

NOMINATION OF PUBLIC INTERIOR PORTION OF BUILDING OR STRUCTURE
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: Broad and Market Streets

Postal code: 19107-3298

Councilmanic District: 2

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Philadelphia Common Council Chamber

Current Name: Philadelphia City Council Chamber

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building Interior

☐ Structure Interior

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☒ excellent ☐ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: City Council Chamber

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach an interior plan with the boundary marked and written description of the boundary

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a description of the historic resource.

7. INVENTORY OF FEATURES AND FIXTURES

Please attach an inventory of all features including fixtures with their locations within the public interior portion indicated on architectural plans and/or annotated photographs.

8. INVENTORY OF FEATURES AND FIXTURES

Please attach annotated photographs describing all aspects of the physical appearance of the public interior portion, with a key showing the locations from which each photograph was taken.

9. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1895 to 1907

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1895; altered 1907; restored 2002-03

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: W. Bleddyn Powell

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Various

Original owner: City of Philadelphia

Other significant persons: _____

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- ☒ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- ☒ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- ☐ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- ☒ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- ☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- ☒ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- ☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- ☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

10. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Please attach a bibliography.

11. NOMINATOR

Name with Title Carl E. Doebley, M.A. Email cedoebley@transystems.com

Organization Transystems Corporation Date 7.16.10

Street Address 421 Chestnut Street Telephone 267-546-0059

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

12. PROPERTY OWNER

Name City of Philadelphia

Organization _____

Street Address Broad and Market Street

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19107-3298

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: _____

☐ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: _____

Date of Notice Issuance: _____

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Postal Code: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

7/6/2010

Philadelphia City Council Chamber

Boundary Description

The Council Chamber (Room 400) is located on the fourth floor of City Hall within the north, central pavilion. It is situated just north of the Council Caucus Room (Rm. 401) and North Corridor. It measures 58 feet by 71 feet with the longer dimension oriented north-south. The boundaries of the resource are formed by the center lines of the demising walls of the room to the north, east, south and west. Included within the boundary are the windows and sash on the north wall, the entrance vestibules and inner and outer doors adjacent to the North Corridor, and the doors that communicate with the rooms to the east and west of the Council Chamber. In the vertical dimension, the boundary extends from the centerline of the floor to the line of the lath above the continuous decorative plaster ceiling over the main body of the room and the galleries.

Philadelphia City Council Chamber

Description

The chamber is two stories tall with a single-bay gallery on both the east and west sides of the room. The main floor of the Council Chamber can be entered from four locations. Flanking doorways on the south side of the room open onto the north corridor. The leather-covered, corridor doors lead into small, wood paneled vestibules. On the east and west sides of the chamber, single doors communicate *en suite* to Rooms 402 and 496 respectively. The galleries are entered from the fifth floor with a door serving each gallery. The inner vestibule, east, west and gallery doors are paneled and construction of solid East India Mahogany.¹ They originally were finished with a French polish.

On the north wall of the room, a grand two-story double-hung window, with an arched transom, lights the space. There are two double-hung windows on the north wall that overlook the galleries. The upper sash of these windows are fitted with oval-shaped mullions. Two additional, flanking double-hung windows are found on the main floor, beneath the galleries.

The highly ornate plaster ceiling is the most dominating feature of the room. It is subdivided by plaster-cased beams into twenty bays. The sixteen outer bays, eight each on the eastern and western sides of the chamber, are rectangular in shape with the long dimension oriented north-south. The four center bays, also rectangular and approximately twice the size of the outer bays, are oriented with the long dimension running east-west.

The undersides of the beams are treated as recessed panels that are framed with gilded, foliated plaster molding. The panels are painted in greens and reds with gold stenciling.² The Grecian decorative motif used on the undersides consists of opposing ribbed staffs, with foliated bases and stylized pineapple caps, which are entwined with green ivy. The staffs are separated by gold stenciled eagles that clutch olive branches, a decidedly American touch. At the long dimension of the center bays, the motif is reduced in size and repeated to account for the greater dimension.

The sides of the beams are treated in the Corinthian order with an architrave, frieze and deep cornice. The frieze panels are framed by gilded egg and dart and foliated moldings. They are decorated with muted, red Greek frets on deep green fields. The troughs of the frets are punctuated with stenciled *Neo-grec* flowers.

