
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-09

National Presbyterian Church complex

4101 and 4125 Nebraska Avenue NW and 4120 and 4124 Van Ness Street NW
Square 1724, Part of Lot 805

Meeting Date: September 26, 2019
Applicant: National Presbyterian Church
Affected ANC: 3D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the National Presbyterian Church complex as a Historic Landmark to be entered into the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites under DC designation criteria B, D and F with a Period of Significance from 1927 to 1969. HPO also recommends that the nomination be revised and forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criteria A and C.

The National Presbyterian Church (NPC), at the intersection of Nebraska Avenue and Van Ness Street, consists of a striking, mid-Century modern neo-Gothic church building and bell tower set back from Nebraska Avenue and dominating a complex of four older Tudor Revival-style cottages that historically formed the core of the Washington City Orphan Asylum known as Hillcrest. The orphan asylum, designed and built in 1926-27, occupied the site until the National Presbyterian Church purchased the property in 1966. NPC renovated the former orphanage buildings for its own use, while introducing the new and architecturally notable church building and bell tower, along with a chapel, and a re-organized site plan, including a formal landscaped forecourt that replaced an outdoor plaza and play space. While the Hillcrest buildings represent an important early Washington, D.C. institution, the church and its bell tower are an architecturally significant example of mid-Century modernism.

History and Architecture

The National Presbyterian Church traces its Washington roots to the late 18th century when, as tradition holds, Scottish masons and stonecutters building the White House gathered on the grounds to worship. By 1795, the congregation had grown large enough to install the Rev. John Brackenridge as the first ordained Presbyterian minister to serve a congregation in the city. Initially called St. Andrew's, the church was formally organized as First Presbyterian Church in 1811 and began construction of its first church building at South Capitol and B Streets. In 1827, as membership grew, the church built a new and impressive church on 4½ Street (today's John Marshall Place) at Judiciary Square. The congregation remained on that site for 100 years until the site was purchased as part of the government's plans to develop a Municipal Center complex for the District. At that time, the First Presbyterian congregation merged with another Presbyterian church in Washington, the Church of the Covenant, organized in 1885. A long-held desire within the Presbyterian church to establish a national Presbyterian Church in Washington encouraged the merging of the two congregations. By then, a commission, established in 1924

with the purpose of developing a national church, had already been raising funds to build a new national church building, and had commissioned nationally known architect Ralph Adams Cram to design it on a site at Connecticut Avenue and Calvert Street (present site of the Shoreham Hotel) in Woodley Park. However, the fundraising campaign was years away from its goal as the country entered into the Great Depression, and the plans to build the Cram-designed building were thwarted. In 1947, the combined congregation (which worshipped in the Romanesque Revival-style Church of the Covenant at 18th and N Streets NW) was officially established as the National Presbyterian Church. Finally, a major fundraising effort in the 1960s allowed NPC to purchase the 12.4-acre site that had been home to Hillcrest, and to plan for a church, education center, and offices on the site.

Chartered by Congress in 1824, the Washington City Orphan Asylum (re-named Hillcrest in 1927) was founded by a group of socially prominent women to address the needs of the city's growing orphan population. In the pre-Civil War years, the asylum saw many homes, including two purpose-built ones. During the War, William Corcoran donated a large lot at the corner of 14th and S Streets for construction of a new building, but before it was completed, the site and building were taken over by the federal government for use by the Department of State. The asylum finally moved into the building in 1876 and remained there for the next fifty years. During the 1920s, the institution sought to better serve the needs of its children, and with the help of a sizeable donation, purchased the tract of land at Nebraska Avenue and Van Ness Street, and hired architect Appleton P. Clarke, Jr. to design a new complex. Clarke was well-prepared for the task and introduced a philosophically avant-garde design scheme that consisted of a series of seven Tudor Revival-style stone cottages (only four were built) that were domestic, rather than institutional, in scale and character. Clarke worked with landscape architects Horace Peaslee and Rose Greely on the grading plan and road network for the wooded site, so that the individual buildings were arranged in a broad U-shape with an open space and plaza forming a cross-axis at the interior of the U-shaped plan. Indeed, the four individual Tudor Revival-style cottages that were constructed were consistent with the suburban domestic architecture of the city's emerging suburbs in the vicinity. This small-scale, domestic model served the institution for several decades.

