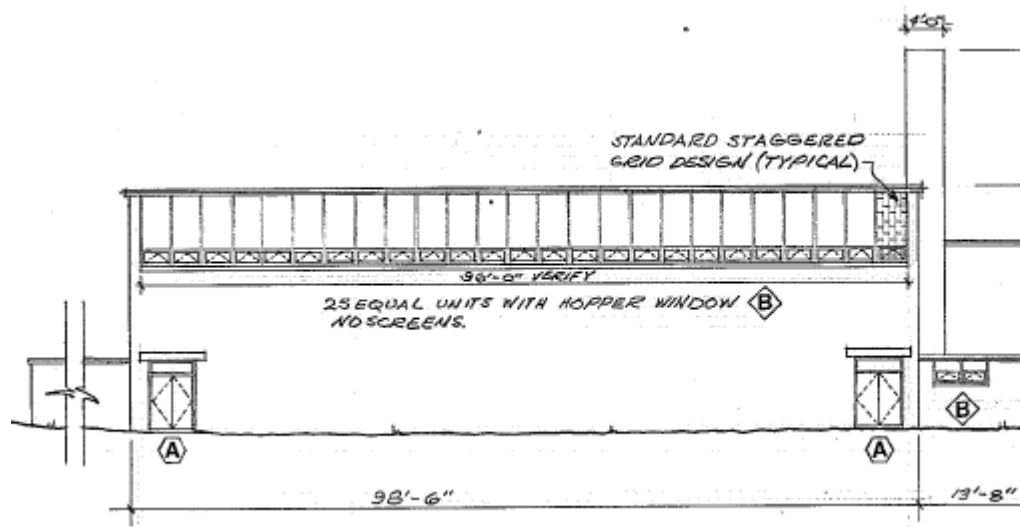


# **Second Ward Gymnasium**

## **Architect ural Descripti on**



The Second Ward Gymnasium is a tall (30') masonry-clad building with a flat roof. The building sits on relatively flat land on a fairly compact urban school campus. The building fronts onto a paved parking lot and is connected to the rest of the school buildings by a covered walkway. The gymnasium is the eastern-most building on the campus, which is composed of three other more recent one-story buildings. The walls of the gymnasium are constructed of masonry blocks veneered with brick laid in Common Flemish Bond, a bond with five rows of stretchers separated by a single row of alternating headers and stretchers. Steel posts set in the masonry walls support a steel roof frame. Built in 1949, the building exhibits a distinctly Modernist architectural style. Typical of the Modernist Style is the building's starkness, its lack of gratuitous ornamentation. The building's facade, the west elevation, features a large expanse of blank wall. Fenestration on the facade is limited. The facade features two simple door openings set near the corners of the building. The doors are sheltered with simple flat steel awnings. The wall is topped with a ribbon of twenty-four tall replacement windows that stretches the width of the building. Ribbon-windows are a typical element of the Modernist Style. The ribbon is composed of twenty-four individual metal-framed windows containing translucent fiberglass panels, with a single awning sash. The original windows were multi-light sash windows. A covered walkway metal roof has been attached to southern end of the facade to connect the gymnasium with the newer school buildings.



These plans were produced in 1979 and reflect the current condition of the building, including the replacement windows.



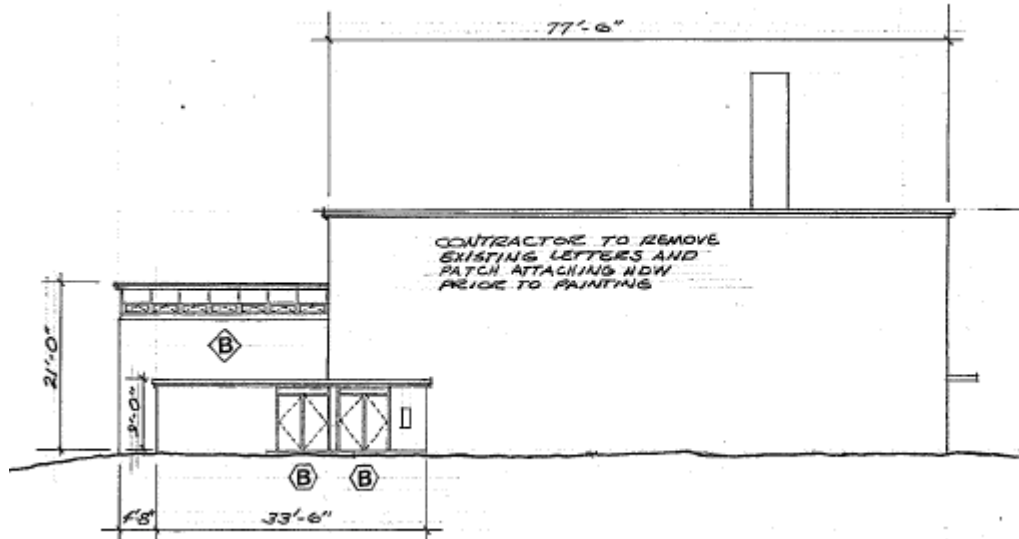
**Detail of southern corner of facade.**



