NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

061

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

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1. Name of Property

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historic name Sears, Roebuck and Company Department Store

other names/site number

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2. Location

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street & number 4500 Wisconsin Avenue, NW not for publication N/A
city or town Washington vicinity X
state District of Columbia code DC zip code 20016 county N/A code N/A

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3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally X statewide ___ locally. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Hampton Carson — 9/18/95

Signature of certifying official — Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official — Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

Entered in the National Register

✓	entered in the National Register (See continuation sheet).	Barbara J. Lapsley	2/16/90
____	determined eligible for the National Register (See continuation sheet).	_____	_____
____	determined not eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
____	removed from the National Register	_____	_____
____	other (explain): _____		

_____ for Signature of Keeper _____ Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- X private
- ___ public-local
- ___ public-State
- ___ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- X building(s)
- ___ district
- ___ site
- ___ structure
- ___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
COMMERCE	Business

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
WORK IN PROGRESS	

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT:
Moderne

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	
roof	ASPHALT
walls	CONCRETE
other	

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

_X_ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

___ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

_X_ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

___ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

___ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

___ B removed from its original location.

___ C a birthplace or a grave.

___ D a cemetery.

___ E a reconstructed building, object,or structure.

___ F a commemorative property.

___ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)
ARCHITECTURE
COMMERCE

Period of Significance 1940-1941

Significant Dates

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation _____

Architect/Builder John Stokes Redden
John G. Raben

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)
___ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ previously listed in the National Register
___ previously determined eligible by the National Register
___ designated a National Historic Landmark
___ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data
_X_ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
___ Other
Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	319700	4312900	3	__	_____	_____
2	__	_____	_____	4	__	_____	_____

__ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Eve Lydia Barsoum / Architectural Historian

organization D.C. Historic Preservation Division date September 14, 1995

street & number 614 H Street, NW, Room 305 telephone (202) 727-7360

city or town Washington state D.C. zip code 20001

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)
name _____
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state D.C. zip code 20006

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Sears, Roebuck and Company
Department Store
Name of property
Washington, DC
County and State

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The Sears, Roebuck and Company Department Store was built in 1940-41 in the Tenleytown section of northwest Washington, D.C. It is the largest structure in an uptown commercial area which includes churches, schools, and public buildings. It is located at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue, Albemarle Street, River and Murdock Mill Roads, and an alley. The structure is free-standing and polygonal in shape, following the irregular alignment and sloping contours of the streets. Sears is one story plus a basement and has rooftop parking. It has concrete walls and measures about 25 feet high on average and 385 feet on its longest side, creates to an impressive horizontal profile. The principal elevations have show windows with bronze frames. The features include a large show window which wraps the Albemarle Street and Wisconsin Avenue corner and ramps which rise to the parking deck. The architectural details express modern functionalism, influenced by design motifs from the International Style and Stream line Moderne. The store was designed by Sears' chief architect John Stokes Redden and store designer John Girard Raben, with the assistance of consulting engineer Oliver G. Bowne of Los Angeles. The exterior is largely intact, except for the removal of original signage and various alterations to the penthouses, display windows and entrances. It operated until recently as a department store and auto service garage. The building is in good quality and is presently undergoing renovation to accommodate a Hechinger's lumber yard.

Bounded by Wisconsin Avenue, Albemarle Street, River and Murdock Mill Roads, and an alley, the Sears Department Store was constructed on an unusual site; in terms of its polygonal shape and its eight foot variation in grade. This created design problems because no two sides of the building would be parallel for symmetrical location of expansion and control joints and it required a variation in floor level. The construction problem was solved by the design of a five-sided building divided into three sections of irregular shape, each independent of the other with expansion joints in a T-plan. The ground level problem was solved by regrading and building the structure into the sloping site with entrances at two levels.

The store's dimensions are approximately 385 feet by 350 feet, by 25 feet high. It originally contained 196,775 square feet of space: 111,525 square feet of gross sales floor area, 41,475 square feet of stock storage, 29,115 square feet for utilities, and 14,660 square feet for an automobile service facility.

