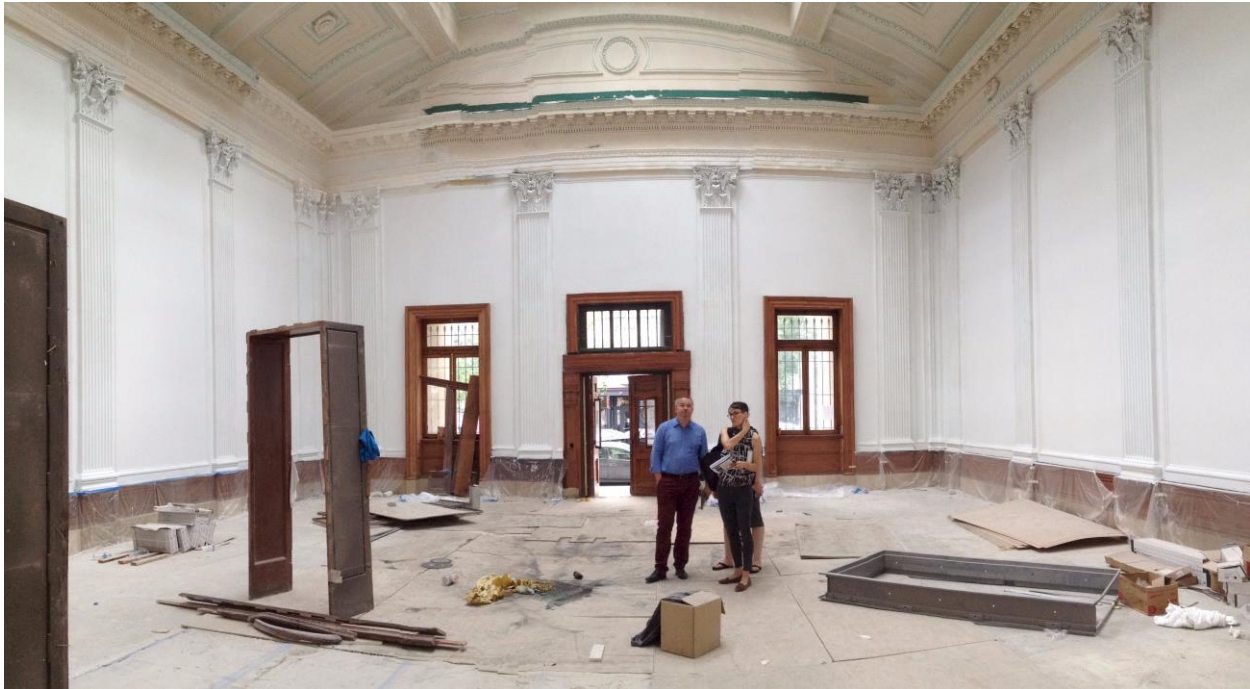

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	915 F Street NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	Equitable Co-Operative Building Association (Interior Landmark)	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
		<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
Meeting Date:	September 22, 2016	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	#16-565	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Brendan Meyer	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

Knead Hospitality, with plans prepared by Studio 3877, seeks concept design review for adding a mezzanine and making other alterations to the banking hall of the Equitable Co-Operative Building Association. The building, including its two-story interior banking hall, is designated a DC and National Register landmark and is located in the Downtown Historic District. In 2012 the Board approved a five story addition at the rear of the building, which has been completed. In 2014 the Board approved glass enclosures for the front façade for a previous retail tenant; the enclosures were not constructed.



Equitable Co-Operative Building Association banking hall, current condition, July 2016

Property Description and Context

The Equitable Co-Operative Building Association is a monumental, one-story bank building built in 1912. The double height banking hall was designated an interior landmark in 1994 as, “an exceptional example of bank architecture in the Classical Revival style, unusually successful in illustrating the use of classical design principles to convey an image of dignity and financial stability.” The building interior north of the banking hall is not part of the landmark designation (Figure 1).

From the designation application, “The Equitable banking room occupies most of the interior, measuring 41 feet wide, 54 feet long, and 35 feet in height to the vaulted skylight. The interior is classically ornamented and detailed. Each of the four walls is divided by six fluted Corinthian pilasters resting on a marble base and low paneled mahogany wainscoting. Centered on the north wall opposite the entrance is the door to the vault.

On either side of the vault are two smaller doorways. Above the cornice on the north and south walls are segmental pediments which meet the curve of the vaulted ceiling. The ceiling has a central barrel vault laylight. The ceiling sides are coffered with rosettes and Greek-key moldings. The roof above the laylight has a skylight.”