The ceiling proper consists of center flat panels with muted red fields that are accented with green and gold Greek fret borders. Surrounding the flats are large foliated bosses, which alternate between *rinseau* and acanthus patterns. At the center of each boss is a single, clear incandescent light bulb.

The wall surfaces of the chamber, for the most part, are finished in plaster and marble. The original specifications describe the marble work:

It is to be observed that the marble used for cornices, bases and capping to wainscoting, gallery railing and panel framing for walls and columns and pilasters of the first stage, also the casing of columns and pilasters of the second stage in room 400 shall be No. 1 Golden vein white Alabama Marble, the mottled white known as Alabama Pavonazetta marble, to be matched for the body or die part of the wainscoting and in single slabs for

¹ "Specifications for Completion of City Hall." 12-14.

² Paint Analysis performed by DPK&A Architects, LLP in 2002.

the panels of the four faces of all square columns and the panel faces of the pilasters of the first stage; corner pieces of said columns and pilasters together with architraves over large window at north side and at the back of the rostrum on the south side of room 400 to be golden vein No. 1 White Alabama Marble....³

At the first level, the marble columns that support the galleries, and the pilasters on the outer walls of the room, are capped with a simple marble capital in a modified Doric order. At the second level, the columns and capitals are surmounted by gilded Corinthian capitals that are formed of cast plaster. The flat panels outlined by the marble trim are plaster, covered in canvas. Today, the plaster walls are painted a grayish green, with borders formed by blue and gold striping at the second level. Originally, the walls were painted a muted red.

At the gallery level, the walls are finished with plaster and a deep maroon, mottled ceramic tile wainscot, with a Numidian marble base.

Consistent with the parliamentary role of the Council President, the chamber is focused, along the north-south axis, on the Council President's Rostrum. The rostrum is composed for four elements: a low dais, the clerk's desk, an elevated President's desk and a pedimented, mosaic trimmed, marble frontispiece. The dais and clerk's desk are trimmed in white marble. The desk top is mahogany with a leather inset. The President's desk sits on a white marble-faced, raised platform that sits three steps above the dais. The desk is mahogany, with inset Numidian marble panels that are decorated with three, cast bronze wreathes. Two large, carved mahogany, inverted brackets flank the center mass of the desk.

The floors of the Council Chamber have always been carpeted. A relatively non-durable surface, the carpets have been replaced several times over the history of the chamber. The mosaic border that circumscribes the room survives from the original construction. Its continuity is broken only in front of the President's Rostrum. The mosaic is composed of foliated and floral motifs in gold, red, green, blue, white and maroon tesserae, which are set in Portland cement. The floors of the galleries are tiered to accommodate rising rows of wood benches.

At the main level, a bronze rail, with three bronze gates, segregates the seating for the Council members from the rest of the main level. The Council member's desks, which are not attached to the floor, are a combination of desks, dating from the nineteenth century, from the Select and Common councils. These bodies later merged into today's single council arrangement. They are mahogany with leather desk-top inserts.

As it stands today, the Council Chamber (Rm. 400) largely is an amalgam of two distinct design programs. Originally, it was conceived in a rich Second Empire style. This High Victorian treatment was consistent with the *fin-de-siècle* interiors found throughout City Hall. This design was completed in the fall of 1895. In 1907, the room was extensively modernized in a much lighter, more austere classical style. Though quite distinct in their appearance, both designs were from the hands of W. Bleddyn Powell, who in 1889 assumed John McArthur's role as the Architect for the Philadelphia Building Commission.⁴ Surviving from the 1895 design are the ornate ceiling, with its array of single bulb lighting fixtures, the column capitals, the Council President's desk, the frontispiece behind it, though it was altered in 1907, the mosaic floor border, and the tile wainscot and Numidian marble base in the galleries. The white marble wall treatment, column covers, dais trim, clerk's desk and gallery rail date from the 1907 alteration.

³ "Specifications for Completion of City Hall." 10-11.

⁴ *Philadelphia and Popular Philadelphians*. Philadelphia, The North American, 224.