**Common Flemish Bond**



**The north elevation is generally blank with the major exception of a one-story, flat-roofed, masonry ticket-booth/vestibule projecting from the elevation's eastern corner. The vestibule originally featured a recessed entrance sheltered by partial-width, shallow recessed porches on the north and east elevations, and a narrow box-office on the north elevation that extended to the edge of the roofline. The porches have been filled-in with two sets of metal doors and brick walls, laid in a running bond, to expand the interior space of the vestibule. The box office features a small ticket window. The only other feature of the north elevation is a simple wooden and sheet-metal band that caps the stark masonry wall.**

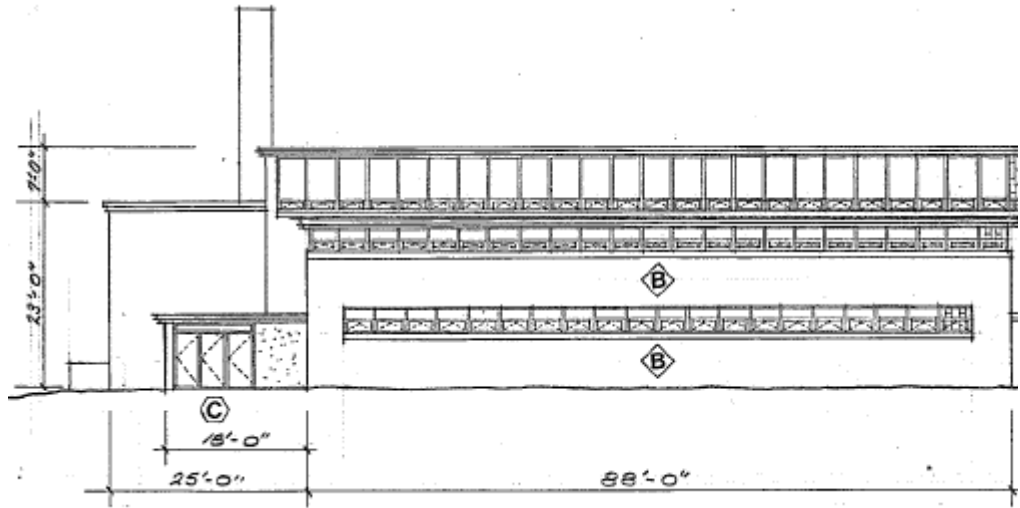


**Gymnasium vestibule/box-office. The metal doors are located in an area that was once an open recessed porch. The narrow box-office to the right of the doors is original.**





**A two-story wing projects from, and is centered on, the east elevation. Originally fronting on a city street (South Myers Street ), the east elevation features a symmetrical design. The large projecting wing dominates the elevation and features the same architectural elements found on the principal section of the building. The wing is topped with a ribbon of twenty-two replacement windows. The windows are short, with an operable sash awning set below a short fixed panel. Located high in the one-story-level is a second ribbon of short windows, set-in 4' from the sides of the wing. Other than the windows and a simple wood and metal cap the elevation is blank. The wing is 24' deep, and the upper ribbon of windows wraps around the north-east corner, and extends the width of the north elevation of the wing. The lack of a "solid" wall underneath the wing's flat roof gives the impression that the roof is floating above the wing. The roof is actually supported by steel posts that are integrated into the frames of the windows. The northern one-story vestibule obscures much of the wing's north elevation and is balanced on the wing's south elevation by a much smaller one-story vestibule that has retained its original recessed entrance, now containing replacement metal doors.**



The east elevation viewed from the south.

