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

Property Address:	1925 13th Street, NW	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Benjamin Franklin School	X Consent Calendar
		X Concept Review
Meeting Date:	November 16, 2017	X Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	17-667	New Construction
		Demolition

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) and Franklin School Development LLC seek conceptual design review for alterations and rehabilitation of the landmark Franklin School. Plans have been developed by Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners.

The building is owned by the District. In 2015, DMPED issued a solicitation for its redevelopment and the Franklin School Development LLC was selected with the goal of rehabilitating it for the “Planet Word” museum, an institution devoted to promoting the study of words and language. A long-term lease was approved by the DC Council earlier this month, and the museum is seeking to open in 2019.

Property Description

The Franklin School was completed in 1869, and was the “flagship” of a group of seven modern, model schools erected in Washington during and shortly after the Civil War to house and symbolize the city’s first comprehensive system of free universal public education. The three-and-a-half-story masonry building was designed in the German *Rundbögenstil* style by émigré architects Adolf Cluss and Josef von Kammerhuber.¹ The team also designed the extant Sumner School, and Cluss (with Kammerhuber or Paul Schulze) designed other well-known landmarks, such as the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building, Calvary Baptist Church, Eastern Market, Old Masonic Hall, and the Julius Lansburgh Furniture Company building.

Franklin School earned the “Medal of Progress in Education and Architecture” at the 1873 International Exhibition in Vienna and won honors at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and the Paris International Exhibition. It was designated a DC landmark in 1964, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, and elevated to the status of National Historic Landmark in 1996 in recognition of its place in the progress of American public education. Franklin School is arguably the most significant school building in Washington, and retains higher integrity than its contemporary Charles Sumner School. The Board amended the DC Inventory landmark application by designating the interior in 2002.

¹ *Rundbogenstil* was widely introduced by German emigres involved in the design and construction trades, and was extremely influential in Washington’s late 19th century Victorian era architectural development. It was considered a modern style of architecture influenced by the Renaissance but without superfluous detailing, noteworthy for its restrained and purposeful brick detailing.

The five-part plan of the building consists of central, northern, and southern sections connected by stairways, each separated by massive brick bearing walls. The broad, twin stair halls—constructed because of both the building’s size and to segregate the classroom sections by sex—are among the most impressive interior features. The floors within the stairs are of checkerboard black and white marble, with the staircases themselves of cast iron with foliate stringers and balustrades.

The school’s grandest space was the third-story Great Hall, 48 by 66 feet and originally intended as an auditorium to hold up to 1,000 students. Originally frescoed in an architectural *trompe l’oeil* design, the wall finish has been covered and the ceiling dropped, but the sense of the expanse and function of the hall, with its elevated musicians gallery, remains.

Many of the classrooms have retained their general appearance, but there have been a variety of alterations with insertion of office partitions and additional bathrooms, and changes to room openings and finishes. The most important classroom features are the arched transomed door openings. Many of the classrooms retain vertical wood bead board wainscoting or paneling with smooth wall surfaces above. The ceiling on the second story of the southern section has a neoclassical pressed tin ceiling—dating to and best demonstrating the *circa* 1900 remodeling for the school superintendent—but which is extremely deteriorated. There are also early details remaining, such as small display shelves and grilles related to the original and later heating systems. Although not visible to the public, the massive timber-frame roof truss system within the mansard roof is also recognized as part of the interior designation.

Proposal

The project calls for rehabilitation of the building in a manner that is consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. The exterior is in relatively good shape, the result of a comprehensive rehabilitation undertaken in 1991 as the primary amenity offered as part of the planned unit development office building constructed to the east. The exterior scope of repair work will include selective masonry and cast iron repair, reconstruction of the altered front stairs facing 13th Street, and restructuring of the flat roofs flanking the mansard.

To provide an accessible entrance, a new terraced “pocket park” will be created in the rear yard with entrance off K Street. A paneled brick wall closing the rear yard off from K Street would be removed, but has been documented to date from a later than the 1925 end date for the building’s period of significance. Three windows on the rear elevation would be joined into a single pedestrian opening, accessed through a new simple, one-story glass vestibule. Back-of-house storage and staff rooms would be created under the new terrace, but would fully retain the existing outside wall. A terrace would be created on the roof of the school’s north section that would be hidden from street view behind the existing parapet wall, and screened mechanical equipment would be located on the roof of the southern section.

The interior plans call for retaining the five-part plan, with some modification to classroom spaces within each section on the first and second floors where there has already been some plan modifications. Minor additive alterations will be made to the stairs to make their railings code-compliant and to enhance their structure. The Great Hall space would be retained as a

single volume, with the original decorative painting conserved and protected. An event space would be created on a new fourth level within the mansard which would provide access to the roof terrace; the creation of this space would not result in alterations to the original roof truss system. Throughout the primary levels, interior window and door trim would be retained, and a survey is currently underway to identify the original wainscoting and paneling to determine what is salvageable. While the pressed tin ceiling on the second floor is deteriorated beyond repair, other features such as the display shelves and heating grilles will be retained.

Discussions remain on-going with the National Capitol Planning Commission and National Park Service, both of which have review authority due to the building's location and National Historic Landmark status. These discussions are focused on specific details, such as the extent of retention of the interior wainscoting and how best to retain a memory of the interior floor plan where it will be modified, rather than conceptual approaches.

Evaluation

The conceptual plans have been thoughtfully developed to respect and celebrate the character of the landmark, and to retain the important character-defining spaces, features and finishes as recognized in the interior designation. As such, the project is consistent with the preservation act.

As the starting point for the architects' evaluation of the building, it has already been thoroughly laser-scanned to provide a perpetual document of the building's pre-renovation condition. As an additional step, any decorative features -- such as the tin ceiling on the second floor -- that cannot be preserved should adequately photographed prior to their removal.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the conceptual design compatible with the landmark and consistent with the purposes of the preservation act, and delegate final approval to staff.