

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

Property Address:	901 G Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	October 4, 2012	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	12-563	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett		Subdivision

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library was designed by Mies van der Rohe and built in 1972. In 2007, the HPRB designated the building – including the interior public areas of the first floor – as a D.C. Landmark. Subsequently, the D.C. Public Library (DCPL) produced design guidelines for the building, which delineate preservation zones to help determine appropriate treatments for various parts of the building and its finishes. Currently, DCPL, working with the Freelon Group Architects, seeks the Board’s concept review to make changes to the landmarked interior of the building.

Project Description

The project is confined to the Central Lobby and the Business, Science, and Technology Reading Room to its west (left), both of which are included in the Landmark designation. In the lobby, DCPL will restore a carpeted lounge area at the west end, where the Books Plus store was located, using Barcelona chairs and tables consistent with Mies’ original design. At the east end, a series of movable café tables and chairs will be set up in the area where the second lounge was previously located.

Behind the central information desk, new display cases will be installed, using a design that draws upon the form, size, and materials of the card catalogs formerly located here. Minimally visible speakers will be inset in the ceiling and an audio/visual control station installed out of view within the information desk. Mounted display monitors (i.e. television screens) are no longer being proposed.

In the reading room, all bookcases, desks, and chairs will be removed and new furniture installed. A new freestanding collaboration space is proposed within the room, consisting of six meeting spaces with glass walls and sliding doors.

Evaluation

The Design Guidelines, adopted by the HPRB in January 2012, identify the public areas of the first floor as a Restoration Zone, the highest level of protection, where the preservation treatment calls for the “retention, maintenance, in-kind replacement of all architectural and structural features.”

Central Lobby

The proposed changes to the Library’s Central Lobby are compatible with its original – and largely intact – Miesian design, and they adhere to the Library’s own design guidelines. The

changes to the Lobby are minimal and restorative, recreating seating areas at both ends, refurbishing the original built-in casework, installing display cases that recall the design and location of the original card catalogs, and restoring the clock.

Reading Room Furniture

In the reading room, all of Mies' specifically selected furniture – the bookshelves, Steelcase reader tables, and Remington Rand chairs – are proposed for removal, a divergence from the guidelines, which identify the reuse of original furniture as an important treatment in Restoration Zones. A significant amount of the guidelines is devoted to explaining the importance of this furniture and its placement, relying on letters from the architect regarding the meticulous selection of pieces. The guidelines state that the “rehabilitation and reuse of the original Steelcase tables and Remington Rand reader chairs are encouraged to be a priority in the Restoration Zone reading rooms.” The guidelines even identify a replacement laminate for tables in need of repair.

The black steel bookcases are identified as “a continuation of the architectural program” whose “simplicity and grid-based arrangement...reinforce the building’s rectilinear forms and were laid out to reinforce the building’s modular aesthetic.” While the guidelines are more flexible on these pieces of furniture, stating that they should be used “as possible,” they are nevertheless considered a critical part of the Library’s historic appearance.

In order to conform to the Library’s guidelines while also allowing the upgrades necessary for modern use of the building, the HPO recommends keeping as many of the chairs, tables, and bookshelves as possible, retrofitting them as necessary to accommodate electronics, while also allowing the introduction of some new furnishings. More space could be made by not installing Barcelona chairs, which Mies designated for the library’s lounge areas, not within the reading rooms.

Reading Room Collaboration Space

The proposed collaboration space creates a freestanding room within a room and has no ceiling or separate air handling systems. Its metal and glass structure does not engage the walls of the reading room, allowing circulation around it and views through it. The walls are the same height as the existing window mullions that divide the upper and lower window panes (the room’s primary horizontal element). Its location, pushed toward the back of the building, puts it out of direct view from the Central Lobby.

Although the guidelines recommend avoiding “dividing the public open spaces, such as the Central Lobby or the reading rooms, into smaller defined rooms,” the fact that the collaboration space does not attach to any walls within the reading room, does not prevent access to any other part of the room, is transparent and without a ceiling, and respectful of the openness of the room, makes it a compatible alteration. However, as plans develop for the future of MLK Library, DCPL is urged to consider this a temporary solution and to select a more permanent location for collaboration space, perhaps fully enclosed for soundproofing, outside the landmarked interior. If viewed as a temporary solution, it may even be possible to use some of the historic bookcases to create collaborative spaces, since sound-proofing is not required. If glass walls are erected,

they should be designed to closely resemble the existing metal and glass partitions in the Library and should be removable.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board

- *find the project generally compatible with the character of the historic landmark and consistent with the building's design guidelines;*
- *direct the applicant to consider the collaboration space as a temporary insertion and to seek permanent space for collaboration space needs elsewhere;*
- *require the retention of some of the original bookshelves and tables in the landmarked reading room;*
- *and to delegate final approval to staff.*