The building's siting at a busy traffic intersection without sufficient neighborhood parking space strongly influenced the use of rooftop parking, accessible by ramps on Albemarle Street and Wisconsin Avenue and exit ramps leading to Murdock Mill Road and the alley. The ramps were conspicuously located on each facade to communicate that convenient automobile access and parking was available. Stepped and punctured parapets, streamlined steel railings, and sweeping curbs and bollards articulate the ramps. They were 18 feet wide and had no more than a 10 percent incline. There were 250 parking spaces and two penthouses which incorporated escalators and stairs leading to the retail area

below. The penthouse at the Albemarle Street ramp is extant. Rectangular in plan with glass block windows on each side, this entrance has a flat roof and a curved canopy surmounted by the original "ENTRANCE" sign. The stairs have their original terrazzo finish. The Wisconsin Avenue penthouse was removed, although the terrazzo stairs were kept. It was triangular in shape with curved walls. Two types of lights were designed for the roof. Tall standards with multiple lights and reflecting disks were arranged in a circular pattern in the parking aisles; these have been replace with modern street lamps. While lamps with round concrete posts with a metal band which held opaque glass lamps were located at the rounded curbs at the ramps; these are extant, albeit in a deteriorated condition.

The site configuration is reflected in the building's multiple orientation. From the double-height display window at the corner of Albemarle Street and Wisconsin Avenue, entrance facades extend along both Albemarle and Wisconsin, bending around onto River Road where the auto service shop was located. The principal facades were on Wisconsin Avenue, Albemarle Street, and River Road. Together, they incorporated 13 display windows with bronze trim (some sections have been replaced with aluminum or steel) surmounted by continuous curvilinear concrete canopies; these areas are also distinguished by their rose-tinted exposed-aggregate concrete panels. The architectural focal point of the building is a huge display window on the corner of Albemarle Street and Wisconsin Avenue. Originally, six sixteen foot glass panels created a stage-like corner display. The panes have been replaced by windows approximately 12 feet high surmounted by a transom-like row of four square panes. Above the window is a bold curved canopy on which is mounted "SEARS" in neon--a replica of the original. This show window was intended to be a dramatic advertisement attracting the attention of motorists by day or night.

In 1975, the Wisconsin Avenue elevation was altered to accommodate construction for the Tenleytown Metro station escalator entrance; the doors and two of the five display windows were removed. This alteration pushed the ground level portion of the exterior wall back twenty feet. Granite was used to frame the escalator entrance and the original bronze Sears doors were reinstalled and reoriented toward the Metro. However, the distinctive curved canopy which hung over the original entrance remains intact. The original Albemarle Street entrance remains intact, although the doors and hardware have been replaced. The flanking display windows have been infilled. The River Road elevation is largely intact. In addition to the exit ramp, it has a large central garage entrance door for the original automobile service area. To the left of this opening is a pedestrian entrance with its original bronze hardware. The canopy and a small display window which once enhanced the doorway have been removed and the opening has been closed to pedestrians.

The secondary elevations fronting Murdock Mill Road and the alley are intact. Their concrete walls are punctuated by open panels, ribbons of small windows or air vents, and large loading dock entrances.

The building's overall appearance was enhanced by a distinctive rectangular basketweave pattern and surface texture. Large poured-in-place concrete panels separated by V-joints, designed to conceal the expansion and control joints, create a visually interesting wall. The innovative surface texture, made by using circular sawn lumber and alternating the direction of the grain to create the formwork panels required detailed analysis of concrete aggregates and an almost perfect alignment.

