
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-01

Corcoran Gallery of Art amendment (interior)

1700 New York Avenue/500 17th Street/1701 E Street NW
Square 2891, Lot 823

Meeting Date: March 26, 2015
Applicants: D.C. Preservation League and Save the Corcoran

Affected ANC: 2A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate portions of the interior of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, thus amending the property’s landmark designation in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the Board request the State Historic Preservation Officer to forward the amendment to the National Register of Historic Places as information to supplement the previous nominations and listing of the property.

Like the exterior—or, rather, in concert with the exterior—the interior merits designation under District of Columbia designation Criteria A and B and National Register Criterion A for its association with the institution of the Corcoran gallery and school, their contributions to the culture of the city and nation, and the shows, exhibits and other events that punctuated its history. While the most important spaces were public ones, there are also a boardroom and library that are fine and intact and intimately connected to the history of the administration of the institution.

The interior also merits designation under District Criteria D, E and F and National Register Criterion C for “embody[ing] the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values,” especially for being an excellent, very early, and monumental Beaux-Arts work of architecture by Ernest Flagg employing restrained Néo-Grec ornament. It is also important for its complementary addition by Charles Adams Platt, which included a Pantheon-inspired rotunda, mansion-like rooms, and French-inflected galleries to house a collection that incorporated an earlier architectural triumph, the neoclassical Salon Doré.

Background

The Corcoran Gallery of Art was completed in 1897 to house the collection of its late namesake, banker and philanthropist William Wilson Corcoran, as it outgrew its previous home at what is now known as the Renwick Gallery. The Beaux Arts and Néo-Grec museum and art school was designed by New York architect Ernest Flagg, who had practiced architecture even before a sojourn at the École des Beaux-Arts in his mid twenties.

Flagg is best known for the 47-story 1908 Singer Building, then the tallest in the world (he also designed a summer castle in the Thousand Islands for Singer's president). He also designed two successive Beaux-Arts headquarters for publishing house Charles Scribner's Sons (1893 and 1913). Flagg's Corcoran building was acclaimed for its elegant monumentality, the clarity of its plan, and the extensive use of natural light. It is notable for being on the cutting edge of the classical revival in the mid 1890s. The influence of Flagg's museum design can be seen, for instance, in the plan, interior columns, coffered ceilings and lay lights of the Grand Staircase, Hall of Architecture and Hall of Sculpture at Pittsburgh's 1907 Carnegie Museum of Art.

Flagg's work is most remarkable for its grand sequence of spaces, from entry vestibule through the monumental, columned, two-story atrium and grand stair serving a variety of galleries on the first floor and soaring rooms on the second. Calculated to show even huge works to their best advantage, the spaces are architectural works of art themselves.

One of the interesting features of Flagg's plan was the curved Hemicycle at the building's north end which resolved an acute angle formed by the intersection of New York Avenue and 17th Street and connected the museum and art school spaces and uses. Early on, it served as gallery and performance space, but in 1915, the Corcoran commissioned prominent Washington architect Waddy Wood to insert a floor to divide the two-story-high space in order to provide additional exhibit space upstairs and to address issues of light and acoustics below. The first-floor space has since been used as an auditorium, but most of its elements and finishes are recent.

As the premier arts space in Washington prior to the opening of the National Gallery of Art, the Corcoran continued to draw donations of both funds and art works and soon found itself again expanding gallery and storage space. The catalyst was the bequest of the collection of industrialist and former U.S. senator William A. Clark. Clark had stipulated that his collection be displayed in its entirety. For a compatible addition, the Corcoran engaged Charles Adams Platt, another prominent New York architect, perhaps best known in Washington for his design for the Freer Gallery of Art. The 1925 Clark Wing essentially extended westward Flagg's relatively simple south elevation of the building, departing a bit from the original window treatment. Its interior was given a domestic feeling in contrast to the original building, albeit with the scale and finishes of a mansion, said to be inspired by Clark's Manhattan home. The wing was suited to his collection, as it incorporated wholesale the salon of Louis XVI-era Parisian nobility and the portraiture and genre paintings commissioned by the affluent Dutch bourgeoisie. The beautiful sequence of Flagg's spaces presented a challenge to the connection of the structures; Platt resolved potentially one awkward link at the landing of Flagg's grand stair with the creation of the Roman-inspired Rotunda, at once a temple and an entry foyer. Beyond that, a paneled stair landing connects the three levels of the wing; above, French-inspired cove-ceilinged galleries, and below, the Salon Doré and its approach, with small side galleries arranged around fireplaces.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art was designated by the Joint Committee on Landmarks in 1964 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. With a fuller nomination, the Corcoran was elevated to National Historic Landmark status in 1992. Both nominations cataloged the museum's interior spaces and features to differing degrees, but D.C. landmark designation was not then sought. The present application seeks to amend the District of Columbia landmark

designation of the property, as well as to supplement the information associated with its National Register listing.¹

