
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	4340 Nebraska Avenue, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Immaculata Seminary		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	September 27, 2012	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	11-467	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	X	New Construction
			Demolition
			Subdivision

SmithGroup Architects (David King and Tom Butcavage), representing American University's Washington School of Law, seeks on-going concept review for renovation, alterations and new construction at the former Immaculata Seminary campus.

The Board approved the general concept for redevelopment of the site in October 2011, complimenting the school and its architects for developing a plan that sensitively integrated a substantial program of new construction with the site's contributing buildings and landscape features. As the plans were still relatively conceptual, the Board asked that the project return at the appropriate time for final review. Since that time, the campus plan has received approval from the Zoning Commission, and has been further developed and refined.

Property Description

The Immaculata Seminary was created on what was part of the early nineteenth-century Dunblane estate, the original house of which remains in modified form on the western edge of the property. In the early twentieth century, the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary of the Woods, a Catholic order, purchased the property to establish the Immaculata Seminary school for girls, and constructed an imposing building (Capital Hall) facing Tenley Circle in 1904. The land between the new school and Dunblane was used as a recreational play area, with the former carriage drive retained as a walk and visual axis between the house and the school. During the 1920s, the school grew with the construction of a chapel and a dormitory wing to Capital Hall, and a garage and laundry building to Dunblane. In the mid 1950s, the campus was further enlarged by the construction of three buildings that surrounded the campus's lawn to form a central quad. A one-story addition was added to Dunblane in 1974. The complex served Immaculata from the school's opening in 1905 until it closed in 1986, when the property was sold to American University.

In 2011, the property was designated by the Board as an historic district. The Dunblane house (c. 1839), Capital Hall (1904, with a 1919 addition), the Chapel (1921), and the site – the lawn in front of Capital Hall and the central quad with its axial relationship between these buildings – were determined to be contributing to the character of the historic district. The 1950s buildings were determined non-contributing.

Proposal

The project include renovation of the campus' flagship building, Capital Hall, for use as administrative offices, rehabilitation of the Chapel as a moot courtroom, demolition of the existing 1950s dorm and gymnasium buildings, and construction of approximately 240,000 square feet of additions to the rear and sides of Capital Hall along Nebraska Avenue and Yuma Street for classrooms, faculty offices, law clinics, a library, and student support spaces. Like the 1950s buildings, the new construction will be organized on the site to reinforce the central quadrangle and to retain the central axis formed by the contributing historic buildings. The project will include significant site improvements, including regrading of the lawn in front of Capital Hall, tree retention and renewal of plantings in the central quad, and creation of a walk around the perimeter of the site with improved plantings. Dunblane and the area immediately surrounding it at the western end of the property would not be affected by the project.

Among the many refinements that have been made since previously presented:

- The materials have been finalized, to include a rich variety of limestone, limestone units with a blend of colors, granite, brick, zinc, aluminum and glass;
- The Chapel Atrium design has been further developed, now including a wood-clad coffered ceiling with skylights supported by four monumental columns;
- The penthouse on the Nebraska Avenue building has been more fully integrated into the design, now proposed to be clad in zinc panels to match the attic story of the Yuma Street building;
- The overall landscape has been developed to be more informal and naturalistic with a variety of spaces and plant material. The spaces include courtyards with benches and movable seating at the new building entrances at Yuma and Nebraska to allow for congregating areas, a front lawn and gardens accessed by a new stair facing Tenley Circle, and a simplified quad design that includes an informal alley of trees to reinforce the site's central axis and a field area that can continue to be used informally for recreation.

Community Participation

As summarized in the previous report, the concept design has been developed with significant community participation. At the request of ANC 3E and Councilmember Cheh, the Office of Planning facilitated a series of community meetings over the summer of 2011 with AU representatives and their design team to discuss and provide input on the development of the design. In addition to Office of Planning and HPO staff, ANC 3E invited members of the Tenley Campus Neighborhood Association and Ward 3 Vision; the Tenleytown Historical Society (the applicant for the historic district designation) and other community representatives also participated.

The purpose of the meetings was to ensure an open dialogue between the many stakeholders and to arrive at an appropriate balance between a variety of planning, preservation and programmatic goals. At the first meeting, the group identified and generally agreed upon the principles that they were interested in seeing embodied in the

project. The design principles and goals included: 1) Maximizing connectivity to transit and Metro; 2) Retaining and restoring Dunblane and Capital Hall; 3) Ensuring that the new construction was compatible with the historic buildings, campus and neighborhood; 4) Achieving the School of Law's program in a building that embodied excellence in design and sustainability; 5) Locating building density closest to Metro, Wisconsin Avenue and Nebraska Avenue while minimizing building presence on Yuma and the western end of the campus around Dunblane; 6) Achieving the proper balance between encouraging density and discouraging sprawl with retaining and enhancing the classic characteristics of a college campus; 7) Ensuring porosity – the ability for the public to see and move through the site; and 8) Achieving superior public spaces, including using the front lawn in front of Capital Hall for a more public use, minimizing impervious surfaces, and maximizing tree canopy.

Since previously presented to the HPRB and following approval of the project by the Zoning Commission, another community session was held on July 16th specifically to focus on the development of the landscape.

Evaluation

The revised plans further improve on an already strong concept. As before, the buildings present a more monumental scale at the public entrances facing Wisconsin and Nebraska Avenues, transitioning to a more human scale facing the residential neighborhood and within the quadrangle. The palette and detailing of the architecture has been developed to reinforce this, with a variety of materials and textures that relate and expand on those found on Capital Hall, and effectively breaking down the scale and mass of the new construction so that it is respectful to the surrounding neighborhood.

The naturalistic landscape provides an appropriate setting for the buildings that is in character with the campus's informal setting and the surrounding early 20th century suburban neighborhood. The front lawn has been the subject of much discussion and exploration in an effort to provide an accessible space that is welcoming and provides an appropriate foreground for Capital Hall. The result achieves an artful balance in solving a variety of challenges: the need to regrade the lawn to make it universally accessible while also retaining a sense of the sloping topography and ensuring views into the site; making the space inviting with a public stair to the circle while also signaling that this is not the primary entrance into the campus; providing landscaping at the perimeter to provide a sense of enclosure without being overly enclosed; and providing more interesting landscaping, seating areas, and a public lawn to allow for greater activation.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the conceptual design to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff.