

The Kresge's Building



Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation
Landmark Designation
September 9, 2008

The Kresge's Building was built in 1938 by the S.S. Kresge Company to house a new, expanded retail store for the Baltimore area. The original Baltimore Kresge store opened in 1909, and in 1911 moved to the location where the current Kresge building sits today at the corner of West Lexington and Park Avenue. This was the S.S. Kresge Company Store Number 20.

The Kresge Five and Dime (or variety store) chain began in the 1890's and by the early 20th century the Detroit variety store began to expand across the states. Its sales rivaled the volume of its competitor, the F.W. Woolworth Company. The S.S. Kresge Company was founded by Sebastian Spring Kresge, an educated salesman whom at one time was part owner of the of J.G. McCrory's Five and Dime chain. By trading his share of McCrory's ownership, Kresge was able to gain full control of one location in downtown Detroit and found a new business partner, Mr. Charles J. Wilson. In 1899, he founded his own company, the S.S. Kresge Corporation. With the store and an \$8,000 investment they were able to quickly gain control of the Detroit variety store market. By 1912 they had 85 locations, and incorporated the company. On May 23, 1918 the S.S. Kresge Corporation appeared on the New York Stock Exchange for the first time.

The Kresge Company would out live its competitors, the F.W. Woolworth Company and the J.G. McCrory Company. In the 1977 changed its name to the Kmart Corporation, and most recently was purchased by the Sears Holdings Corporation. Mr. Kresge passed away in 1966, just four years after the opening of the first Kmart. His name lives on in many of his philanthropic ventures, most notably The Kresge Foundation, in which he founded and donated over \$60 million to in his life time. Interestingly, Mr. Kresge was a strong supporter of prohibition and donated a lot of time and money to this cause, even starting his own organization, the National Vigilance Committee for Prohibition Enforcement and strongly supported the Anti-Saloon League.

The Kresge Building is most significant in Baltimore for its being a very popular and well noted example of the Art Deco or Modernist style. Located in what is now called the "Market Center," the Kresge building is comparable to the Hutzler's building on Howard Street in Art Deco styling, simply on a smaller scale. The three story corner structure consists of two sections, the 1938 Art Deco structure, and a 1955 addition designed by Emil G. Jehle. No specific architect is credited for the Art Deco structure. Several other Kresge locations from around this period have a similar appearance, most likely a staff architect designed the structures. Having a staff of corporate architects was a growing trend around the time of the depression.

The Park Street and Lexington Street facades meet at a gentle curve on the corner of the building lot with white terracotta panels on the upper levels, and rounded panes of glass on the ground level leading into the front corner entrance. This curve motif was a popular element of the Art Deco style. The ground level glass is framed in green marble with green aluminum casings, all blending almost seamlessly creating a very horizontal base for the structure. The second and third story windows are arranged in a vertical orientation with green terracotta panels between floors. Between the window groupings vertical sections of the white terracotta panels emulate pilasters emphasizing the vertical elements of the structure. The corner of the structure is a large single bay window with an illuminated clock. Below this clock, metal Deco-style lettering with the original Kresge's sign was located on a large panel; this was removed when the building was converted to another business. Also removed were door push handles with the

Kresge name and two signs featuring the Kresge name in traditional lettering. The interior of the building was designed with modern conveniences such as a fully functional lunch counter, air conditioning and a hair salon. Sleek Art Deco detailing such as railings and light fixtures completed impression of a modern, clean and efficient way of business the Kresge Company tried to maintain.

The rear addition was completed in the 1950's to meet the higher standards downtown retail was put up to with the expansion of the suburbs around Baltimore. The new updated store space added extra space for food service, the salon and sales floor. While the addition is truly 1950's Modernist, the project's staff architect Emil G. Jehle carried the Art Deco elements from one store space into the other. This attempt to adapt for a changing retail environment kept the Kresge location open till 1984, the building was then sold off a small drug store corporation, which owned the building for over 20 years. In the 1960's the Kresge Corporation joined the new trend in suburban shopping and began to remarket its self as Kmart.

The Kresge's Company Store Building Number 20 meets CHAP Landmark Designation Standards:

B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

4. is significant of the architectural period in which it was built and has distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, method of construction, or engineering, or is the notable work of a master builder, designer, engineer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age;

Attorney John Murphy on behalf of the property owners has stated that the owners are taking no position on the proposed historic designation.