At the time of its construction, the interior design of the Sears Department Store was considered radical. It was termed "windowless" because there were no openings into the sales area for daylight or fresh air, central air and heating and lighting were used instead. The interior plan of the store generally was organized into the three sections defined by the T-shaped expansion joints. These construction joints roughly bisect the building where the Wisconsin Avenue and River Road facades join and at the midpoint of the Albemarle Street and Murdock Mill Road facades. In section, the building has two levels for sales, while store and automotive service areas were located in the basement. The office and service areas, located toward the rear of the building, incorporated a mezzanine for a lunchroom, restrooms, customer services, and offices. This area was accessed by the Albemarle Street pedestrian entrance and stair from the penthouse; it was demarcated on the elevation by horizontal bands of tripartite windows.

The main sales floor area had an open plan with long aisles defined by large square piers and was accessed by three pedestrian entrances, one from each of the principal elevations, in addition to the penthouse access. The piers, escalators, terrazzo floors, and signage remain.

The Wisconsin Avenue Sears is significant as a product of mid-20th Century innovations in department store design aimed at adapting retail merchandising to an increasingly mobile and suburban population. National retailer Sears, Roebuck & Company pioneered many of these changes with remarkable success, offering a wide range of well-made practical goods to the middle class.
The Sears, Roebuck & Company department store, designed and built in 1940-41, is highly significant to the architectural and cultural heritage of the nation's capital. Designed by the Sears company's chief architect John Stokes Redden and store planner John G. Raben. The building meets Criteria C and A. It is among Washington's earliest and most significant examples of moderne commercial architecture, illustrating the revolutionary impact of the Modernist design philosophy of functional expressionism on the historicism that constituted Washington's dominant architectural idiom; in conception and execution, the building anticipated the modern revolution which transformed the city after the war. It embodies significant innovations made by an influential national retailer in the development of modern department store design, including a "windowless" and "upside down" layout--a major customer entry from roof parking. The Sears department store also exemplifies significant national trends in the development of modern merchandising, including the decentralization of major retail centers to suburban locations, the integration of automobile parking and services into shopping facility design, the reformulation of department store layout to accommodate modern climate control systems and merchandising techniques, and the expression of practical modernity as a basis for customer appeal.

This Sears building ranks among the most innovative stores realized during the seminal period of development by a company that has had significant impact on twentieth century retailing practices in the United States. By the mid-1920s, Sears had expanded beyond its mail-order beginnings to enter the retail market, guided by retired General Robert E. Wood, a veteran of Army supply operations. The company's initial outlets resembled warehouses, but by the early 1930s, Sears began to develop a more sophisticated national merchandising strategy. Stores were classified according to market size, with corresponding facilities and selections of merchandise. Sears first commissioned outside architects, but by the end of the 1930s, its own in-house planning and construction departments created complete new prototypes of modern store layout and design.

When the first generation of big Sears stores was built in seeming isolation along arteries far from the urban core, they attracted considerable attention because the overwhelming dominant center for retailing in Washington and almost every other U.S. city was downtown. The typical Sears neighborhood was one of modest single-family houses. Sears was instrumental in altering the notion of department store exclusivity. Capitalizing on the great success of its mail-order sales to a predominantly rural population of modest means, the company stressed inexpensive, practical, good quality merchandise. The vast unadorned selling floors of its first big stores, afforded a striking contrast in appearance and

merchandise to the leading emporia. Sears gave no-frills merchandising a respectability it had seldom enjoyed before. The target audience was the enormous urban population of modest means.

Thousands of consumers responded enthusiastically to Sears stores because they met wide-spread needs in a setting that was no nonsense, yet seemed eminently respectable rather than cheap. Sears also changed the retail climate by adapting operational methods pioneered by chain grocery and variety stores in earlier decades. As a mail-order house, Sears was already among the retail giants, having developed its own successful methods of volume purchasing and sales. In 1922, its earnings of over $5 million were matched by only two big downtown store operations, Gimbal Brothers and the May Company, both of which had outlets in several major cities. Only F.W. Woolworth exceeded this level.