The chamber has changed little over the years since the 1907 redecoration. Later alterations include augmentation of the original lighting scheme with the addition of six bronze pendant fixtures over the Council seating, eight bronze pendants, with alabaster globes, under the galleries (four per side) and six wall sconces (three per side) at the gallery level. The date of these fixtures is uncertain, but they possibly date from the 1960s. They are in character with the room. Other modern additions include cameras, air conditioning grilles and exit signs. A press booth also was added under the gallery on the east side.

During the weekend of 29-31 March 2002, an air conditioning chiller located on the east side of the upper mezzanine in the Law Library failed, leaking water into the Council Chamber. The leak badly damaged the ornate finishes throughout the chamber. Soon afterward, the chamber was restored, including the conservation of the original decorative painting that survived the flood, and repainting to match the original in areas where the paint was too damaged to save. This restoration also included a redesign of the press booth, the addition of sprinklers and fire protection devices, rewiring of the ceiling light fixtures, installation of new exit signs and the addition of glass security rails at each of the galleries.

Philadelphia City Council Chamber

Significance

The City Council Chamber (Room 400) satisfies the definition of a public interior space, as it is "an interior portion of a building or structure that is, or was designed to be, customarily open and accessible to the public, including by invitation.

The Council Chamber has broad historical and architectural significance at the local, state and national levels. As an element of Philadelphia City Hall, its importance has been recognized nationally for its rich architecture and historic relevancy with its designation as a National Historic Landmark. It meets the Philadelphia Historical Commission's Criteria for Designation under categories A, B, C, E, H and J.

A. Since it was opened to the public in 1895, the Council Chamber has stood as a primary physical manifestation of Philadelphia's legislative branch. Since that time, it has served as the backdrop to each and every ordinance enacted into law in the City, as well as a venue for vital, and at times heated, public debate. Thusly it has significant character, interest and value a part of the development and heritage of the City and Commonwealth.

B. As the physical backdrop for the legislative governance of the City, the Council Chamber is associated with innumerable events that are of importance in the history of the City, and Commonwealth.

C. In both its original appearance, as first designed by W. Bleddyn Powell in 1895 (large portions of which remain), and its appearance after Powell's modernization in 1907, the Council Chamber is characteristic of the High Victorian design of City Hall, as well as the refined neo-classicism of early twentieth century.

E. Powell's Council Chamber is a significant example of interior architecture which can be argued influenced the historical and architectural development of the City, Commonwealth and Nation.

H. City Hall, at the heart of the city, is unique in its appearance and location. The prominence given to the City Council Chamber in the north central pavilion, overlooking North Broad Street, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the City.

J. The cultural, political, economic, social and historical heritage of the City is fully embodied in the City Council Chamber.

As originally established in 1691, Philadelphia was governed by a bicameral legislature and Mayor. The two councils were the Common Council and the Select Council. This arrangement remained in various forms until the two councils were merged in 1919 into a single City Council. Room 400 was designed and constructed for the Common Council. The Select Council was housed next door in Room 402. When the councils merged, Room 400 was chosen for the new body.

The design of Room 400 was undertaken in 1894-1895 for the Common Council by W. Bleddyn Powell.¹ In the original plan for the building, two council chambers were to be located on the

¹ For a detailed history of the City Council Chamber, see: John Milner Architects, Inc. (as subconsultant to Vitetta Group). *Master Plan for the Restoration, Modernization and*

second floor. At the request of the councils, it was decided to fit-out rooms for them on the fourth floor along the north corridor. That location was thought to provide more room for ancillary meeting rooms and offices.

Powell's original design for the Council Chamber was in keeping with the High Victorian character of the other major rooms in City Hall. Its elaborate molded plaster ceilings, intense paint scheme, highly figured marbles and dark wall tiles continued the somber decorative program established by McArthur two decades earlier.

In 1907, the Council Chamber was redecorated. Again, W. Bleddyn Powell was the lead designer. Based on a close reading of the documents pertaining to the original construction and subsequent redecoration of the room, it would seem that the Council Chamber had not been fully finished during the first building campaign. Murals, intended to line the plaster wall of the room, were never executed. There also is some question whether the originally-planned Numidian marble wainscot was ever installed.

