

Windows

Aluminum-clad replacement windows are proposed throughout. The Board and staff have generally approved such windows as replacements in firehouses, as well as at many schools. It is an acceptable replacement type here, as long as the product selected has convincing, narrow, external muntins (as well as being properly sized, etc.). The more difficult windows to match, especially the dimensions of the muntins, and therefore the size and shape of the lights, are the neoclassical dormer windows. In accordance with the window regulations, these should be retained if their condition permits them to be rehabilitated.²

All the windows are proposed to be covered with security screens, as firehouses are sometimes empty. Still, it is difficult to understand the utility of such screens on second and attic stories uniquely in a firehouse, as opposed to other types of buildings,³ except perhaps where immediately accessible from the Walgreen's roof. Such screens darken and obscure the windows⁴ and would be especially problematic on the façade.

Roof

The drawings note only that the “shingles” will be replaced, without specifying material.

Vehicle doors

The vehicle doors would be widened to twelve feet from the present ten. This change would presumably require the reconstruction of the entire stone face of the façade's first floor, because the widening would require the cutting of all but about a half dozen small pieces of stone.

The Board has previously reviewed two door widenings, one at Engine Company 10 (1342 Florida Avenue, NE) and the other at Engine 19 (2813 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE). These were approved by the Board as sufficiently compatible. The reason in the former case was that it is a fairly simple building and probably a lesser example of the Colonial Revival style, and the material—brick—was relatively easily reworked.⁵ The latter, a more architecturally significant building, had a little more room or opportunity for widening in the sense that its rubble-stone arches were surrounded by a field of stucco, and much of the stone could remain in place. In neither case were the openings widened quite as much as the present proposal.

Historic preservation aims at the retention of both the visual qualities of a property and its actual fabric; without the former, the character is lost, and without the latter, the authenticity is lost. In the present case, it is the visual appearance of the building that would suffer most for the

² See 10A DCMR 2308(a).

³ The D.C. public schools have been removing most of their window screens in recent years, especially any at upper floors, despite the fact that schools have been uniquely subject to nighttime rock-throwing.

⁴ As can be seen at some firehouses, such as Engine 10, where they have been installed without prior HPO review.

⁵ But the reconstruction of the arches at 10 Engine was not entirely successful, and the Engine 19 project has not yet been done.

proposal, because most of the material would be re-installed, even if some is lost from the stone-cutting.

The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines state that:

Creating a new opening or enlarging an existing opening in a primary character-defining wall for a window, door, through-wall air conditioning unit or other reason is almost never appropriate. If a new opening must be created, for example to make a building [more] functional, it should be located on a rear, non-character-defining wall. The size, design and detailing of the new opening should be compatible with the character of the wall.

This principle is not arbitrary, as it is nearly always the case that the composition of the front of a building constitutes its most significant feature to the world at large. The most prominent and accessible portions of a building are those that have historically received the most care in design and quality in materials and workmanship, as owners—whether private, commercial, institutional or governmental—have traditionally had an interest in display and in the conveyance of implicit messages through architecture.

The greatest scrutiny is therefore applied to the review of façade alteration. Where minor exceptions have been made to the strict interpretation of the guidelines, they have been in cases where the program justified the exception when weighed against the quality of the original architecture or of subsequent alterations that have been of lesser quality or significance. The present building's design is of high quality and of high integrity of materials, workmanship and design. It was carefully composed in the best Beaux-Arts tradition, and its rusticated stone base does not easily admit of alteration.

Assuming that the work could be done in such a way as to look seamless—as if the doors had always been of a twelve-foot width—there would still be substantial adverse effects on the building's design. This kind of rusticated base is a carefully worked-out matrix in which the proportion of each piece is considered, intended, and related to each other. The proportions of openings in classically influenced architecture are generally vertically oriented, often approaching the golden mean. The result of the widening of the doors here is squarish openings, or rather, openings slightly squatter than square, as only at the apex of each arch is the height equivalent to the width. The width of such buildings was largely determined by establishing openings of a particular width and working out the proper proportions from there.

The increase in proportion of void to solid naturally attenuates the remaining solid surfaces, rendering the voids below out of scale and balance with the calibrated hierarchy of diminishing openings from ground to attic, and making the base less massive relative to what is above. Arches were built with an understanding that their radius and heft had to be sufficient to support the mass of a wall above, so they consequently *looked* that way. The widening of the doors flattens the arches and reduces the amount of stone over the opening. Even if such a rebuilding is structurally sound, it *looks* wrong on such a building. Perhaps most conspicuously problematic feature is the fact that the modillions supporting the second-floor balcony would now be positioned hanging over the openings.

The alteration would require a major and quite tricky intervention into the building's fabric, necessitating the reconstruction of the entire stone face of the façade's first floor and the removal, cutting, beveling and re-installation of nearly all of its stone, requiring a very high level of skill in design and the execution by stonemasons.

Recommendation

The preservation law requires the Board to make a finding as to whether a proposal is compatible with the character of a designated property. To a point, it permits the weighing of the programmatic or adaptability interest versus the strict preservation interest. But the law also permits an applicant to proceed to the Mayor's Agent for a determination whether such a project is consistent with the purposes of the law, either because it is in fact compatible, or it constitutes a project of special merit. In previous cases of firehouse-door widenings and the designation of firehouses and landmarks, the likelihood of Mayor's Agent hearings on similar projects was discussed. The preservation law explicitly addresses the Mayor's Agent's review of projects at public-safety facilities: "In considering a claim of special merit, substantial rehabilitation or new construction for operational needs of a public safety facility shall constitute a public interest having a significantly higher priority than that of historic preservation." In other words, the Mayor's Agent can approve alterations, even if incompatible from a strictly preservation perspective, if they are found to be necessary to the operational needs.

The staff recommends that the Board recommend clearance of a permit for those repairs and alterations that are compatible with the character of the building and historic district—with review of the window products, roofing, scope of repointing, etc. to be delegated to staff—so that work may commence. The staff recommends that the Board advise the Mayor's Agent that the following work is incompatible with the character of the property and the historic district: the widening of the vehicle-door openings; the installation of security screens on the second-story and attic windows except where immediately accessible from the adjacent Walgreen's roof; and the replacement of the dormer windows, if they can be repaired.