When Sears expanded into retailing, Sears purchased large volumes of durable goods at unusually low prices without a middleman and passed the savings on to customers. Between 1925 and 1929, the company opened almost 60 full-line, "A", stores in major cities and several hundred stores carrying a limited line of goods in smaller communities. Net earnings soared to over $30 million and net sales to $415 million in 1929. On the eve of the Depression, Sears had a network of stores throughout the country that far exceeded its closest rival, Montgomery Ward.

After five years, Sears had redefined department store retailing into a national enterprise of enormous volume, focusing on basic goods for the mainstream population. In the process, Sears also helped redefine the location and character of the department store building type. Rather than choose sites downtown or even in outlying business centers, Sears' new outlets stood more or less in isolation with few if any commercial establishments close by. This siting practice ran directly counter to conventions of the period. The prevailing view was that such locations were of marginal value. However, Sears' underlying criterion was that stores be conveniently accessed by a critical mass of its target audience. Sears believed that customers would prefer to drive to a store, not far from where they lived, as opposed to contending with the streetcar trip downtown. Thus, stores were located along a major artery and at or near a major intersection. Land prices were much lower in the outlying areas than in concentrated business areas, a savings that permitted the store to spread horizontally rather than vertically. This building form was cheaper to construct and better for selling. Moreover, the low land costs enabled at least half of the parcel to remain open for parking an unheard of amenity at that time, but the form characterized every Sears store from the beginning.

Virtually no precedent existed in the retail sphere for any of these elements. The model, it appears, was from the latest planning of industrial buildings, of which Sears' own mail-order plants were widely considered leading examples. The "A" stores also looked somewhat like industrial plants, upgraded with a few decorative embellishments which situated them ahead of the cheapest store.

Sears' mass-marketing merchandising techniques began to influence those of major department stores and provided a model for many chain companies as early as the 1930s. During the post war era, leading retailers were virtually unanimous in acknowledging that Sears was the single-most important force in shaping their then current thinking. Even before the Depression, Sears' great success in outlying locations prompted many downtown store executives to establish branches so as to remain competitive. Some of those branches were similarly sited. Low-loft stores as they were called, began with Bullock's Wiltshire in Los Angeles of 1928-29. By the late 1950s, several other major department store companies were following Sears' model of becoming a true chain, that is having a network of equal stores throughout a region as opposed to a downtown parent store and smaller branches in satellite locations.

Sears entered the Washington, D.C. market in 1929 with a big store on Bladensburg Road (the major thoroughfare into the city from the northeast) just north of Benning Road, an easily accessible site. (The store has been demolished.) It was located several blocks to the east of the outlying business center around H Street, NE, then arguably the most important commercial area, next to downtown, for Sears' target audience. The stores around H Street were small. However, the new Sears "A" stores of the 1920s averaged around 100,000 square feet, at a time when 5,000 square feet was considered large for a store in an outlying area. H Street was close enough for comparison shopping but the Sears store was sufficiently removed to have its own identity. Within the local context, the store was an especially pronounced departure for it was the only large-scale retail outlet situated beyond the city center until the Wisconsin Avenue Sears store opened in October 1941.

The Wisconsin Avenue store possessed all the unique siting characteristics of its predecessors from the 1920s. At that time, the area was congestion-free and not near a concentration of retail. The location was easily reached from the nearby neighborhoods as well as Montgomery County.

The building was also at the forefront of some significant changes that reveal the company's dynamic approach to store development. The Wisconsin Avenue store is part of a decisive turn in the company's merchandising and design practices. Not surprisingly, Sears built far fewer "A" stores during the pre-World War II years than it had during the expansive 1920s. Those realized were less standardized and responded to the location. These buildings also tended to have experimental aspects to them, introducing new features that might prove their value to widespread use in the future. To combat the impact of the Depression, Sears began to enlarge its market, targeting women and a larger segment of the middle class. This shift explains the siting of the Wisconsin Avenue store in an area where the population was predominantly white-collar and not far from wealthy neighborhoods. This new group of patrons, in turn, appears to have had an impact on store design. If the buildings were to have a greater middle-market appeal, they must look less like factories and more like typical stores. To achieve that end, Sears remained true to its character by defying conventions.

