
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 11-22

Brightwood Street Railroad Company Car Barn

5917-5929 Georgia Avenue, NW
Square 2986, Lot 38

Meeting Date: October 27, 2011
Applicant: Brightwood Neighborhood Preservation Association
Owner: Missouri Avenue Development Partners LLC
Affected ANCs: ANC 4B
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee/Kim Williams

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board not designate the Brightwood Street Railroad Company Car Barn, 5917-5929 Georgia Avenue, NW, a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the application not be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Begun in 1909, the Brightwood car barn is a utilitarian brick structure covered with two parallel, gabled bays (hipped in front) running perpendicular to Georgia Avenue and extending approximately 250 feet deep. The northern half of the building is the first section, constructed as a single structure nearly the full depth of the lot. Two additions to its south were built almost immediately, as suggested by the original site plans, attaching to its south wall.

The building was designed with essentially no façade, just openings for the rolling stock under a broad entablature. The structures were car sheds designed in the spare industrial vernacular of the time, with exterior expression limited to slightly recessed bays between piers and under a bit of corbelling. Window openings were surmounted by the segmental arches typical of this period of loadbearing masonry construction.

Although plain, the building was modern, typical of the large, low-slung industrial buildings that were becoming more common in the era of electric power. The most striking and modern features were its skylights—which illuminated the huge spaces with natural light—supported on exposed steel trusses and punctuated by occasional ventilators.

The conversion of the property to use as an auto dealership brought a pared, front, showroom addition and service department façade. The new materials return around the north side of the original car shed and, with a large concrete-block addition, obscure most of that side.

A detached, multiple-bay automobile garage stands at the rear of the lot, north of the car barn.

Historical Background

The Brightwood car barn was constructed in 1909 as part of an effort to improve the city's streetcar infrastructure and, more particularly, to house streetcars that traveled along 7th Street and Georgia Avenue to the line's terminus at Brightwood. It was built near the site of stables that had served earlier, horse-drawn cars.

The Brightwood line was established in 1888 by the developers and promoters of the Petworth subdivision. The Brightwood Railway Company was to provide streetcar service from Florida Avenue north along 7th Street and Georgia Avenue to the District boundary with Montgomery County, Maryland, but the line's terminus never reached farther than Brightwood. The line's first horse-drawn streetcars began operation in 1889, and stables, a turnaround and other company buildings were erected at Brightwood.

The use of horses was intended to be temporary as the company experimented with alternative modes of propulsion. In an effort to meet the challenge of its hilly terrain, the company began experimenting with an underground technology known as the Judson system. When this system failed and local residents became increasingly agitated by poor service, Congress, in 1892, amended the company's charter allowing overhead electric wires. These lines were strung from poles in the center of Georgia Avenue. Despite the switch from to electric power, the Brightwood line continued to be the source of citizen complaints. In 1898, a fire destroyed the Brightwood stables and other buildings (the powerhouse was saved), adding to the company's problems. In 1901, the Brightwood Citizens Association threatened to start a line of auto jitneys to compete with the streetcar service if its complaints were not resolved.

By 1908, as part of an industry-wide consolidation trend, the Brightwood Street Railroad was one of a dozen D.C. lines controlled by a holding company, the Washington Railway and Electric Company (the WRyEC, and later PEPCO). In 1909, the company constructed the present car barn on the site of the old stables and immediately adjacent to the (now demolished) power plant facilities. Built to accommodate 52 cars, it housed electric streetcars, and later buses, for decades. During the 1920s, bus service supplemented streetcar service along the Brightwood line, eventually replacing it altogether. In 1955, PEPCO sold the car barn, at which point it was enlarged by front and side additions and converted into an automobile showroom and service department.

Evaluation

The Brightwood car barn is one of 29 identified streetcar barns constructed in the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and one of only eight extant. Car barns were designed as large sheds for the purpose of storing and maintaining vehicles. They also often housed the power generators for the electric traction systems.

Architecturally, the city's car barns ranged from the strictly utilitarian to the fairly ornate, representing a variety of styles indicative of the stylistic preferences of the day. Four car barns have been listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, including the Fourteenth and Boundary Street Car Barn, the East Capitol Street Car Barn, the Georgetown Car Barn, and the Navy Yard Car Barn. A nomination is pending for the Decatur Street Car Barn. These designations provide protection for a good, representative sample of Washington's car barns. Yet, the extant examples constitute a small enough, varied enough, important enough, and geographically

dispersed enough class of buildings that all could reasonably be designated if they each meet the necessary criteria.

The few remaining car barns are the most prominent remnants of the former streetcar system. While the once-ubiquitous tracks have mostly been taken up or covered by paving, these large buildings tend to merit attention if for their size alone. While the Brightwood car barn was not as architecturally striking as some of earlier peers that have been landmarked, it shared their function and, as an essential feature of its line, influenced the development of the Brightwood area. It could thus be eligible under D.C. Criterion B and National Register Criterion A, for history. It probably typified the basic car sheds of its era and could be eligible for listing in accordance with D.C. Criterion D and National Register Criterion C as embodying a particular building type.