Implications of designation

To put the proposed designation into context, it is worthwhile to consider what its practical implications would be. First, it makes permit applications for the designated spaces subject to review under the preservation law. Beyond the idea that alterations should be compatible, designation says nothing specific about the treatment of any particular space, and there are no specific proposals that have been submitted. While designation is about retaining important characteristics, it does not freeze properties as they are. If anything, the preservation law's other mission of adapting properties to modern use is even more applicable to interiors.

Second, designation of a portion of an interior does not generate new permit applications; the building code requirements for permits remain the same. While the building code requires a pretty broad list of projects to be permitted, it also exempts many types of interior work.² Further, it is unlikely that the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs will alter its practice of not referring to the Historic Preservation Office applications for isolated mechanical, electrical and plumbing projects. The present level of designation already brings the regulation of the outer walls and exterior features (including the light court), the site, subdivisions, and structural demolition. The addition of interior designated elements may, in certain instances, provide additional flexibility to an owner, as designation allows exemptions from the Energy Conservation Code and the allowance of alternative standards for other construction codes issues.

The HPO has discussed with the property owner the idea of developing design guidelines for interior alterations, but this was not pursued. It is understandable, because developing such guidelines is time-consuming, and it is difficult to anticipate all types of future projects. In addition to continuing to meet the requirements for the exhibition of art works, the building is going to require adaptation for ADA accessibility, additional bathrooms, more classroom and studio space, and perhaps additional office space. The HPO recognizes that this means partitions, systems interventions, and other alterations, and it is anticipated that these can be accommodated reasonably and compatibly. HPO and the property owner also considered cataloging important feature elements throughout the building, but concluded instead to focus on the most important and mostly intact rooms. The historically significant rooms are important for the proportions of their space and their natural illumination, of course, but also for certain

¹ The nomination notes that the building exterior was listed in the National Register in the 1990s. However, the 1992 listing was as a National Historic Landmark (NHL), whereas the property had already been listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. These Park Service designations do not separate interior from exterior; an entire property is listed. The nominations described the building in as much detail inside as out, certainly with the implication that the interior contributes to its significance. In any instance, the Register is interested at least a property's level of integrity throughout. While listing in the National Register or as a National Historic Landmark is principally honorary, reviews of listed federal projects or historic tax credit rehabilitations include the treatment of important interior spaces and features. The bifurcation of interior and exterior occurs at the local level, as the District's preservation law permits significant interiors to be designated as part of a landmark, but a landmark application must specifically request interior designation and most applications do not.

² 12 DCMR § 105.2 exempts "caulking, patching and plaster repair of non-rated assemblies... painting other than fire-retardant paint... papering, tiling, carpeting, floor covering, cabinets, countertops and similar finish work... non-rated suspended ceiling tile... not more than 160 square feet (14.9 m²) of gypsum board... movable fixtures, cases, racks, counters and partitions not over five feet nine inches (1753 mm) in height..." and many kinds of simple electrical, gas, mechanical and plumbing installations, repairs and replacements.

elements. Some rooms retain nearly all original elements intact, but many galleries are most notable for their cornices and ceilings (including lay lights, coves and grilles), with the mostly blank walls punctured, patched and painted many times over the decades.

Evaluation

Most of the interior of the Corcoran Gallery of Art was designed to be publicly accessible spaces, commensurate with the qualities of its exterior, and suited to the character of the art to be displayed. The beauty and historical significance of the vestibule, atrium, grand stair, rotunda and Salon Doré probably need no further discussion, as they have been so extensively documented elsewhere, including this nomination and the NHL nomination. The quality of the Clark Wing staircase and its necessity as both physical link and transition in feeling from the monumental to the more intimate spaces make it integral to the building.

Identifying what are clearly the foremost spaces does not necessarily end the discussion. Interior designation does not mean that each space must be eligible for landmark status in isolation, any more than exterior designation requires each exterior element—roof, walls, porch—to be individually eligible. But the intention is to designate and protect (as well as adapt) the more important spaces, while recognizing that the whole may be more than the sum of the parts, and that the relationships between the spaces can be important, too. Beyond the atrium, consider the axial relationship of the second-floor front galleries, or that of the approach to the Salon Doré, or the transition between the Clark stair hall and the galleries. The second-floor galleries in the Clark Wing do not have the same clear axial views and flow that Flagg's do, but as a group they demonstrate the careful working out of the proportions of each room, so that their heights vary in relation to their length.

