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

Landmark/District: **Decatur Street Car Barn/Northern Bus Garage** (X) Agenda
Address: **4701 14th Street, NW** () Consent Calendar
Meeting Date: **May 28, 2020** (X) New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers: **20-176** (X) Alteration
(X) Demolition

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), Beyer Blender Belle Architects and Wendel Architects seek conceptual design review for an extensive renovation of the historic Decatur Street Car Barn and its substantial additions. The goal of the project, which includes rehabilitation, demolition and new construction, is to modify the facility so it meets current bus garage standards.

Decatur Street Car Barn

The Decatur Street Car Barn was designed in the Italian Renaissance style by the local architectural firm of Wood, Donn and Deming, and constructed for the Capital Traction Company in 1906-1907. The National Register nomination describes the building as "...a high style and sophisticated piece of architecture...deliberately designed to serve as a company landmark..." Its most prominent façade, which faces 14th Street, resembles a 16th century Italian villa and features a prominent tower, large arched streetcar openings, a long arcade of windows, and decorative stone detailing such as keystones, quoins and belt courses. The building was originally 537 feet by 208 feet and occupied approximately half of its site, but that changed significantly as the carbarn was converted for bus garage use over time.

Bus-related modifications began as early as 1926 when the lower level started being used for bus storage and an addition was constructed on the east side for similar purposes. By 1959, the entire building was converted to a bus garage. WMATA assumed ownership of the property upon its creation in 1967 and substantially expanded the building in 1989-1992 via construction of a large, one-story bus maintenance facility and storage area. This expansion replaced virtually the entire roof of the original building, destroyed a great deal of historic interior fabric, altered the original exterior, and enclosed Decatur Street to provide additional bus egress, thus effectively engulfing the historic car barn in new construction. Upon completion, the bus garage occupied its entire site. However, the historic building still retained sufficient integrity to be designated a DC landmark in 2012 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2013.

Proposal

Substantial renovation is necessary to accommodate WMATA's expanding and modernizing bus fleet. Larger spaces are required to allow 40' and 60' articulated buses to circulate

through the facility; additional clearance is necessary for taller diesel buses and planned overhead charging equipment for electric buses; more service bays and storage areas are needed to meet future needs; and additional space is required to house updated air filtration equipment, solar panels and office space for WMATA employees. In order to meet these project goals, WMATA proposes to gut most of the existing building, reconfigure the interior, and construct new levels above and below.

Evaluation

The proposed extensive modifications will destroy practically all remaining historic interior fabric, the original eastern wall, and the majority of the carbarn's north and south elevations, thus resulting in substantial demolition that is inconsistent with the purposes of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act (Act). To offset this loss, the 14th Street elevation will be largely restored, and portions of the north and south façades will be retained and revealed to express the carbarn's historic configuration.

Restoration of the primary 14th Street elevation will include in-kind replacement of slate roofs, substitution of 1980s windows with historically accurate replacements, removal of brick infill, demolition of a non-historic stair tower, and a variety of standard preservation treatments such as repointing, crack repair and cleaning of the brick facade. The large arched openings that originally provided ingress and egress for streetcars will be glazed with new storefront entries to facilitate adaptive use of former administrative areas for community retail. One of the historic arcade windows will be also be converted to a door to provide additional retail ingress/egress.

On the southern end, new construction will be set back to expose the distinctive rounded corner and two bays of the former streetcar barn as well as the original smokestack that is located just beyond. These features will provide historic interest and offer a sense of the building's original form, especially when viewed from the intersection of 14th and Buchanan Streets. The design of the newly constructed office wing nearer to the intersection has been made compatible with the historic building by echoing the horizontal belt courses and rhythm of its windows, and by using similarly scaled brick that is similar in color to the stone details of the streetcar barn.

To the north, the new stair tower required to provide access to all existing and proposed levels of the facility has been designed as a simple glazed structure that maximizes views to the remaining portions of the historic north façade while the 1980s historicist Decatur Street enclosure has been redesigned as a simple contemporary structure that is clearly distinguishable as new construction.

The newly constructed upper levels, including the anticipated solar arrays, will be sufficiently set back to allow the Decatur Street Carbarn to read like a historic building rather than a mere façade. These new levels will also be positioned far enough to the east to be minimally visible from 14th Street.

Even though the remaining elevations of the bus garage do not adjoin any historic fabric, are not visible from historic portions of the building, and are not located within a historic district, their relationship with the surrounding community could be improved. As the landmark's 14th Street elevation illustrates, it is possible for large-scale industrial buildings to compatibly co-exist with much smaller residential buildings if they have a commensurate scale, materials and detailing. The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) encourages the design team to revise the elevations proposed for Iowa and Arkansas Avenues and for Buchanan Street so that they reflect the smaller residential scale and detailing that are characteristic of the surrounding neighborhood.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- 1. Acknowledge that extensive renovations are necessary to meet project goals;*
- 2. Find that those aspects of the proposed concept relating to restoration of the 14th elevation and preservation of portions of the northern and southern elevations are appropriate for the historic Decatur Street Car barn;*
- 3. Find the proposed demolition of remaining historic fabric inconsistent with the purposes of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act, and recommend that the case proceed to the Mayor's Agent for review; and*
- 4. If the Mayor's Agent determines that the project is found to constitute a project of special merit and/or consistent with the Act, request that the Mayor's Agent direct the applicants to return to HPO for further design review to ensure final plans include an appropriate scope of preservation and restoration work to offset the loss of historic fabric.*

Staff Contact: Andrew Lewis