Aside from significance, there are other necessary considerations and standards for designation. One of these is sufficient age. While greater age does not necessarily convey more significance, the passage of time is necessary for us to be able to consider a property *historic*, and not contemporary, and, as the District's preservation regulations state, to permit professional evaluation of them in their historical context. Certainly, sufficient time has passed to evaluate the resources related to the District's former streetcar system, as that system disappeared decades ago and was demonstrably important to the development of the District, and the Historic Preservation Office has already surveyed such resources and forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places a multiple-property document on the subject.

The final important designation consideration is that of the historic *integrity* of a property or resource. This concept addresses the degree of intactness of a property, physically and visually, i.e., how well it evokes its historic appearance and function. The D.C. designation regulations state that landmarks and historic districts "shall also possess sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which they are judged significant." Guidance from the National Register of Historic Places details the meaning and importance of each of seven aspects of historic integrity: *location, setting, workmanship, feeling, design, materials and association*.

All streetcar barns lost significant integrity of feeling and association with the disappearance of the streetcar system, the loss of the rolling stock and disconnection from visible tracks. Yet, extant barns may nonetheless be eligible for designation. According to the multiple-property document, *Streetcar and Bus-Related Resources of Washington, D.C., 1862-1962*, a car barn is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criteria A and C if the building retains its original form, as well as its entry openings, and if it otherwise retains sufficient integrity of location, setting, workmanship, feeling, design, materials and association.¹

The multiple-property document says an eligible car barn "must retain its original form or shed-like appearance, as well as the streetcar entry openings."² The Brightwood car barn retains a

¹ That the property retains integrity of location goes without saying, and most properties do. As for workmanship, to the degree that the building retains its design and physical integrity, it retains evidence of its workmanship, but this, too, is typical; the workmanship demonstrated here is essentially the competent joining of the structural materials.

² The MPD originally added: "For both criteria, enough of the railway tracks should exist on the interior to represent the original site configuration and function of the resource," but it was amended to remove this requirement, because it was too strict and even unfair when considering a property that has otherwise high integrity.

strong sense of its shed-like appearance as seen from the south side or from within the interior of the sheds. It retains much of its original form. Unfortunately, the alterations that took place upon its conversion to an auto dealership substantially altered its design, feeling and association, even if it retained most of the materials. Although the building's façade was originally little more than void, these voids were characteristic of its design and function, just as a more solid or ornate façade would define the character of another building. The intended front of a building is almost always the most significant and character-defining portion of its exterior, which is why front additions to designated buildings are almost unheard of. Obscuring and closing the original front, and then wrapping the north side in a new skin and a concrete-block addition, adversely affected the perceptibility of its original form, design and materials from important vantage points. The showroom affects the building's setting even, disrupting the connection between the car barn entrance and the street. The south side of the building is the portion that best conveys a sense of the original appearance.

Over time, a number of window openings have been filled in or reduced in size with brick alone or with brick and glass block. This includes some openings on the south side of the first car shed that are encapsulated within the building. Nearly all of the original windows themselves are gone, assuming that the few remaining steel windows are original.

More recent work has further diminished the building's historic, even physical, integrity. Arguably the most interesting or prominent portion of the building was the roofs, visible even over the auto showroom, and most notable for their nearly full-length skylights and ventilators that mark this as an industrial building. The roof decking, skylight and ventilators of the original and largest shed have been removed in accordance with a recent building permit. What remains of the roof are just the steel trusses, which appear to be merely resting on the walls below; the brick that held them fast has been removed.³ Whether related to this partial demolition or not, the upper part of the shed's rear wall has collapsed, and there is serious cracking below.

Although the decking, skylights and ventilators on the southern sheds remain, the trusses have been similarly freed from the surrounding brick, presumably in anticipation of removal.

There is no question that, with the resources and intent, the Brightwood car barn could be reconstructed and repaired to its early appearance. But its integrity problems are too great for designation at this point. In the opinion of staff, the National Register would reject the nomination given its present condition, even without knowing that a redevelopment would likely make further changes to its fabric, appearance and setting. If the property were already a landmark or within a historic district, its present loss of integrity would likely not be sufficient to de-list it, render it "noncontributing," or discourage its repair. But the Historic Preservation Board has endeavored to maintain high standards for both the significance and integrity of landmarks, requiring that landmarks be both demonstrably important and evocative of their past. "Restoration" is the high treatment standard for landmarks set by the preservation law, but a property should not require restoration prior to designation in order to meet the integrity criterion.

³ It is the staff's understanding that there is an agreement to remove and reuse the trusses in a proposed redevelopment project on the site.