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

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Landmark/District: **National Museum of Women in the Arts** (x) Agenda  
Address: **1250 New York Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **April 30, 2020** (x) Alterations  
Case Number: **20-230** (x) Concept

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The applicant, Marshall Craft Associates, Inc., architects and agent for property owner National Museum of Women in the Arts, requests the Board's review of a concept application for the rehabilitation of the landmark 1907 Masonic Temple, which now houses the museum. The exterior work proposed includes construction of a mechanical penthouse and a rooftop elevator enclosure; the replacement of windows and the alteration of some openings; and the alteration of two entrances to make them accessible.

**Window alterations**

For an art museum, windows pose a challenge to climate and light control, security, and even the availability of display space. The narrow wedge shape of this building also makes the use of the exterior walls important; a number of windows are already effectively sealed off. The applicant proposes to restore many of the most prominent windows, to close openings at the ground floor and fourth floor, and to replace a larger number with aluminum units. Many of the openings would be sealed and insulated from the inside, with the upper-story office windows merely to be replaced.

The openings that would be sealed would be closed with limestone panels. The arched openings at the fourth floor have always been obscured by grilles, so there would be little apparent change there. The small openings at the ground floor have already been sealed with stuccoed panels, and those on the north side have recently been used to exhibit images on the exterior, so a more permanent sealing of the openings with matching limestone will hardly be noticeable. *This could be found to be a reasonably compatible alteration if the stone panels are inset sufficiently to retain the present sense of the openings as niches.*

The only potential issue with window replacements is with the apparently original second- and third-floor casements, which are lovely, tall, wood, four- and five-light windows with robust astragals. Aluminum replacements are proposed, because the idea is to seal those openings from the inside and essentially forget about them. Therefore, they must be pretty much maintenance-free. The problem is that most aluminum windows are very flat in profile and poor facsimiles for such windows. *The compatibility of replacement is wholly dependent upon locating close matches for these windows.*

## **Entrance alterations**

The applicant proposes new and replacement ramps on the north side of the building, to reach existing entrances and a proposed one. The north side has less of difference in grade from sidewalk to main floor, so it is an appropriate place for such improvements. The stoops are masonry, but undistinguished.

The ramp at the main north door would be reconstructed and extended to reach an entrance in the 1997 addition, where the gift shop is located. Another ramp would serve an existing western door plus another to be added, even farther west, replacing two small window openings. This latter door would admit entrance directly to the elevator lobby. New and replacement doors would match the existing wood, five-panel doors.

*With both ramps, a more conservative approach is recommended, limiting their extent in public space and avoiding alteration of the exterior stone.*

The present purpose of the second, western door is not immediately apparent, as both of the existing entrances open onto the same large ground-floor space. Adding a third door on the north side, so close to the second, does not appear to be a compelling need. It may have a security function—to admit people to the elevator lobby and to the upper floors for after-hours functions without taking them through the main hall. But as an accessibility feature, it would be preferable to use the existing door—a long existing condition—and not a tertiary entrance. The mobility-impaired could thus go the same distance within the building that they would travel outside on the ramp in inclement weather. This would also spare the exterior masonry. In the event of a fire, elevators cannot be used, so immediate egress from the elevator lobby may be a moot issue.

A similar approach may be preferable at the main entrance, to avoid stretching a second ramp across the east corner of the landmark and across the face of the addition. The gift shop can be reached from the interior of the museum by a ramp today, but that ramp is steeper than it should be. Thus, the floor of the shop is proposed to be built up nine inches to become level with that of the museum. This will change the shop's exterior door from at grade to nine inches above grade. If ADA access to the shop can be provided through the main door of the museum, under cover, then it may obviate the need for a ramp to the gift shop's storefront. Alternatively, the shop floor might stay where it is, and mobility-challenged customers could reach it through the existing at-grade door, that is, from the exterior as one would reach it with the proposed ramp.

## **Penthouses**

The applicant proposes a small penthouse for the existing elevators, necessary in order to extend elevator service to the building's top floor. The motive equipment for replacement elevators would be in the basement, not in an overhead machine room. Still, the required overrun is approximately 14.5 feet, making it protrude through the roof about three feet. This puts the top of the structure even with the level of the primary roof, but its cubic form makes it a carbuncle on the building's mansard. It would be very difficult to relocate the elevators, even if there were a convenient spot available. If there is to be service to the sixth floor, then one probably has to accept just trying to blend in the penthouse with the mansard using the same material as the roofing.

A large mechanical penthouse is proposed as well. It requires zoning relief, because the narrow building does not allow for a one-to-one set back from all sides. Much of the building's mechanical equipment is located in the basement, but it must be augmented by additional energy conservation and storm-water management devices, and the remainder of the basement is occupied by art storage. Unless art storage can be expanded to the newly accessible top floor, more rooftop mechanical is necessary. Some equipment would be located on the roof of the addition, and there is already some there now.

The applicant feels that employing equipment that is weather-resistant would require spreading it across the roof, necessitating reinforcing the roof structure throughout. Concentrating it within an enclosure, on the other hand, necessitates additional structure only in the location of the penthouse. But the penthouse will enclose the equipment at a uniform height to accommodate the tallest—one might say, the highest common denominator—making the structure very prominent. At eighteen feet above the roof, it will be quite large, without the usual setbacks. There are long views from the west, but the building itself cuts off some of those, as the penthouse diminishes with distance. It will be most prominently seen from the north along 13<sup>th</sup> Street. Surrounding taller buildings may make it blend somewhat. A stuccoed exterior would be a better match for a masonry building of this type, although it would present more of a maintenance issue over time. The proposed metal panels, even if matte and light in color, will be more reflective and less compatible.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept with the conditions that:*

- 1. aluminum replacement windows closely match the configuration, dimensions and profiles of the windows to be replaced;*
- 2. the limestone panels be set into the ground-floor windows to a depth similar to that of the present stuccoed panels;*
- 3. the accessibility ramps be reduced in length, each to serve a single door;*
- 4. the elevator penthouse be clad in roofing to match that of the mansard; and*
- 5. other materials for the mechanical penthouse be considered and further exploration undertaken to reduce its height.*