

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

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|--------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Property Address: | 901 G Street NW | X | Agenda |
| Landmark/District: | Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library | | Consent Calendar |
| Meeting Date: | January 22, 2015 | X | Concept Review |
| H.P.A. Number: | 15-137 | X | Alteration |
| Staff Reviewer: | Anne Brockett and David Maloney | | New Construction |

The District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL), represented by Mecanoo architecten of the Netherlands and local partner Martinez + Johnson Architects, seeks conceptual design review for alterations and an addition to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. This architectural team was selected in February 2014 after a public competition held by DCPL in 2013.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (MLK), the District of Columbia's local memorial to the slain civil rights leader, was designated a historic landmark in 2007. It is the only building designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the District of Columbia and the only library designed by the internationally recognized architectural Master to have ever been constructed. The publicly funded building is an important landmark of the International Style in the District, a city more commonly recognized for its monumental federal architecture reflective of the Beaux Arts Classical tradition. In recognition of its significance, the interior public spaces on the first floor (vestibule, lobby, and two reading rooms) were also included in the designation as part of the landmark. The lobby is highlighted by the large memorial mural depicting the life of Dr. King, by Jamaican-American artist Don Miller.

At the time the building was designated, the Board recommended that DCPL create design guidelines to help the Library in making future decisions regarding treatment of the building's interior and exterior features. Design Guidelines were subsequently prepared and adopted by the HPRB in January 2012 as consistent with its standards and with the expected treatment of this historic landmark. These Guidelines give firm recommendations for general approaches to altering the building as well as explicit treatments for specific significant features. This document should be relied upon as the plans continue to be developed.

Project Description

The proposal introduces several major new program elements into the library, and includes a number of exterior and interior alterations, the most significant of which are listed below:

Interior

- Convert the first floor rear loading dock to a flexible program space with a stage, access under the mural and directly opposite the main entrance
- Introduce two open staircases by removing floor plates and walls in the building cores flanking the main entrance and rising up to each floor
- Introduce a café at the northeast corner of the first floor, opening onto an outdoor terrace
- Create a large central space or flexible-layout area (the same size as the lobby) in the center of the upper floors by removing the inner brick corridor walls

- Create a new movable auditorium on the fourth floor, surrounded by special collections and exhibition spaces
- Add a fifth floor at the current penthouse level for library offices, a restaurant, and roof terrace
- Reconfigure the basement space (not shown in the current submission)

Exterior

- Expand beyond the present penthouse structures to create new program space at the roof level
- Selectively remove parts of the brick perimeter site walls to define the outdoor café
- Introduce large new skylights in the loggia pavement flanking the main entrance
- Introduce air grilles and skylights along the building perimeter

Some aspects of the proposed renovation are still under development and are not fully reflected in the present submission. This includes items such as the basement plan, proposed treatment of windows and exterior doors, various possible spatial divisions (such as between the Digital Commons and Café), and the treatment or possible removal of various lobby features such as the information desk, circulation desks, built-in shelves, etc.

In addition to the HPRB's review of the proposal as a D.C. Landmark, the project has also been submitted to the State Historic Preservation Officer under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), under its requirement to approve the construction permit, is acting as the lead agency for the 106 consultation process. The SHPO submitted its comments, which are attached, to NCPC on December 3, 2014. Some of these have already been addressed in the revised concept (for example, a larger addition and new entrances on the G Street façade are no longer shown).

Evaluation and Recommendation

The proposed concept plan represents an excellent starting point for renovation of the library to meet its 21st-century program needs. The arrangement of new functions and spaces has been accomplished with great sensitivity to the basic organizational layout of the building. The concept plan also addresses the major deficiencies of the existing layout—the lack of visible and gracious public stairs; the need for an event space near the main lobby; the claustrophobic hallways, windowless offices, and lack of orientation on the upper floors; and the dismal basement auditorium and meeting rooms.

At present, the architects propose to introduce the overall concept for the library, and seek the Board's initial feedback. While the concept offers successful solutions to many aspects of the modernization, there are some significant rehabilitation questions to be discussed at this stage, including the following:

New event space for the lobby. The proposed recapture of the loading dock area to create an event space for the lobby has been handled with care and sophistication. The existing back-of-house space is architecturally insignificant and provides an excellent location for a public event space with an implied stage, directly opposite the front doors of the library. Although a large section of wall would be removed to create the opening into the lobby, it does not disrupt the

architectural logic of the lobby layout. The large pivoting doors could be closed to recall the former wall while creating an effective way to manage use of the space.

Alterations to the building cores flanking the main entrance. The concept proposes significant alteration to the two brick-clad building cores on the G Street side of the building. These would be converted to enclose public stairwells, with large portions of the brick being removed to create visibility and transparency.

