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

Property Address:	615-621 14th Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Federal-American National Bank		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	September 22, 2016	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	16-626	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		New Construction
			Demolition
			Subdivision

Lincoln Property Company, with plans prepared by Shalom Baranes Associates Architects, seeks conceptual design review for an eleven-story addition and exterior and interior alterations to the former Federal-American National Bank (later National Bank of Washington) at 14th and G Streets, NW. The building's designation as a DC and National Register landmark includes its two-story interior banking hall; the building is also located in the recently expanded boundaries of the Financial Historic District.

Property History and Description

Built in 1925, the Federal-American National Bank was a collaborative design between nationally-renowned bank and skyscraper architect Alfred Bossom and Beaux-Arts trained Washington architect Jules Henri de Sibour. The Classical Revival building is an example of an "elevated" bank, in which the banking hall is raised up to the second floor to allow for income-generating retail space at the street; Bossom used this parti extensively in New York and other cities but it is unique in Washington. The building's vault-like exterior design is clad in limestone with large two-story arched windows opening to the banking hall on the upper levels.

The interior is entered by a central door on 14th Street which opens to a travertine stair that ascends to the banking hall. The hall is a two-story space with a second story mezzanine. Its walls are clad in Aqua sandstone (referred to at the time of construction as "George Washington sandstone"), which has since been painted. The painted plaster ceiling features a decorative coffered design in what was referred to at the time as a Spanish design. The banking hall was originally lined on three sides by open teller desks, an innovation in bank design which eliminated enclosed cages and tall grilles in order to maintain an open appearance to the space and to suggest confidence and trust between the bank and its clientele. Some of the original desks remain; others are later copies. A vault is located in the rear wall. The fourth floor, which is not included in the interior designation, retains an impressive conference room and library with eclectic Spanish stylistic elements.

Proposal

The plans call for the building to be converted for use as the primary entrance, lobby and conference facilities for an office building that would be constructed to the rear (east) of the landmark. The office building addition would be a contemporary design of stone and glass, and

would have a four-story projection on floors 7-10 extending 25 feet over the landmark. While designed to appear as a cantilever floating a floor above, the projection would be supported by columns that would tie in with the existing structure of the bank.

Exterior work to the landmark would include repairs to masonry and the original bronze window frames; the non-original commercial storefronts would be removed and new storefronts designed to replicate the originals. On the interior, openings would be made in the rear wall through existing arched openings to provide connection to the new building. Other proposed alterations include installing glass partitions to close off the mezzanine and portions of the main floor of the hall on each side for conference rooms, reconstruction of the travertine entry stairs to make them less steep, and relocating the teller cages from the back wall to alternative locations.

Evaluation and Recommendations

While technically an addition, the new office building has been designed for its urban context to appear as its own building with a vocabulary, composition, and material use that is complementary to but distinguishable from the landmark. The use of glass projecting bays on the G Street elevation provides massing relief, shadow and verticality to the composition.

As a general preservation principle, the Board has discouraged substantial masses of new construction atop or in the air space above historic buildings, particularly when the projection is readily visible from street view. Minor projections that follow the general proportions and depth as was found in traditional projections, even though not used historically over top of other buildings, have often been found acceptable and compatible. As proposed, the 25 foot projection over the top of the landmark falls more in the category of substantial mass than incidental projection, and reducing its projection by 5-10 feet in depth would reduce its visual weight and projection over the landmark.

The conceptual scope of exterior work on the landmark, including masonry cleaning and repair and recreation of the original storefronts based on historic documentation, is compatible and should continue to be developed in consultation with HPO.

The designated interior spaces are identified as “restoration” zones in the plans, a treatment that is consistent with the preservation law’s stated purpose that encourages the restoration of historic landmarks. However, some of the treatments and alterations proposed are not consistent with that stated approach. While some level of alteration is understandable as necessary to adapt the building for current use, the cumulative effect of removing the bank teller cages from their original location, opening up the back wall, and enclosing both the first and second levels with glass partitions would significantly and adversely change the character of the space. As the plans continue to be developed, the following is recommended:

1. If glass partitions are to be used in the banking hall at all, they should be used sparingly as the exception rather than the rule. Partitions that stop short of extending the full height of the space should be considered, and alternative uses for the hall that do not require partitions should be explored.

2. The teller desks along the east wall are integral in defining the space as a banking hall and in serving as the terminus of the spatial sequence into the building. The original desks remaining in the hall should be reused in this location. Some shortening of their length may be possible to improve circulation around them, but they should remain as the central focus of the space.
3. In conjunction with the proposed removal of the teller desks, the opening up of the three blind arches in the east wall has the effect of turning the banking hall into a corridor. As illustrated, the openings would remove not only the stone within the arches but also the decorative metal fanlights. The points of connection between the banking hall and the new building should be developed to retain the hall's spatial qualities and distinctive architectural features.
4. Reconstruction of the stair into the banking hall in a manner that changes its proportions is not an appropriate restoration treatment for an original feature of a designated interior landmark.
5. The paint covering the Aqua sandstone walls should be removed to restore this important original finish.

Recommendations

The HPO recommends that the Review Board approve the general concept for the addition, with the recommendation that the projection be reduced in depth, and that the plans for the interior treatment of the landmark continue to be developed as outlined above and return for further review when appropriate.