

Fire Alarm and Telegraph Bureau, Bronx Central Office

1129 East 180th Street, Bronx
Tax Map Block 4333 Lot 1 (in part)

Built: 1913-15

Architect: Frank J. Helmle

Style: Italian Renaissance Revival

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendaring March 14, 2023



The Fire Alarm Telegraph Bureau, Bronx Central Office is one of four borough offices constructed in the early 20th century as the Fire Department of New York's (FDNY) Fire Alarm Telegraph Bureau decentralized its operations.¹ It was designed by the notable Brooklyn architect Frank J. Helmle and built in 1915. Its intact and highly refined Italian Renaissance Revival-style design and prominent siting at the southern edge of Bronx Park lend to its striking presence and historical and architectural significance, and it has remained in use for a century.

New York's fire alarm system was developed through the 19th century to meet the needs of the growing city. An early system of lookouts in watchtowers, who alerted the city's volunteer firefighters by a series of bells, was enhanced in 1851 when the towers were connected to each other by telegraph. In 1871 a fire alarm telegraph system was constructed, consisting of public alarm boxes connected to a central office from which signals were relayed to the appropriate fire companies. The system, which at first served Manhattan and the East River Islands, was extended in 1874 to the newly annexed western section of the Bronx. Following consolidation in 1898, the FDNY's Fire Alarm Telegraph Bureau operations centered in Manhattan were no longer sufficient to handle alarms for the entire city. To improve response time, new Central Offices were established in each borough, capable of directly receiving fire alarms and transmitting the information to the appropriate firehouse. The siting of these buildings in large open lots within city-owned parks was intended to protect them from potential hazards that could impact communications. The southeastern corner of Bronx Park was chosen as the site of the Bronx Central Office.

The Italian Renaissance Revival style Bronx Central Office, along with its twin the Brooklyn Central Office (a New York City Landmark), was designed by Brooklyn architect Frank J. Helmle in 1913 and construction completed in 1915. The T-shaped building is clad in light brick and topped by a deep, terra-cotta cornice and hipped roof covered in Spanish tiles. A broad stoop leads to a recessed loggia screened by an arcade resting on a balustrade. Trabeated window openings along the front and side elevations have double architrave surrounds with bracketed lintels; the entrance is similarly treated and features a grille-work transom. The side elevations of the ell each feature a trio of large arched window openings set in an arcaded surround; the rear facade has a single arched window with similar decorative treatment.

The Fire Alarm Telegraph Bureau, Bronx Central Office was dedicated in 1923 when, like its Brooklyn counterpart, it became fully operational. Renovated in the early 21st century with new windows in the style of the historic fenestration and a small addition at the rear, the building has excellent integrity to its original design and continues to play an important role as part of the FDNY's communications system.

¹ The Staten Island Central Office was located in Borough Hall until 1962 when it was moved to a dedicated building in Clove Lake Park.

