

Board of Trade Building

210 West 8th Street

completed 1888, demolished 1968

by David Conrads

The Board of Trade building was the pride of downtown Kansas City when it was completed in 1888. Designed by the Chicago architectural firm of Burnham & Root, the building at 210 West 8th Street was once praised by the renowned British architect James Stirling (1926-1992) as “the toughest building of its period on either side of the Atlantic.” An early skyscraper and a transitional structure in the development of the modern, high-rise office block, the Board of Trade building also reflected Kansas City’s status as a growing and increasingly sophisticated young city.



The Board of Trade, which was organized in 1869, operated first from a dingy room on Union Street across from the [Union Depot](#) in the West Bottoms. In 1877 the organization moved to a new building at 502 Delaware Street, at the corner of 5th Street, a three-story building designed by Asa Beebe Cross (1826-1894), one of Kansas City’s most prominent architects. This first Board of Trade building (also known as the Exchange Building), though greatly altered from its original design, stands today.

Kansas City experienced rapid growth in the 1870s and 1880s, and the decade of the 1880s was an important one in the architectural history of Kansas City. The city’s population more than doubled during that ten-year period, increasing from 55,000 in 1880 to 132,000 by 1890. Many prominent architectural firms from New York, Boston, and Chicago opened offices in the City to take advantage of the opportunities here. Both designers and clients displayed an increased architectural sophistication. The result was a great number of significant structures erected in the 1880s, which had a large impact on the skyline of what was then a medium-sized western city, not far removed from its origins as a frontier trading post.



By the mid-1880s, the Board of Trade had outgrown its Delaware Street building. The design of the organization's new edifice (sometimes referred as the second Board of Trade, to distinguish it from its predecessor) was the result of a national architectural competition, a competition that was closely followed in architectural journals of the day. Burnham & Root's winning entry was chosen from among a pool of some 50 entries. The firm had entered a similar competition years before for the Board of Trade building in Chicago. Since the entire Chicago competition had collapsed in intrigue and failure, the firm was not overly excited at first about the Kansas City competition, even though it was to be conducted under rules approved by the Western Association of Architects. Although Burnham & Root was offered \$1,000 on an invitational basis to enter the competition, the firm was slow to respond. It was reported that John Wellborn Root, the firm's design principal, started and finished their entry on a Saturday before packing for a European trip.

The program for the second Board of Trade building provided a substantial challenge for the architects. The design needed to provide for a large exchange room, many rental offices and sufficient traffic flow within the building. Built at a cost of \$700,000, the Board of Trade building was designed by Root on an H-plan, with two major wings joined by a monumental entrance arch, skylighted concourse, and a soaring elevator tower. Entrance to the building was through the great arch. Inside was a two-story lobby with a skylight supported, in part, by cast-iron columns. Marble stairways on either side led to a gallery serving the mezzanine offices, while passage through the lobby led to the elevators.

Two-story arched windows on the fifth floor of the west wing and a gable decorated with terra cotta indicated the location of the grain trading hall, which occupied the entire fifth floor. It presented a large, unobstructed space (59 feet by 115 feet) beneath an arched and coffered ceiling. Spectators were able to watch the activity in the trading pit from a small balcony at the sixth-floor level. The east wing of the building contained most of the office space. For many years the Chamber of Commerce, originally called the Commercial Club, was a tenant in the Board of Trade building.

The exterior of the building was faced on three sides with pressed brick and ornamental terra cotta, both of a reddish color. The facades were divided horizontally by intricate patterns of terra cotta string courses and window trim. Countervailing vertical elements were provided in the massively modeled corner piers. Rich detailing of exterior decoration was used, especially around

the central door. The enormous tower, far taller than was needed to house the elevator's mechanical equipment, was a distinguishing feature of the building.

Burnham & Root was a pioneering firm in the field of early skyscraper design and a highly important firm in the history of architecture. The design of the Board of Trade building is closely related to The Rookery, an 11-story office building also erected in 1888, which still stands in Chicago. Architectural historians consider the Board of Trade building in Kansas City to be an important step in the evolution of John Root's design work, which eventually led to his greatest achievements, the Monadnock Building (1892) in Chicago and the Mills Building (1892) in San Francisco. Burnham & Root designed seven buildings for Kansas City between 1887 and 1888. The only one still standing is the William Chick Scarritt Residence, at 3240 Norledge Avenue in Kansas City's northeast section. The Board of Trade building was considered to be the firm's finest Kansas City design and one of its most notable buildings in any locale.

Kansas City experienced another period of rapid growth following World War I. By the early 1920s, many grain companies had outgrown the Board of Trade building and had found space in other buildings in the area. In 1925 the organization moved south to a 14-story building at 10th and Wyandotte streets. In 1964 the Board of Trade moved again, to 49th and Main streets, just south of the Country Club Plaza, where it remains today.

For many years after the Board of Trade moved, the building at 210 West 8th was known as the Manufacturers Exchange Building. The building changed hands a number of times over the decades and gradually fell into a state of deterioration. A study done while the building was occupied estimated that it would require \$1 million in renovation work to be commercially viable, and even more if the building was left without maintenance for a length of time. A rehabilitation of the blighted area surrounding the building would also be necessary to make the Board of Trade building commercially attractive.

The building was still partially occupied in 1965 when the Mid-Continent Mart Redevelopment Corporation proposed a \$17.5 million apparel mart on a four-block parcel of land that included the Board of Trade building. Preservationists rallied around the venerable, if decaying, structure. Petitions were circulated. Citizens to Save the Old Board of Trade Building was formed, a small group made up mainly of young architects, and new uses

for the structure proposed. None of these efforts garnered any immediate response.

Although Mid-Continent's redevelopment plan was revised in 1967 and the new version did not include the Board of Trade building, the damage was done. The building's last remaining tenants had moved out, and the owners had turned off the heat and electricity, locked the doors and terminated maintenance on the structure. In the end, no corporation, institution or philanthropist stepped forward to save the building. The preservation effort did, however, lead directly to the formation of the Missouri Valley chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians.

The Board of Trade building was razed in 1968. Its demolition is widely considered to be a deplorable loss both to Kansas City's architectural wealth and to American architecture as a whole. An eight-story commercial building now occupies the site.

Sources

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