Rival Montgomery Ward took a more mainstream approach, adopting a decorous-historicism then popular and suggestive of a rise in stature. By contrast, Sears pursued an increasingly modern vein, culminating in several stores of which that on Wisconsin Avenue is among the most fully developed. They were characterized by a sleek abstraction of horizontal form inspired by avant garde examples. This kind of modernism was still very novel for retail facilities but was soon adopted by some of the most fashionable and prestigious firms in the trade, such as Lord and Taylor (Manhasset, 1940-41) and Bullock's (Pasadena, 1945-47).

At the same time, Sears remained true to its origins. Its cultivation of a modernist vocabulary was of a practical nature and avoided associations of a resort hotel or of a country club, such as Bullock's cultivated. To implement the ideas, Sears chose a new team of designers. The firm headed by George Nimitz, a national leader in the design of industrial buildings, responsible for almost all the Sears mail-order plants and the new "A" stores erected through 1938, was now replaced by an in-house team, John Stokes Reden and John Girard Raben, both from the store planning and display department. The Wisconsin Avenue store was one of their premier demonstrations of charting a future course for the company's retail outlets.

Raben was hired by Sears not long after the department's founding in 1932. Previously, he had worked for the Los Angeles designer John Peters on the remarkable interiors of Bullock's Wiltshire and created horror movie sets for Universal Pictures. Raben was asked to rethink the interior layout for Sears, giving increased attention to the arrangement and display of merchandise so that the sales floors would seem less like warehouses.

As a result, Raben proposed to eliminate all windows except for ground level display windows for the new store in Chicago's south side. With advances in air circulating systems the arrangement made sense and interior lighting was more controllable, emphasizing displays and not harming merchandise. Doubts existed, however, as to whether the public would accept such a face. Raben prevailed. The windowless store in Chicago attracted national attention. It set a precedent followed by all subsequent Sears stores and eventually by department stores across the nation.

The scope of the store planning department broadened in 1938 with the hiring of architect John Stokes Redden who had worked for one of the nation's most prominent commercial firms, Holabird and Roche. Raben and Redden began to work on a new prototype, the Pico Boulevard store in Los Angeles of 1938-39. Their objective was to design the store around the displays, circulation, storage, and other internal needs, rather than to assume that a vast industrial plant-like box would satisfy all requirements. For the consumer, the exterior change was most apparent. The concept of the monumental exterior, the hallmark of Nimitz's stores, was completely altered. This image was replaced by a building of lower profile, more dynamic in form, where every part seems to have a clear, logical purpose instead of contributing to a neutral form.

Redden and Raben preached utilitarianism. They claimed that only elements essential to the building's efficient functioning remained at the Pico Boulevard store. The architectural press no less than the retailing divisions depicted their functionalist methods as the very essence of good design and cast the building as a new model for stores generally.

Between 1930 and 1950, scarcely any retail building anywhere in the country received more publicity. The enormous success of the Pico Boulevard store led to two other Redden and Raben designs before the war, in Birmingham, Alabama and in Washington, D.C. The Birmingham store was the first Sears to have its entire selling area on a single floor, a feature not often repeated due to land costs. Washington's, by contrast, was unusually compact due to site limitations and also to neighborhood concerns that the building not be too intrusive.

Beyond its associational significance, the Wisconsin Avenue store has a number of important physical attributes that make it among the most sophisticated and innovated of dozens of "A" stores built by Sears during the interwar decade. Not the least of its distinguishing characteristics is the success with which Redden and Raben were able to respond to neighborhood demands with the building not overpowering otherwise seeming to encroach upon the residential blocks close by. This was among the largest of the Sears stores to date, with nearly 200,000 square feet of floor area. This space not only encompassed sales, storage and office functions but also the auto service facility, a feature introduced at Sears stores in 1932 but which had always been housed in a separate structure elsewhere on the property. In keeping with concerns for neighborhood decorum, the service area was minimally articulated on the exterior. Similarly, the loading bays located at the rear, on the west elevation, were recessed into the building so as to minimize intrusiveness.