Of architectural interest is how the redecoration of the room strays from the McArthur's original design intent. Though the ornate plaster ceiling and Council President Rostrum were retained in the new design, the latter albeit altered, the character of the room shifts from the string tones of the High Victorian era to the lighter more planar style of early twentieth century classicism. Surely, this reflects the development of Powell as an architect in a career that bridged two centuries.

Washington Bleddyn Powell (1854-1910)²

While sometimes overshadowed by the architectural luminaries, John McArthur, Jr. and Thomas Ustick Walter, who first undertook the City Hall project, as their successor, after a brief tenure by John Ord, W. Bleddyn Powell was a significant force in shaping the building's interior and bringing the overall project to fruition.

A Philadelphian by birth, Powell reportedly began his career in the office of Louis Reddmann, of whom little is known. Early on, he served as an architect with the Office of Engineering of Buildings and Bridges of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Then, in 1872, he was appointed Second Assistant to McArthur, Jr., who led the effort to design and construct Philadelphia City Hall until his death in 1890. Powell apparently worked with McArthur until 1881, when he returned to the Pennsylvania Railroad.

At the railroad, Powell developed his individualistic architectural style. He was partial to the then-fashionable Queen-Anne Revival and Colonial Revival styles. In the 1880s, he was responsible, along with William Brown, for the design of series of handsome suburban stations along the railroad's Chestnut Hill line, including stations at Chestnut Hill, St. Martins Allen Lane and Tulpehocken.³ He also had a role in the Harrisburg Central Station.⁴

Rehabilitation of the Philadelphia City Hall, Component 1: Historic Structures Report. 3 vols., Philadelphia, Final Draft: December 1995, 7.107-7.143.

² Two short biographies provide most of the information known about W. Bleddyn Powell: Tatman, Sandra L. "W. Bleddyn Powell." *American Architects and Buildings Database* www.philadelphiabuildings.org; and Shettleworth, Earle G., Jr., ed. "W. Bleddyn Powell." *Brief Biographies of American Architects Who Died between 1897 and 1947*. Society of Architectural Historians, www.sah.org.

³ Tatman, Sandra L. and Moss, Roger. *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects*. Philadelphia, 1985.

Powell stayed with the railroad until 1887, when he set up an independent practice. His private commissions over his career included the Atlantic Coast Line Building in Wilmington, Delaware;⁵ the Byrd Street Depot and Freight House, Richmond, Virginia;⁶ the Elkin Residence at Broad and Grant; and the Hotel Majestic at Broad and Girard streets.⁷ Powell's ties to Elkins likely developed from his position at the Pennsylvania Railroad, where Elkins was a director.⁸

In 1889, Powell returned to city employ with his appointment as Architect for the Philadelphia Building Commission. He stayed at that position until 1909. During his tenure, he took primary responsibility for the City Hall project and brought it to completion after nearly four decades of design and construction. In his role as City Architect, he was the lead designer for both the original design of the chambers in 1895 and its redecoration in 1907. As City Architect, Powell also was responsible for numerous police and fire stations as well as designs for the Insane Department at the Blockley Alms House.⁹ Three years after finishing the redecoration of the Council Chambers, Powell died of cancer.

The City Council President's desk and chair, the Clerk's desk, and the Council desks are under consideration for designation. A nomination for these items will be attached to this nomination.

⁴ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*. Philadelphia, 12/5/1887

⁵ www://wilmingtonrailroadmuseum.org; *The Wilmington Daily Messenger*. Wilmington, 1 July 1887 and 13 July 1887.

⁶ *Wilmington Daily Messenger*. 1 July 1887 and 13 July 1887.

⁷ Society of Architectural Historians.

⁸ "Williams L. Elkins Dead." *The New York Times*. 8 November 1903.

⁹ Insane Department Blockley Almshouse: *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*: 8/20/1890; 11/1/1890; 11/26/1890; 11/26/1890; 12/10/1890; 6/24/1891; 8/5/1891.