These cores provide a logical and appropriate location for the badly needed public stairwells, convenient to the main entrance. The desire to make them visible and transparent is also understandable, since their location needs to be readily apparent if this new public circulation system is to become part of an intuitive floor plan consistent with Miesian principles of architectural clarity.

At the same time, the opening up of these two cores is not as successful as the opening to the event space. It needs to be accomplished in a way that does not undermine the role of the brick cores in defining the major landmark spaces, and establishing the architectural logic of the entire building. These are only two in a composition of four brick service cores. The symmetrical disposition of these solid blocks on the regular Miesian grid creates between and around them a natural sequence of spaces, which are gently delineated by floor-to-ceiling glass partitions. The interplay of solid masonry cores and the free-flowing space around them is the essence of Mies's architecture.

As shown, the partial removal of the brick walls in the vestibule is problematic in several ways. By making the cores fully transparent, the careful architectural balance between solid and void is disrupted right at the entrance to the building. The removal of the vestibule walls negates a perceptual device that has been used in public architecture for centuries: by creating a sense of physical compression in a vestibule, the size and grandeur of the succeeding central room is greatly enhanced by contrast. IN addition, any alteration to walls or openings should maintain the rigid symmetry of Mies' design.

Limiting the wall openings inside the vestibule to the area of the central recess (though probably higher than the ceiling of the current service alcoves) would be more appropriate, while also providing transparency and instant announcement of the stairwell locations to arriving patrons. The removal of the exterior metal panel as shown in Option B seems reasonable, although removal of the floor for visibility to the basement seems counter-intuitive under a one-story bumpout and causes the building to lose some of its grounding with the site.

Upper floors. The concept proposes to remove the walls surrounding the windowless work spaces in the center of each of the upper floors, so that each floor will have a central orienting room of the same size, shape, and position as the main lobby. This will make the upper floors more open, understandable, and welcoming, and will greatly increase access to natural light coming through the surrounding rooms and their glass partition walls. In addition, brick walls at new stairwells are proposed for replacement with glass.

Again, the architectural balance between the four solid brick cores and transparent room divisions could be better maintained on these floors. Retention of at least portions of the brick

inner walls, perhaps as full-height wall panels, waist-height walls, or seat walls, would help define a circulation path and retain some of the architectural character of the upper floors. On the second and third floors, the ceiling height will be much lower than the main lobby, so the architectural proportions of the central space or spaces should be carefully considered as the design develops.

Outdoor café and alterations to loggia flooring. The concept shows removal of a section of the perimeter wall to create a partially enclosed outdoor terrace for the café in the northeast corner of the building. Either option shown would activate an underutilized portion of the loggia, recapture the space of an unneeded vehicular ramp, and create a welcoming secondary entrance to the café in a way that is consistent with the Mies design.

The proposals to add air grilles and skylights in the floor of the loggia may be acceptable where they are discreetly placed, but alternatives to the large areas of sidewalk skylight as shown flanking the main entrance should be considered in light of Mies' use of the granite pavers inside and out to create a continuous, uniform floor surface for the site.

Roof addition. The concept shows two options for an expansion of the penthouse level, both of which are set back from the building facades. Either addition would cover more of the roof area than the current mechanical penthouses, which would be incorporated within them, along with expanded mechanical space. Preliminary sightline studies suggest only minor visibility from most vantage points on the street, but these studies should be refined to show closer views and sidewalk views (as opposed to from the center of the street) as the designs progress. As shown, the curvilinear Option 2 is somewhat more visible because it comes closer to the 9th Street façade.

Option 2 is derived from the competition design, where it served as a transitional floor between the sturdy rectilinear block of the original library and an angled three-story addition above. It offered contrast and a shadowed recess that made the upper floors seem to float above the library roof. Without the full composition, however, curved design is more incidental, and the fluid amoeba-like form loses its design rationale. Rectilinear Option 1 with the biomorphic forms limited to the landscape seems a more successful – and Miesian – approach to an additional floor.

The submitted plans do not present the alternative for more than the one extra floor, which was requested as an option in the design competition. If this is presented later, the Board would have to evaluate whether such a prominent addition would be appropriate for a memorial building that is the work of an internationally celebrated architect. The HPO knows of no other Mies building that has been altered in such a highly visible manner, although the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, completed in 1968, is currently undergoing an intensive renovation.

The HPO recommends that the Board provide further direction on specific aspects of the concept proposal, with the aim to achieve a successful modernization of Martin Luther King Jr Library that enhances the landmark in a manner consistent with the design guidelines and its historic character.