In the course of the current concept design, architects for the applicant discovered original blueprints in the Library of Congress that have shed new light on the original layout of the banking hall (Figure 3). According to these drawings the full width of the front of the hall was occupied ten feet deep by a central vestibule and flanking executive offices. Each office had an attached ante room eleven feet wide and seven feet deep along each side wall. These rooms and vestibule--which together formed a shallow U-shape at the south end of the hall--were enclosed by wood paneled partitions nine feet tall. The remaining perimeter of the banking hall was dedicated to clerical staff along the sides and a teller cage at the north end in front of the vault. The center of the hall was public space for customers. Clerk and customer spaces were unenclosed and separated by low railings, screens, and counters over which business was conducted. Contemporary newspaper accounts of the opening of the bank describe an interior that matches the discovered blueprints.

Since designation, the banking hall has gone through several uses, tenants and alterations, some of them major improvements to the integrity of the landmark. In 2010 multiple levels of metal mezzanines and catwalks from its dance hall days were removed (Figure 2), and the skylight in the roof uncovered and restored. In 2014 a travertine floor was removed and the original Tennessee marble floor at the center of the hall restored. At the same time pilasters on the north wall which had been cut into were reconstructed. Today the full volume of the space stands empty, fully displaying the same grand dimensions, highly ornate classical architecture, and natural light that the bank’s customers and staff would have experienced one hundred years ago.

Proposal

The proposal seeks to convert the building to restaurant use, with a mezzanine level for seating added around the perimeter of the banking hall 9’-8” above floor level. The mezzanine would be U-shaped in plan leaving open from floor to ceiling the two central pilasters on the north (rear) wall. Access would be provided by a new stair in the northeast corner of the hall. The mezzanine at the south (front) wall would step up three feet in order for the mezzanine to clear and not run across the façade windows. The sides would be nine feet wide with booth seating inserted between pilasters. The sides widen at the north wall to connect with the non-historic interior beyond.

On the ground floor a new glass vestibule is planned for the same place the historic vestibule stood. The large bronze pocket doors at the front entrance (which operate with effort but need servicing) would be salvaged and used to construct the side walls of the vestibule. A long bar would occupy most of the east wall with a back bar designed in sections to insert between the pilasters. A banquette of round booths would run the full length of the west wall and across the pilasters. A long, double sided booth would run the central axis of the hall from vestibule to vault.

The mezzanine has been designed to be self-supporting and booths, bars, and furniture would be constructed in such a way that nothing destroys or penetrates extant historic fabric. Planning for building systems has already begun, for example the ducts of a new air handling system would be hidden by housing them in the mezzanine floor as a plenum. In addition to relocating the exterior bronze doors to the interior, small exterior alterations include three small signs and placing planters between the columns.

Evaluation

The purpose of the law, with respect to historic landmarks, is to retain and enhance them, and to encourage their adaptation for current use.¹ The Equitable’s designated interior has certainly seen many enhancements to its historic character since it was designated. Moving forward, the challenge is to build on this success and balance future alteration of the space with continued protection of the character and craftsmanship of this

¹ Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978, D.C. Law 2-144, Section 2(b)(2)(A).

exceptional room. While some level of alteration is understandable as necessary to adapt the building for current use, the cumulative effect of the size and complexity of the proposed alterations would significantly and adversely change the character of the space. As the plans continue to be developed, the following is recommended:

1. Any mezzanine will inherently intrude into the volume and proportions of the hall but any such intrusion should be limited. Except for only two at the north wall, the pilasters that fundamentally set the rhythm and scale of the hall as a two-story height space are covered or obscured to the point they would only be seen in disconnected portions. Some mezzanine might be accommodated, but it should be a minor rather than major component of the space.
2. The proposed mezzanine is complex in its form and ornament which contributes to the effect of it dominating the historic space. Complexity is exhibited by the new stairs in the northeast corner, the change in levels at the south end, the curves in the plan where the mezzanine bumps further into the center of the space, and the historicist railing. Hiding, simplifying, or using modern forms could all lessen the impact of the mezzanine.
3. Furniture and cabinetry, like the banquette seating on the west and the bar on the east, should inset itself into the spacing of the historic ornament and avoid spanning across or obscuring it. The bar is moderately successful at this (but then undercut by the mezzanine hovering above). The banquette much less so.
4. If the large bronze pocket doors at the front entrance cannot be rehabilitated at this time, they should be set in their open position and remain in their current location. Although this would hide them from view for now, the alternative course to reuse them as an interior fixture risks them being lost or discarded in a future remodeling.
5. Millwork at the doors and windows on the north and south wall should be reconstructed to match the original features. The original trim is in a variety of conditions: existing and in place, dismantled but accounted for, and missing but documented. This work is noted on the drawings, but not drawn specifically.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board approve the general concept for adapting the banking hall for restaurant use, 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.



Figure 1. Banking hall, north wall. Earliest known photo of interior, 1989



Figure 2. Banking hall, northeast corner, mezzanine and catwalks prior to removal in 2010.