Philadelphia City Council Chamber Bibliography

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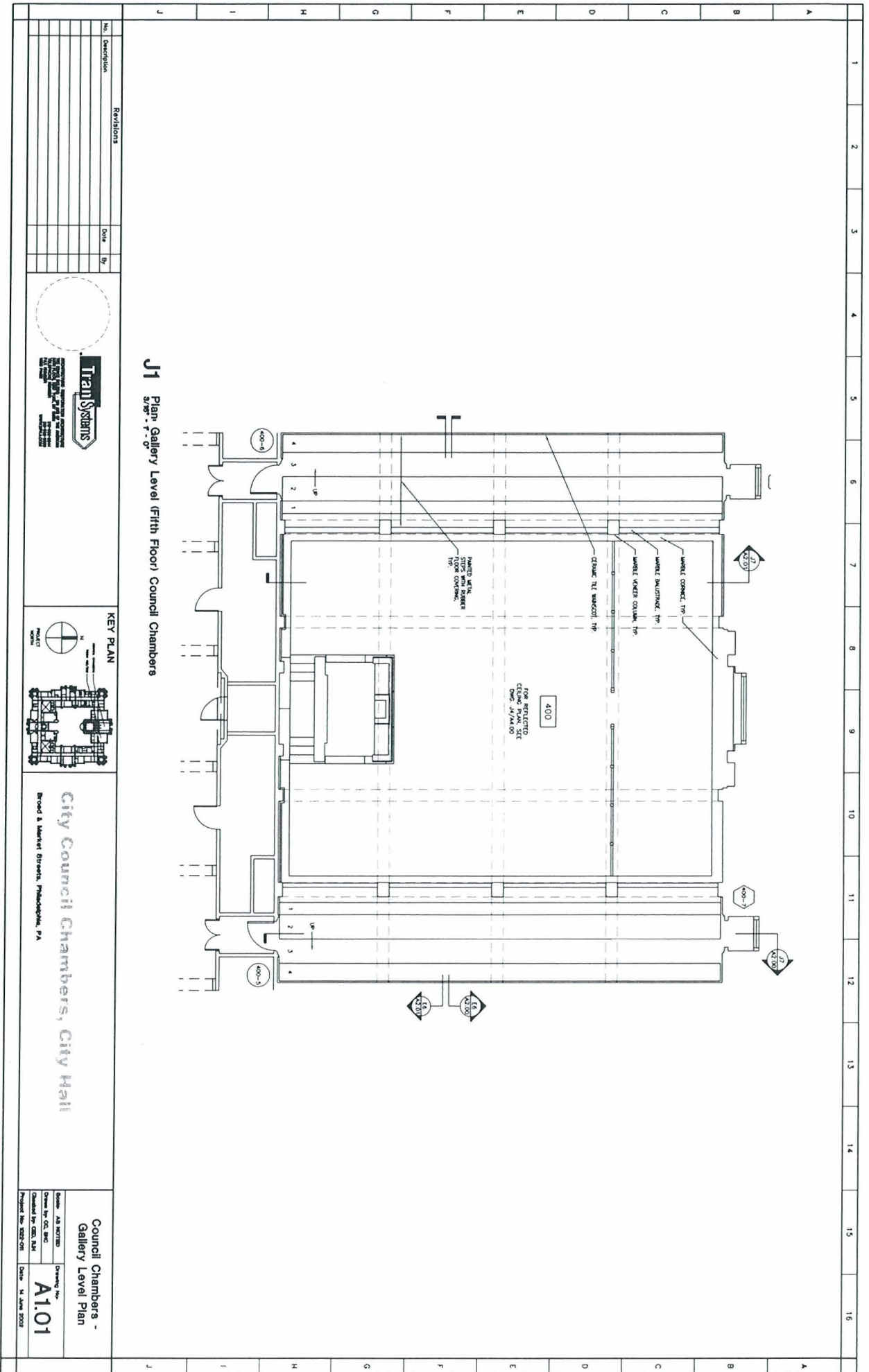
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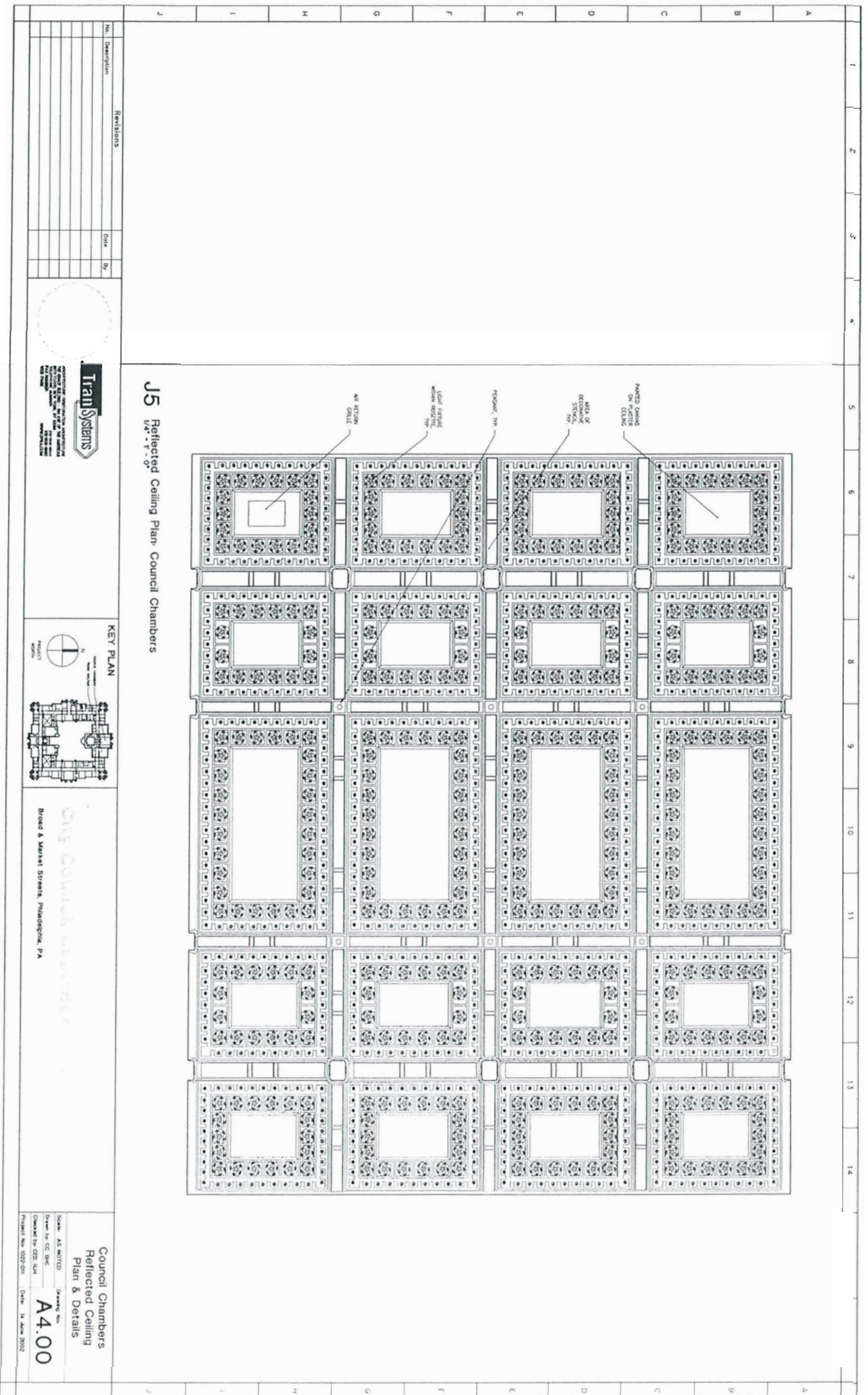


<p align="center">Council Chambers & Room 402 - Lower Level Plan</p>	
Book# A13/RTED Drawn by: OC, SHC Checked by: CBL, RMH Published: 08/09/07	Drawing No: <p align="center">A1.00</p> Paths: M, J, 09/08/08



E6 Section/Interior Elevation: Council Chambers North Wall
3/16" - 1" - 0"

E6 Section/Interior Elevation: Council Chambers South Wall
3/10" - 1" - 0"



[illegible]

