

The Morehouse Parish Courthouse (1914) is a monumental Beaux Arts building located in a courthouse square setting in the heart of downtown Bastrop. The walls are in beige brick veneer, with numerous details in off-white cast concrete. The main original block rises in stages to four stories, culminating in a faceted dome on a high drum. Downtown Bastrop is on a crest of land and the courthouse site itself is elevated about two feet, with the result that the dome can be seen at a distance. Despite the largely new interior and extensive additions (to the sides and copying the original architecture), the building's impressive Beaux Arts character stands forth, providing the rural parish with its greatest architectural landmark. The courthouse is in excellent condition thanks to a multi-million dollar project completed in 2001.

The Morehouse Parish Courthouse epitomizes a kind of flamboyant classicism for public buildings which reached its peak nationally in about 1900 and was thereafter in decline as a more rigid and mannered style came into fashion. The original portion of the building consists of a massive colossal entrance portico (in antis), the dome structure and the three-bay wings on either side of the portico. Here are found traditional elements of Beaux Arts classicism -- advancing and receding wall planes, an operatic building up of massing, the strongly scaled portico with its coupled brick pilasters and Tuscan columns, the massive two-stage parapet and, of course, the drum and dome. More than a full story in height, the octagonal drum has heavy multiple bases. Its corners are accented with coupled pilasters whose mass is registered in the surmounting entablature. The four-stage dome features clocks on four sides redolent of fashionable Beaux Arts rooftop figure sculpture. Additionally, the drum is marked by a large ornamental filigree window on each facet. The faceted conical roof culminates in a diminutive cupola.

The building is set on an almost half-story high basement with imposing approach steps. The portico parapet features a half-story high label panel inscribed with "1914 Morehouse Parish 1914." The rear elevation is almost identical to the front, only there is no label panel. Instead three windows light the third story. The one over one windows (with transoms) are marked with pronounced jack arches with over-sized keystones. Other details in contrasting off-white cast concrete include a belt course, entablature, and string courses. Windows and doors in the recessed porticoes (front and rear) are coupled -- presumably to follow the bay opening sequence formed by the coupled columns. The ends of the original portion of the building are defined by heavy colossal Tuscan pilasters.

The courthouse's cruciform third story (which forms a stage in the architectural building up to the drum and dome) echoes what was originally a cruciform configuration on the interior. The original interiors were long gone or covered prior to the just completed major restoration/renovation project. For example, the courtroom was subdivided into offices with a dropped ceiling which hid the dome. Today the courthouse's interior details, finishes, etc. date from the recent renovation. The notable exception is the handsome, two story courtroom, where enough was left to be able to restore the space. Removing the lowered ceiling revealed balcony seating on two sides and the original ceiling with its stained glass dome. The dome is set within a square defined by pronounced molding. The original stained glass was in bad repair (pieces missing, etc.) and was replicated by local craftsmen. (Broken pieces were sent to the original producer, Kokomo Glass in Kokomo, Indiana so that the colors would be as accurate as possible.) Modern materials include the ceiling finish and recessed lighting. Defining the judge's bench and the side elevations are colossal paneled pillars. Above the judge's bench is a large blank panel added during the renovation. A similar panel, but completely squared off on the ends, is shown in an old photo of the interior. All the woodwork associated with the judge's bench (backdrop, balustrade, etc.), the jury box and public seating dates from the renovation. The distinctive balustrade replicates the one shown in an old photo.

The most noteworthy alterations to the courthouse have been additions. In 1935 small single-story side wings were added. These wings were engulfed in large side additions in 1966 -- adding seven bays (grouped in three stages) on each side. Amazingly (for the 1960s), the original window, pilaster and entablature style of the old building was duplicated in the wings, and the bricks match perfectly. The overall effect was and is very convincing, although the trained eye would be suspicious because of the strong horizontal lines.

The only other exterior modification involves the windows. As part of the recent renovation, the original windows were removed and duplicated (exactly) in custom fabricated aluminum units (clear glass).

Assessment of Integrity:

Admittedly the 1966 additions doubled the size and gave the courthouse strong horizontal lines never intended in the original design. Nonetheless, the original central block is easily visually dominant. Its grand Beaux Arts effect (which is the source of its status as a parish landmark) is no less potent or compelling because of the building masses that now abut it. It is still a monumental work of architecture with Morehouse Parish.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1914

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: W. L. Stevens (architect, 1914)
CRITERION: C

The Morehouse Parish Courthouse is of local architectural significance because its grand Beaux Arts character makes it quite easily the architectural landmark of Morehouse Parish. Indeed, it is the parish's only example of the Beaux Arts taste.

Morehouse is a medium size parish which was and is rural with the exception of the industrial center of Bastrop. While there was some settlement in the region in the late 1700s, Morehouse Parish was not created until 1844. The selection of a permanent courthouse site was based on the junction of the area's main roads—the "Xroads at the blacksmith shop"—now the intersection of Madison and Washington streets. The new town was named for Baron de Bastrop, who had been granted land in the area by Spanish officials in the 1790s.

Bastrop retained village status until 1909, when there was sufficient population to be designated a town, although still less than one thousand. This was to change, however, in the 1920s when the population exploded, due largely to the arrival of two huge paper mills. A small farming community rather suddenly became an industrial center, as the population more than quadrupled (from 1,216 in 1920 to 5,121 in 1930). Other manufacturers included a glass company and carbon black plants. (The carbon plants were a byproduct of the discovery of a major gas field in the area in 1916.) The only other town in Morehouse Parish of any size is Mer Rouge, and it only had a population of between 600 and 700 in the early 1900s.

While Morehouse Parish has not been completely surveyed for historic buildings, the staff of the Division of Historic Preservation has done enough fieldwork there over the years to make the following observations. There are no known rural buildings of architectural importance, and the buildings in Bastrop, Mer Rouge, and villages such as Bonita and Oak Ridge are for the most part quite modest. Despite Bastrop's considerable prosperity in the early twentieth century, the surviving historic building stock (almost entirely twentieth century) consists largely of simple cottages, low-key folk bungalows, and unadorned commercial buildings.

Major expressions of architectural styles are few in number. They include: (1) the fairly simple, wood frame Gothic Revival Christ Episcopal Church (1897) in Bastrop; (2) the Snyder House (also in Bastrop), a historic revival residence combining English cottage massing with an overall Mediterranean character; (3) a Classical Revival Methodist church in Bastrop; (4) early twentieth century historic revival schools, one each in Bastrop, Oak Ridge and Mer Rouge; and (5) the Morehouse Parish Courthouse. Of these, the Beaux Arts courthouse, with its colossal porticoes and towering dome, is far and away the grandest architectural statement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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