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

Landmark/District: **Duke Ellington School for the Arts (former Western High School)**
Address: **3500 R Street, NW** (x) Agenda
Meeting Date: **January 22, 2015** () Consent Calendar
H.P.A. Number: **14-133** (x) Alteration
Staff Reviewer: **Andrew Lewis** (x) Addition
(x) Demolition
(x) Conceptual Design

The Historic Preservation Review Board has reviewed the proposal to modernize the Duke Ellington School for the Arts on three prior occasions. The original concept was revised as a result of comments made by the Board on January 23, 2014, and additional elements for refinement were identified in the HPRB hearing of March 27, 2014. Subsequently, in response to Board’s recommendations of April 24, 2014, the Mayor’s Agent reviewed and approved the proposed demolition as a component of a project of special merit - “...on the condition that the HPRB review final design elements for the project in a subsequent proceeding...” During the interim, the project team continued to consult with staff to refine the concept in accordance with Board recommendations and in response to changes necessitated by “value engineering.” The final design elements are now ready for additional review by the Board.

Duke Ellington School for the Arts

Duke Ellington School for the Arts, originally known as Western High School, was designed by Harry B. Davis and constructed in 1897-1989. Snowden Ashford added classroom wings on the north and south and extended the portico in 1910, and Albert Harris more than doubled the size of the school by constructing a major addition on the west in 1925. Finally, Arthur Cotton Moore adapted the school for the newly introduced performing arts curriculum in the mid-1980s by making numerous modifications to the interior and a few on the exterior. The school was designated a DC Landmark on May 23, 2002 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places on July 25, 2003.

Proposed Demolition and Alterations

For the most part, the proposed demolition and alterations remain much the same as before and do not warrant repetition. However, the existing stage fly will now be retained, thus allowing the originally proposed height and mass to be substantially reduced by avoiding a complete replacement of the fly. Similarly, the mass above the Back Bar has been reduced by eliminating an upper floor mezzanine, and the visual impact of the former “Sky View Terrace” (now referred to as the “Education Terrace”) has been minimized by lowering the

height of the enclosure and removing a stair tower originally slated for the Front Bar. The latter revisions are in keeping with an agreement between DGS and the ANC and also address the Board's previous concerns regarding the degree to which the rooftop elements would be visible from the surrounding historic district.

Other revisions of note include the insertion of glass egress stairs between the Front and Middle Bars on the north and south sides, and the incorporation of a small, surface parking lot in the southwest corner of the site. These minimally visible revisions should raise no significant preservation concerns since the stairs will be set back beyond the original rustication on the Front Bar's western elevations and the parking lot will be located at the rear of the school.

Evaluation

Additional modifications have also been made specifically to respond to the Board's earlier comments. For example, the design of the amphitheater has been refined by relocating the central stairs to the either end of the stepped seating. The elevations of the new additions have been simplified by eliminating the previously proposed vertical curvature, and the visibility of rooftop elements has been reduced as described in the preceding paragraphs.

The lantern reading room has also been refined by redesigning the structure into a simple cube and revising the glazing supports so that they are less visible. Night lighting of the lantern has also been improved by redirecting the focus to the walls behind and the ceiling above. In keeping with earlier reports, HPO continues to consider the lantern a compatible and clearly contemporary element that will add interest and allow year-round use of the portico. The revisions improve the compatibility of the lantern element by making it lighter in weight and simpler in form and detailing.

Similarly, the design of the porches has been improved by eliminating the previously suggested horizontal and vertical mullions, opting for a point supported glazing system and redesigning the door surrounds so that they appear as freestanding elements. As a result, the reconstructed elements will read much more like the open porches that once existed. Despite the Board's recommendation that the columns, balustrades and other decorative elements of the front porches be made of "original materials," the project submittal suggests that fiber-reinforced plastic (FRP) will be used. HPO is seeking the Board's direction regarding whether FRP is an appropriate material for reconstructing the porches.

Finally, no discussions regarding the incorporation of interpretive exhibits on the history of the school have occurred to date, but this Board requirement is being reiterated to ensure that such exhibits will be designed and incorporated in the future. Archaeological survey is being conducted by Stantech and Tracerics and the National Register of Historic Places eligibility of an identified site named after the historic estate known as "The Cedars" which predated construction of Western High School (site 51NW254) is ongoing. Staff was informed by a concerned citizen that the Threlkeld family cemetery was once located on the school property. Historical research is being conducted as part of the investigations to pinpoint the location but no evidence of the cemetery has been found so far.

Recommendation

In consideration of the Mayor's Agent finding of special merit, staff recommends that the Board:

- approve the revised concept;
- provide specific recommendations regarding the lantern reading room, the materials that should be used to reconstruct the porch and any other aspects of the revised concept that the Board identifies for further refinement; and
- delegate all remaining review to staff.