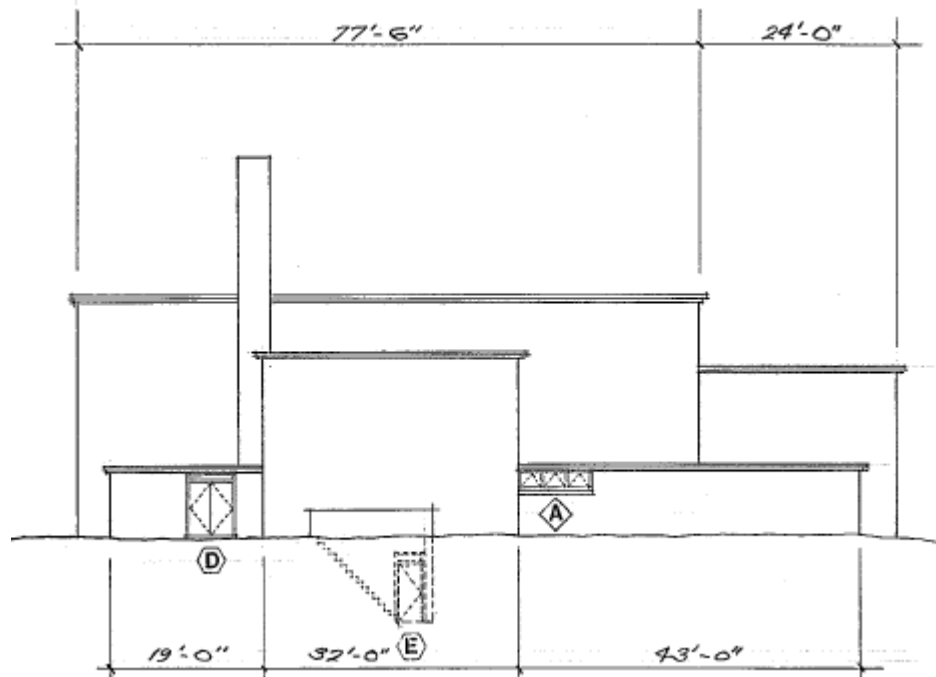


**Recessed entrance to southern vestibule.**



**The south elevation was designed as the least public of the elevations. The elevation is dominated by a tall, windowless, flat-roofed wing that houses a stage. Unlike the still frame of the principal section of the gymnasium, the stage-wing appears to be a solely masonry structure. The basement of the stage wing houses a boiler room, with a tall, square and unadorned chimney rising along the west side of the wing. Low, one-story wings on**

either side of the stage-wing connect, via hallways, the stage to the principal section of the gymnasium, and also contain hallways.







**Chimney viewed from the facade.**



**One-story wing on the south elevation that contains a bathroom and connects the stage with the principal section of the**



**gymnasium. Note that the Common Flemish Bond brickwork is utilized on all of the exterior walls.**

## **Interior**

**The interior of the Second Ward High School Gymnasium has retained a high degree of integrity and is in good condition. Built in 1949, the exposed steel framing and uninterrupted ribbons of windows that flood the interior with light reflect the Modernist Style. But the building's Modernist design stands in contrast to some of the traditional building element found in the gymnasium.**



**The tall wing that projects from the east elevation houses poured-in-place concrete bleachers. Steel posts as seen above and below support the weight of the roof. The posts are both freestanding (above), and encased in the masonry curtain walls (below). The exterior wall behind the bleachers utilizes the steel-encased-in-masonry design.**



**The steel in the exterior walls support simple, open steel trusses. This design also allows for the, virtually uninterrupted ribbons of windows high in the east and west walls.**



**The above photo shows the an edge of the wooden roof deck that was originally exposed from below. At some point most of the exposed wooden roof decks were obscured with drop-panel ceilings. The roof decks were constructed using tongue-and-groove lumber. If this building had been built much later than 1949, it is likely that a more modern and hi-tech deck material would have been used.**

**Set above the roof deck are the replacement windows, filled with translucent panels.**



**The concrete bleachers and steps were formed in place.**



**The stage is concealed behind a recent wall. However, the outline of the stage opening and the projecting raised stage floor are still apparent.**





**Detail of projecting stage floor. The original hardwood gymnasium floor features an unusual ventilated baseboard that allows the large expanse of wooden floor to expand and breathe.**



**This photograph of the stage ceiling may represent the original appearance of the gymnasium's primary ceiling.**





**The wooden interior doors exhibit construction typical for the first half of the twentieth century. The double-doors that enter into the main gymnasium space exhibit a minimal Modernist design, while the secondary doors feature a traditional five-panel design.**



**The solid concrete bleacher are supported by massive steel beams. The space under the bleachers contains the locker and shower rooms. This photograph demonstrates the masonry block construction of the walls, which are veneered with brick on the exterior.**