Most of the galleries are fine rooms as originally conceived and remain largely intact. There is a rough hierarchy to the galleries in terms of architectural significance, but a precise ordering is difficult and probably a matter of taste. Foremost, however, would have to be the immensely tall front galleries on the second story, which could be said to be the proper termination of the sequence through the original building that begins at the main entrance. At the other end of the spectrum of scale are the intimate first-floor galleries in the Clark Wing which, even lacking their paintings, are lovely, adaptable, and say something important about the evolution of the museum. These and the boardroom and library are fine spaces representing significant aspects of the institution's history and development. They should not be excluded just because they may not evoke the same sense of splendor.

The argument has been offered that designating several similar galleries—such as the second-story ones in the Clark Wing—is unnecessary as each represents diminishing marginal utility in expressing the interior's character. There is something to be said for this argument, as the number of similar spaces diminishes the individual distinctiveness of each. Yet, it does not reduce their significance relative to each other. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that one or more is truly redundant.

In the main, the HPO concurs with the nomination's proposed plan of spaces to be designated for the reasons stated above and in the nomination, with the exception of particular spaces with which there are issues of integrity. This evaluation is intended to be consistent with the manner in which exteriors are considered for designation, namely that spaces be looked at as they stand today, and not as they might be restored in the future. Historic integrity is as important for

interiors as exteriors, and designation does not require, nor necessarily bring about, the restoration of spaces that have integrity issues.

For that reason, it is recommended that the following spaces be removed from the designation plan proposed by the nomination (see the shaded plans in the nomination's illustrations):

- The entire basement. While the central columned space was once important architecturally the space has long been carved up with partitions. It certainly could be a great space again, because the columns are structural and unlikely to be removed. The same could be said for the columns in the Hemicycle, and its basement space and the nearby studios are spare, utilitarian, and somewhat altered. Remaining window openings are already protected by the exterior designation.
- The four galleries at the southeast corner of the first floor. While these retain window and door surrounds, bases and cornices, they have long been subdivided into offices, affecting the feeling of the spaces, the memory of them as galleries, and to some extent, the physical features.
- The first-floor auditorium in the Hemicycle. Again, the columns and raked floor are structural, but the remainder of the elements and finishes are modern.
- The two first-floor galleries at northwest corner of the Atrium. Among the least interesting galleries, one has been altered to serve as an exhibit space for the art school, and the other recently had its window openings sealed with the construction of the abutting office addition.
- Gallery 2 in the second floor of the Clark Wing, which has been used for storage for many years, *if and only if*, there has been an agreement that the ceiling mural is to be removed (as are the stained-glass windows in this room and another in the alcove along the light court). As the principal feature of that room, its loss would compromise the integrity of that space.

It is also recommended that two spaces be included in the designation:

- The first floor of the main staircase in the Clark Wing. This omission is likely the result of an unintended error in the submitted floor plan which shows the stair shaded on the second-floor plan but not the first. The first floor run should be added, as it is difficult to imagine the upper portion of the stair hall without the lower.
- The secondary stair at the north end of the atrium. This handsomely designed and intact stair, with marble treads and decorative ironwork, was suggested for inclusion by the property owner's team and merits inclusion.

Period of Significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance stretching from the completion of the building in 1897 to the year 1987. The HPO recommends that the terminal date remain 1942, the date chosen for the NHL listing in 1992, to avoid having to request of the NHL staff an amendment that may serve little purpose.

The NHL employed the National Register's 50-year rule in order to divide the property's "historical" era from its "modern" one. The 50-year rule is somewhat arbitrary and not always useful, but is sufficiently worthwhile in this instance. The nomination's suggested date of 1987 corresponds to a well-reviewed—but now long-dismounted—installation in the Rotunda, and

while it can be appreciated that the date is intended to honor the continuing history and evolution of the institution, it may be more appropriate at some point to recognize a period of significance that extends to the end date of the Corcoran's operations. However, such a determination seems premature at this time and counter to standard preservation practice of encouraging the passage of sufficient time to evaluate historical significance.

Periods of significance are intended not only to provide distance and perspective for evaluation, but to guide the treatment of properties. The nomination appropriately acknowledges that the essential character-defining spaces and features are largely intact to their period of construction, whether to the initial construction campaign, the Wood remodeling, or the construction of Clark Wing, all predating 1942. For this reason, there is not a compelling reason to alter the NHL's period of significance.