Off-street parking presented another challenge on this comparatively small site. Unlike all of the other "A" stores, no space existed for on-grade parking. Thus, the team designed a parking deck on the roof, a concept introduced at the Pico Boulevard store to supplement the constrained ground-level parking. It accommodated 150 cars and was among the most ambitious features of this kind then found in the United States. The technology had been developed some years earlier for multi-level parking garages, however it was not used due to the high structural costs and the persistent reluctance among many building owners to allocate money for on-site parking. The Pico Boulevard and Wisconsin Avenue stores stood out as pioneers of a concept many observers thought would prove to be widely used in the future.

The impact of the building is mitigated by the fact that half of it is below grade, functioning as retail space and storage. The intricacy of a floor plan accommodating diverse functions on a site as irregular as it is constricted also underscored how much of a departure the building is from the typical box-like stores designed by Nimitz, such as in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Equally important on the overall effect of the building is the skill with which the exterior form and details are manipulated. Taking advantage of the angled configuration at the principle corner, Redden and Raben designed an enormous display window, far larger than windows found on most retail stores, and accentuated it by recesses at each end and by a curvilinear overhang above. Other parts of the two main elevations facing Wisconsin Avenue and Albemarle Street are less theatrical but hardly uniform. Throughout the composition emphasized horizontality while unifying the diverse parts so that the overall effect from a distance is subdued rather than agitated. Yet from the pedestrian's perspective, the aspect is constantly changing, which subtly breaks down the scale of the walls' great linear dimensions.

Beyond form and composition, texture is used to enhance the effect. Like all the new "A" stores, this one is of reinforced concrete construction. And like all those erected after 1936, its exterior walls were exposed concrete. The site configuration, however, prohibited a conventional arrangement of expansion joints. This constraint was turned into an opportunity by creating a tapestry of concrete patterns, alternating the alignment of form work imprints, on the entire wall surfaces. The textural richness is not discernable from afar, but offers a play of texture, light, and shadow from the sidewalk.

Another example of how the building's structure becomes its decoration is the treatment of the ramps to the parking deck. The most prominent lies at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and River Road, conspicuously advertising the availability of parking.

The idea of a fully-exposed vehicular ramp bisecting the main front of a store was unheard of at that time. However, this element plays a key formal role as well as its functional role. The ramp is essential in breaking up the mass of the Wisconsin Avenue/River Road elevations which, meeting at an oblique angle, could otherwise render the effect formless and unrelieved. On the other hand, the second entry ramp facing Albemarle Street is tucked behind the exterior wall as unobtrusively as the auto service entrance.

The parking deck itself was a great convenience. Although its elements were few, all were treated with the same attention to detail as found on the elevations. The deck is punctuated by two penthouses, one now greatly modified. The other remains intact. It housed basic functions in ways which were dramatic and underscored the ambient newness of driving onto the roof of a store and then descending into its spaces via escalators. Redden frequently relayed to the architectural press that utility was the driving force behind every aspect of his designs for Sears. Yet, it is clear, due to their level of integration, that both aesthetic considerations and popular perception figured prominently in his goals, fulfilling a primary modernist dictate.

