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

Landmark/District:	Central Public Library (Carnegie Library)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	801 K Street, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	June 29, 2017	
H.P.A. Number:	17-415	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Andrew Lewis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Conceptual Design

Events DC (aka the Washington Convention and Sports Authority) and Apple Inc. are working with Beyer Blinder Belle Architects to restore the exterior of the historic Central Public Library (aka Carnegie Library) in Mount Vernon Square, and to adapt the interior for use as a retail store, office and exhibit spaces for the Historical Society of Washington, DC, and other purposes. Minor improvements to the grounds of Mount Vernon Square are also proposed as part of the project.

Central Public Library

Given its prominent location at the juncture of Massachusetts Avenue, New York Avenue and several streets, Mount Vernon Square (Reservation No. 8) ranks among the most notable L’Enfant reservations. The square evolved over time like many others and once served as the site of an engine house and later, a public market. Prominent industrialist Andrew Carnegie offered to make funds available to construct a public library within the square in 1899, provided that the city would agree to maintain a free public library service. The architectural firm of Ackerman and Ross of New York, which designed a number of Carnegie Libraries across the country, was selected through a national competition and construction of the building began on April 24, 1901. The Library was formally dedicated on January 7, 1903.

The Central Public Library was designated a DC Landmark in 1964 and listed in National Register of Historic Places in 1969. The National Register nomination describes the building as “...an excellent example of the neoclassicism in vogue at the beginning of the 20th century” and a “...landmark of importance which contributes significantly to the cultural heritage and visual beauty of the District of Columbia.” Mount Vernon Square is a contributing element of the Plan of the City of Washington (L’Enfant Plan), which was designated in part as a DC landmark in 1971, expanded to include the entire plan in 1997, and listed in the National Register in 1997.

Existing Conditions

The Carnegie Library still appears much as it did when its construction was first completed. Although some exterior elements are exhibiting signs of deterioration, the heavily-ornamented library retains most of its original grandeur and its elevations have not been compromised by exterior alterations other than the introduction of a new stair and a few other relatively minor alterations on the north elevation. Perhaps the most significant exterior alteration is the

rooftop addition that was constructed over the original skylight in the early 2000s. This addition, which features a hipped, standing seam copper roof and clerestory windows, altered the vertical proportions of the library and blocked views of the original chimneys.

The highly symmetrical Beaux Arts interior also retains much of its integrity but has been partially compromised by conversion of the grand eastern reading room into a theater, the introduction of a raised floor map in the western reading room, alterations to the Great Hall area, removal of the cast iron stacks, and other such revisions.

Like the building itself, the design of Mount Vernon Square retains a relatively high degree of integrity. The layout of hardscape features such as the front plaza and surrounding circulation paths that date to 1913 remain largely intact and in generally good condition. The site still retains mature trees, but many of the plantings have deteriorated significantly over the past few decades.

Review Authorities

The proposed project is subject to review under local and federal historic preservation law. In addition to HPRB review of the concept application for alterations to the landmark building and its site, the DC SHPO is reviewing the DC Government project for its effects on the historic library and its significant interior spaces, as well as its effects on the L'Enfant Plan pursuant to Section 9(b) of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act. Since the project will require approval by the National Capital Planning Commission, effects on historic properties are also being evaluated in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. As part of these review processes, "adverse effects" of the project must be identified, avoided, minimized and/or mitigated in accordance with historic preservation law.

Proposed Alterations

The exterior work proposed for the building is almost exclusively restorative in nature and will consist of repairs, in-kind replacement of deteriorated historic fabric, and the removal of non-historic features such as the early 2000s rooftop addition and the contemporary stair and awning on the north side of the building. New signage consisting primarily of a few, subtle "Apple" logos will be attached to the building and to strategically spaced banners around the site.

Original site features will be retained and modified only slightly to accommodate ADA requirements, most notably through minor regrading of the south plaza. The non-historic, metal switch-back ramp on the southern edge of the site will also be removed.

Non-restorative exterior alterations include replacement of the non-historic stair on the north elevation with a rounded grand stair, and removal of a single, central pier to create a larger entry on the library's north elevation. This new entry will feature a frameless glass door capped by a multi-story transom.

Much more significant alterations are proposed for the interior. Some work, like the removal of the non-historic theater and raised floor map, and the return of the basement level stairs to

their original configuration will be restorative, while others are proposed primarily to create dynamic retail spaces.

The most significant interior change will be removal of the remaining original laylights from the Great Hall ceiling and the non-historic infill directly above to create a large new retail atrium in the heart of the library. This new space, which will feature a massive video screen, new wall openings on both levels, and circulation “bridges” connecting the upper floors, will significantly alter the historic layout and character of the interior.

Immediately to the north, the area that once housed the library’s stacks will also be dramatically altered by removing all interior partitions to create one large room. This adaptation will further alter the historic interior character by introducing views completely through the library that heretofore never existed.

Evaluation

The preservation benefits of this project far outweigh the drawbacks – especially on the exterior. The repair of deteriorated historic fabric, removal of incompatible additions and general landscape improvements will help to ensure the accurate preservation of Andrew Carnegie’s vision for generations to come.

Meanwhile, alterations that are proposed for adaptive use purposes are well thought out and compatibly designed. For example, on the north elevation, the newly planned grand stair will echo the rounded edges of the southern entry plaza, yet read as a contemporary element. The removal of the central pier to create a more pronounced entrance is reversible and proposed for an area that was previously modified by an awning and entrance door. The effects of these modifications will be minimized by the retention/reintroduction of the horizontal window muntins that reflect the multi-leveled cast iron stacks that were once located immediately behind the northern façade.

Although some modifications will diminish the integrity of important interior spaces, it is important to acknowledge that some of these spaces have already been compromised to some degree, and that other aspects of the project involve significant efforts to restore several features of the original Ackerman & Ross design.

Even in the new retail atrium where the most dramatic alterations are proposed, contrasting contemporary features such the video screen and glass railings with the original brick walls and natural lighting help to interpret the evolution of the space.

Some design details have yet to be finalized. For example:

- the manner in which signage will be attached to the building should be clarified;
- strategies for softening the new grand stair should be evaluated (e.g. introducing a planter along the knee wall);
- window muntin details on the northern elevation should be reviewed;
- plans for preservation of the historic clock and its plaster surrounds should be defined;
- and

- interior finishes used for flooring and wall cladding should be reviewed to ensure compatibility with, but differentiation from historic materials in order to clearly distinguish old from new and avoid creating a false sense of history.

However, these are relatively minor details that can be addressed as the concept is refined. In addition, mitigation measures that will be necessary to complete the Section 106 review of the project will need to be finalized. Potential mitigation measures might include development of interpretive information on the history of the library – including some that could potentially be featured on the new video screen; salvage of historic fabric such as the original decorative clock and door surround on axis from the front door, laylights, and sections of the central pier on the north for possible restoration; and completion of the draft Historic Structures Report.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept and delegate the remaining design review to HPO.