
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 12-02

Bunker Hill Elementary School
1401 Michigan Avenue, NE
(Square 4166, Parcel 147/159)

Meeting Date: April 26, 2012
Applicant: The D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 5A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the HPO recommends that the Board designate Bunker Hill Elementary School, 1401 Michigan Avenue, NE, a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a positive recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1939 to 1953. The property meets D.C. designation Criterion C as an exemplar of a particular type and era of public school, the “extensible” school of the late 1920s to mid 1940s. As such, it is eligible for designation under the multiple-property document *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960* as an example of the property sub-type “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46”:

In order for schools to qualify under this property type, they must be representative of the design concepts of Nathan C. Wyeth, the third Municipal Architect. They should demonstrate his development of Harris' Colonial Revival junior high school, high school, and extensible designs as well as the influence of the Commission of Fine Arts. Designs by architects in private practice should be evaluated within the context of their main body of work as well as the manner in which they met the requirements of the Municipal Architect and the Commission of Fine Arts. Subsequent additions must not detract from the original design in any significant way....

Background

Named for the road (now Michigan Avenue) that led to the Civil War Fort Bunker Hill, the first Bunker Hill School was a one-room, crossroads schoolhouse erected in 1883. The building was reassigned to the “colored” division of District schools when white students were transferred to the new Brookland Elementary (now Luke Moore Academy). Old Bunker Hill was replaced with a two-classroom building, also for African Americans, in 1911. Brookland and adjoining subdivisions were growing rapidly, and residential construction only increased after World War I, spreading to the new Michigan Park neighborhood. By the mid 1920s, the transfer of the 1911 building back to the segregated white division (which occurred in 1926) and its expansion had become priorities of the Michigan Park Citizens Association. This second school, designed for only 50 students, was immediately overcrowded. By the early 1930s, more than 200 students were taking classes in shifts under the tutelage of only three teachers, and a kindergarten was

conducted in the school's central hall. A joint conference of Northeast citizens associations agreed to demand a new school, blaming the school board for the inadequacies of the facility. In the midst of the depression, the school board came around.

A full, two-story school was anticipated to cost \$209,000 in 1938, but the only money forthcoming was a generous grant from the federal Public Works Administration. This \$111,200 paid for construction of the building's partial basement and six rooms on a single floor, which became the present west wing. As a condition of the grant, construction had to begin by January 1, 1939, and with the limited project, work moved rapidly. All but some finish work was completed in October, and the new school opened January 2, 1940, with a formal dedication a couple weeks later.

The Citizens Association rejoiced in its triumph after fifteen years of advocacy, but with the arrival of so many New Deal and war workers, Bunker Hill still failed to accommodate all of the neighborhood's children, many of whom had to walk at least a dozen blocks to attend classes at other elementary schools. So, in 1943, the construction of the first three classrooms of the second story was authorized and even made a priority by the War Production Board, responsible for rationing construction materials. And in spring 1948, another addition of three rooms completed the second floor of this initial wing.

As the school population began to reflect the baby boom, many students were again assigned to half-day schedules temporarily. A mirror classroom wing—the east wing—was erected in 1952-1953, along with a central, administrative and auditorium block. These additions fulfilled the original plans for the school. The cost of this building campaign was nearly \$600,000, and it brought the capacity to 792 pupils, expected to be outstripped in the following year.

In 1965 plans were drawn for *another* east wing, a modernistic block of classrooms, located away from the property's prominent corner and connected lightly to, and slightly recessed relative to, the 1950s wing. This addition, completed in 1967, is compatible with the older portions of the school in its height, massing and materials, and it is consistent with the concept of "extensibility." It differs in detail from the earlier sections, however, and as it was not anticipated in the original design, it throws off the symmetry of the composition, but not in a way that truly compromises the rest. It is of less age and architectural significance than the "original" school and, for the purpose of the nomination, considered to postdate the property's period of significance.

Evaluation

The primary historic significance of the school, of course, is its function, educating the youth of Michigan Park and surrounding areas. By virtue of its size, function and siting, Bunker Hill, like other public schools, soon became a visual landmark of its neighborhood. And not only did it serve the children, but it also became a community center, as for Michigan Park Citizens Association meetings and events.

Architecturally, Bunker Hill Elementary School is most important as one of the most fully realized examples of a model "extensible" school. Developed in the late 1920s by Municipal Architect Albert Harris, and first essayed in the prototype Langdon Elementary (designed 1928, completed 1930), the idea was to design buildings that would be built out incrementally, as the need demanded and funds allowed, but at each stage resulting in a pleasing, self-contained

composition. There were different forms of the extensible school, but the most ambitious for elementary schools was the H- or U-shaped building enclosing an entrance courtyard. At complete build-out, this model elementary school consisted of two, mirror-image, eight- to twelve-classroom wings joined by hyphens to a central administrative and auditorium wing, just as at Bunker Hill. But they typically began with a single wing—again as at Bunker Hill—architecturally and functionally self-contained, combining teaching and administration. Many of the schools never grew beyond this stage (while in one or two cases, the result was an asymmetrical plan, as only the administrative block was added). Extensible schools were a clever response to demographic changes and fiscal constraints and to the architectural challenge of having to expand; some earlier experiments with adding to the cubic Victorian schoolhouses were unsuccessful.

The most common architectural style for extensible schools—and for schools of the second quarter of the twentieth century—was Colonial Revival. This mode had been adopted in the 1920s as part of a nationwide revival of interest in the country's early years and spurred by a particular fascination with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg at the time. The adoption of the Colonial vocabulary was strongly encouraged by the United States Commission of Fine Arts. The Commission considered the style native to the region and thought the red brick and domestic scale particularly suited to use among suburban residential buildings, and distinct from the more classical and monumental high schools.

Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth continued to develop the school models devised by his predecessor, Albert Harris. In the early 1940s he began to experiment with modernistic designs, first applied to the already accepted extensible plans. Wyeth supervised the slightly earlier plans for Bunker Hill, but the design was executed by prominent and prolific Washington architect Arthur Heaton, a proponent of both Colonial and modernistic styles. As Bunker Hill was not built out until fifteen years after design, there were some revisions in its implementation. While the east wing had to match the west, of course, the central pavilion received not the high, hip roof and cupola initially intended, but a nearly flat roof surrounded by a parapet. This probably reflected cost concerns, but it may have been evidence of a generational shift from interest in Tidewater domestic architecture to Modernism or functionalism. Otherwise, the school is virtually as first designed, and it has some nice details, such as the typical courtyard-facing bay windows, some interior paneling, monogrammed (“B”) window grates flanking the entrance of the west wing, and monochromatic brick at the corners and surrounds to contrast with the variegated Flemish-bond field brick.¹

¹ Not unlike the way rubbed brick was employed to set off the common field brick at Woodrow Wilson High School (1934-1935).