
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Decatur Street Car Barn/Northern Bus Garage	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	4701 14th Street, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	December 17, 2020	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers:	20-176	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demolition

On May 28, 2020, the Historic Preservation Review Board heard a presentation by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Wendel Architects regarding a proposed extensive renovation of the historic Decatur Street Car Barn. The Board did not find the concept design compatible with the landmark, citing the need to revise aspects of the newly proposed elevations on all sides. The Board also directed WMATA and its architects to seek input from the community and return with a revised concept that reflected public comments. Subsequently, on September 24, 2020, HPRB determined that the extensive demolition associated with the renovation project was inconsistent with the purposes of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act (Act) and referred the demolition permit filed by WMATA to the Mayor's Agent for review. The project team is now seeking approval for its revised concept in advance of the Mayor's Agent hearing.

Decatur Street Car Barn

The Decatur Street Car Barn was designed in the Italian Renaissance style by the local architectural firm of Wood, Donn and Deming, and constructed for the Capital Traction Company in 1906-1907. The original building occupied approximately half of its site but was expanded over time while being converted for use as a bus garage, most notably, when WMATA significantly enlarged the building in 1989-1992 via construction of a one-story bus maintenance facility and storage area. This expansion replaced most of the roof, destroyed a great deal of historic interior fabric, altered the original exterior, and enclosed Decatur Street to provide additional bus egress, thus effectively engulfing the historic car barn in new construction. Upon completion, the bus garage occupied its entire site. However, the historic building still retained sufficient integrity to be designated a DC landmark in 2012 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2013.

Proposal

Substantial renovation is necessary to accommodate WMATA's expanding and modernizing bus fleet. To meet these project goals, WMATA proposes to gut most of the existing building, reconfigure the interior, and construct new levels above and below. To offset the loss of historic fabric, the remaining portions of the original carbarn along 14th Street, NW will be preserved and restored along with the smokestack on the southern end of the building and a good portion of the northern and southern elevations. The preservation scope was outlined during the previous HPRB review and favorably received.

Evaluation

As indicated above, the extensive demolition necessary to modify the historic structure for contemporary use will result in substantial demolition inconsistent with the purposes of the Act. This matter will be evaluated by the Mayor's Agent in the coming month. In the meantime, WMATA has responded to HPRB's earlier comments and worked with the community to revise its new construction plans as directed by the Board.

As part of its outreach, WMATA hosted several virtual community meetings, prepared three new design alternatives and conducted an on-line survey to determine which approach would be most liked by the community. Although not unanimous, a majority supported "Option 3" – the alternative that best integrated the design of the new construction with that of the historic building. This alternative was then further refined based upon comments provided in the November 2, 2020 virtual community meeting.

The most notable integration was achieved via a modified materials palette that more closely resembles the reddish colors and masonry characteristics of the historic brick building. As a result, the majority of the new construction will be clad in horizontally laid high performance concrete panels featuring a range of reddish colors similar to those used to construct the car barn walls. Although these panels will be larger than the historic brick, similarly scaled brick of a dark grey color will also be used in several areas to anchor the new building to the ground and provide a pedestrian scale, primarily at the corners where a human scale is most needed. Matching cast stone panels will also be incorporated to provide highlights that echo the decorative sandstone banding of the original building and provide interest to the façades.

In some locations, the brick and concrete panels will be laid in a screen pattern and overlapped to further break down the scale of the sizeable new construction and maximize the play of light and shadow on exterior walls. Blind brick panels reminiscent of 14th Street's long line of arched windows and inset reveals acting as "recessed piers", created by recessing areas of brick approximately 1" behind the building plane of the building, will also be utilized in some locations to provide an architectural rhythm complementary to the surrounding built environment.

As requested by the community, public art will be introduced along Iowa Avenue and potentially in other areas to minimize the scale of some larger walls and provide elements of interest. Rather than being randomly placed, however, the as yet-to-be-determined artwork will be framed between the "recessed piers" to provide a more direct dialogue between the art and the architecture. Some community comments suggested the artwork relate to the history of the building. HPO would support this approach since it would serve an educational/interpretive purpose as well as beautify the building. The previously proposed vegetative panels have been eliminated.

Another notable improvement of the revised design is the significant reduction in overall height. In addition to relating better to the strong horizontality of the historic car barn, the lower scale significantly improves the primary entrance at the southwest corner of the site.

The elimination of the large entry stair/ramp originally proposed for this corner also greatly improves the new design as does an overall simplification of massing and fenestration.

On the northwest corner, views to the historic carbarn will be substantially improved by eliminating the previously proposed glazed stair/elevator tower and restoring two original windows and more of the carbarn's northern wall. This significant revision will reduce the perception that the 14th Street elevation is merely a façade.

Finally, while some of the project renderings do include trees, it is unclear whether these fulfill the Board's earlier recommendation to incorporate more trees in the project plans and whether a landscape plan has been developed. Further study and development of landscape features may better incorporate the new facility into its surroundings.

Recommendation

For the reasons outlined above, HPO recommends that the Board:

- 1. Find the revised concept compatible with the historic Decatur Street Carbarn and its site;*
- 2. Provide any additional comments that may further improve the overall design; and*
- 3. If the Mayor's Agent determines that the project is a project of special merit and/or consistent with the Act, request that the Mayor's Agent direct the applicants to return to HPO for final design review and to ensure final plans include an appropriate scope of preservation and restoration work to offset the loss of historic fabric.*

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