Redden's and Rabin's work possesses a forceful utilitarianism, gained perhaps from years of experience of working for commercial clients. The closest parallel and a likely source of inspiration was the work of Rolland Wank, chief architect for

the Tennessee Valley Authority. More or less contemporary, these projects were widely covered by the architectural and popular presses. Wank was insistent that his architecture grow out of utilitarian requirements of the dams, generating plants, cranes, observation decks, and other features of the scheme. Both the attitude and the product bear obvious similarities. When it was built, the Wisconsin Avenue store was unlike anything locally in its design irrespective of function. The prevailing modernist idiom was an abstract classicism, or modern classicism, popularized by Paul Cret with his Folger Shakespeare Library but often expressed in less inspired ways, as with Gilbert Underwood's appropriate somber pile for the war department of 1939-40. In the commercial vein, streamlining was the most common modernist vocabulary as here expressed with great vigor at the Hecht Company warehouse of 1936-37.

It is likely that Sears influenced Washington's conservative downtown companies to consider expansion into outlying, yet expanding, areas. Julius Garfinckel led the way with a modest low-loft store in the Spring Valley neighborhood of 1941-42. Immediately after that, Woodward and Lothrop wanted to build a store in Chevy Chase and Arlington, both of which became stillborn as a result of neighborhood opposition. The Wisconsin Avenue store was Sears' second Washington building, following its 1929 store on Bladensburg Road, NE. Sears also built stores in Arlington, Virginia (1942-46) and Silver Spring, Maryland (1949), and on Alabama Avenue, SE (1956); the two suburban stores are extant. After Sears, the first really large store to open beyond the city center was the Hecht Company in Silver Spring of 1946-47 which despite appearance was no larger than the Wisconsin Avenue building in its total floor area.

Sears' new buildings changed once again after the war. It seems that Redden and Raben never again teamed up to design a facility themselves. They directed the company's renewed expansion program, working with a number of architects. These buildings followed a shift in retail architecture generally whereby minimal expense and attention was given to the exterior. At first a small amount of embellishment remained, as with the Santa Monica store of 1946. Within a few years, however, the exteriors became little more than a large box, as with the Wilmington, Delaware store of 1950.

The distinctness of the Wisconsin Avenue store is matched by the unusually good condition of its original fabric. Particularly for a retail building, this facility has sustained remarkably little alteration. Several display windows were enclosed sometime before 1970. The main penthouse was enlarged and much of its original fabric removed in the 1950s. Another change was necessitated by the introduction of the Metro station entrance in the 1970s. While prominently located by the store's main entrance, this modification retained basic aspects of the elevation and it is not even apparent to the casual observer that this area has been altered.

Many Sears stores have not fared as well particularly with the wave of closings in recent years. The Pico Boulevard store closed in 1989 and while most of its fabric remained intact, its character has been conspicuously altered. Changes to

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the Baltimore store, which opened in 1938, are more basic and irretrievable. Washington's store on Bladensburg Road was demolished several years ago. The city's third and only other "A" store on Alabama Avenue, of 1950-51, now lies vacant, awaiting an uncertain fate.

Smaller Sears stores built in the Washington area during the 1930s and 1940s, which never approached the physical condition of the "A" stores, are also a thing of the past. The one in the Clarendon neighborhood in Virginia of 1940 is being altered. The Silver Spring, Maryland store of 1949 is long gone. Outside the Wisconsin Avenue store, examples built prior to World War II do not remain in recognizable form along the eastern seaboard between Philadelphia and Atlanta.

Sears' Wisconsin Avenue store thus possesses significance due to its size, location, and appearance. It also embodied a company which helped revolutionize retailing and forever changed the consumer landscape. Its architects were key figures in the saga of that company's development at a crucial juncture. The building itself possesses strong, formal design characteristics that make it an important one of the period for any location and one of exceptional significance locally.

It was on the first wave of change that transformed the Washington area, as late as 1941, from a completely centralized retail center to one that, like everywhere else, is highly decentralized. The building is an increasingly scarce survivor of a vanishing breed.

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The Sears, Roebuck and Company Department Store is located at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue, Albemarle Street, River and Murdock Mill Roads, and an alley in northwest Washington, D.C. on Lot 15 of Square 1730. The site has been historically associated with this Sears, Roebuck and Company Department Store.