Upon its purchase of the Hillcrest site in 1966, NPC commissioned architect Harold E. Wagoner, who specialized in religious buildings, to design the church center. Wagoner, who was stylistically versatile, introduced highly modern elements into the existing building complex, clearly distinguishing the National Presbyterian Church buildings from the more traditional, revival-style Hillcrest ones. The spare and sculptural church building designed in a Modernist Neo-Gothic expression is characterized by its smooth limestone-clad walls with tall and tightly arranged, attenuated lancet windows extruding from the western front elevation and the northern and southern transept ends. The magnificent "illuminated wall decorations" within the lancet windows and elsewhere consist of 53 faceted glass windows custom-designed for the building by Willett Studios of Philadelphia; 18 stained-glass windows manufactured by Tiffany Glass and Booth Glass for the Church of The Covenant and re-used at NCP; and two other stained-glass windows designed by international artists. The Willett windows are exceptional for their rich and radiant colors that cast about the sanctuary making the church a "place of art as well as a place of prayer."

The soaring bell tower that stands in front of and rises higher than the church, is a well-recognized visual landmark in the city (currently under scaffolding). At 173 feet, the sculptural tower is unadorned for much of its shaft until being pierced by lancet-shaped openings towards the top of the pier and in the bell tower itself which rises sharply out of the base.

The historic landmark application notes that Wagoner worked with landscape architect Boris V. Timchenko on the project, presumably on the design of the sunken forecourt with its central fountain between the church and Nebraska Avenue. Two memorial wall structures are located north and south of this fountain.

Evaluation

The National Presbyterian Church complex is eligible for listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites under Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism) and F (Creative Masters). The property meets D.C. Designation Criterion B because the Washington City Orphan Asylum (Hillcrest) represents an early Washington institution associated with a social movement that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture and development of the city. In addition, the property meets Criterion B because NPC is associated with the national church movement in the District.

The property meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) because Hillcrest embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a building type (children's orphanage), and the National Presbyterian Church embodies the distinguishing characteristics of style in that it provides an excellent expression of mid-Century Modern design.

The property meets D.C. Designation Criterion F, for Creative Masters, as both Hillcrest and NPC are notable works of architects (Appleton P. Clark, Jr. and Harold E. Wagoner). The application includes a biography on Boris V. Temchenko, but as his role in the project has not been clearly defined, he is not included under Criterion F. Similarly, it is not clear that much of the Horace Peaslee and Rose Greely landscape plan survives, so they are not being included under this criterion either.

For the above reasons, the property also meets National Register Criteria A and C. The nomination suggests that the property could be considered eligible at the national level of significance, but as no argument has been made for national-level significance, the local level of significance holds.

Period of Significance

The Period of Significance extends from completion of Hillcrest in 1927 to the completion of the National Presbyterian Church complex in 1969.

Boundaries

The proposed boundaries include part of Lot 805 in Square 1724 and comprise the principal buildings, designed landscapes and grounds of the National Presbyterian Church property. The boundaries exclude the parking lot to the east of the complex and a frame house that was historically part of the Hillcrest institution, but is not stylistically consistent with it, and was not part of the original design scheme of Appleton P. Clarke, Jr.

Integrity

The National Presbyterian Church complex retains high integrity to both its 1926-1927 and 1967-69 building campaigns. The National Presbyterian Church was built into the existing Hillcrest campus, leaving the original buildings, their plan, materials, character-defining details, feeling and association intact. A significant addition connects the two southernmost cottages, but the addition does not detract from the character of the original cottages and they can still be read as independent buildings. The National Presbyterian Church building, and its associated elements, have been little altered and retain high integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board designate the National Presbyterian Church a DC Landmark and that the National Register nomination be revised and enhanced to meet the National Register Guidelines, and then be forwarded to the National Register. HPO will work with the applicant on the preparation of revised nomination to include more clarity on the chronology of the buildings and any additions, landscape features and elements of both Hillcrest and NCP and the contributing/non-contributing status.

HPO would support an argument for national-level significance should the applicant choose to make a case for it. NPC is a national church and its architecture notable, so could well qualify. However, a historic context of the national church movement and/or mid-century Modern ecclesiastical design on the national level would be critical for making the case.

