
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 18-16
Folger Shakespeare Memorial Library (Amendment and Interior)
201 East Capitol Street SE
Square 0760 Lot 0031

Meeting Date: December 20, 2018
Applicant: Folger Shakespeare Library
Affected ANC: 6B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board amend the Historic Landmark designation of the Folger Shakespeare Library to include the additional documentation provided in this amendment, and to designate the following interior spaces of the building: the East Lobby; the Theater; the Exhibition Gallery; the Reading Room; and part of the West Wing including the West Lobby; the Main Stair; the Registrar Room; the West Corridor; and Founder's Room as described and illustrated in the nomination. HPO recommends that the amended nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance with a Period of Significance of 1929-1932.

Preservation Background

The Folger Shakespeare Library at 201 East Capitol Street SE was designated as a D.C. Landmark by the Joint Committee of Landmarks in 1964 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1969 with a Period of Significance of 1929-1932. The Folger Library building is also a contributing resource in the Capitol Hill Historic District. This amended nomination, submitted by the Folger Shakespeare Memorial Library in September 2018, is one of two amendments currently pending for the property. The other amendment, submitted by the D.C. Preservation League in March 2017 with a more expansive period of significance, will remain pending until such time as a hearing is triggered or is desired by the applicant or owner.

History and Architecture

The Folger Shakespeare Library is a marble-clad, Stripped Classical-style gem of a building prominently located on East Capitol Street, one block east of the U.S. Capitol Grounds. The building, completed in 1932 to house the renowned Shakespeareana collection of Henry Clay and Emily Jordan Folger, was designed by Paul Phillipe Cret with Alexander B. Trowbridge serving as consulting architect. The building is widely considered exceptional in design both inside and out for its Stripped Classical exterior, and its extraordinary and highly crafted Tudor and Jacobean Revival interiors. This juxtaposition was deliberately realized by the designers to reconcile the library's location near the Capitol and other federal buildings on Capitol Hill and to fulfill the Folger's vision of the building as a monument to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan era.

The Folger Shakespeare Library was conceived and funded by the Folgers who tapped their Standard-oil-earned fortune and spent their entire married life collecting books and other material either by William Shakespeare or related to the period of his life in an effort to make it

available to the public. At the time of its opening in 1932, the Shakespeare Library building housed over 90,000 volumes. The building also included a theater, designed in the “general Elizabethan style,” for the production of Shakespeare’s plays in an authentic stage setting, as well as for lectures and concerts. Despite this intention, the Theater was not permitted to be used as a regular performance space due to fire code restrictions until 1970 when fire prevention strategies were undertaken and the restrictions were lifted.

The long, three-story building, covered with a flat roof concealed by a low parapet is characterized on the exterior by its smooth, white marble walls which are divided into bays by long and narrow windows with Art Deco-inspired aluminum grilles separated by fluted pilasters and set atop carved stone spandrels. These panels, sculpted by sculptor John Gregory, depict scenes from Shakespeare plays. On East Capitol Street, entry doors located at either end of the façade are set within delicate reveals with carved bas reliefs between the top of door opening and its surround. A wide marble architrave capping the building is bounded at the bottom by a decorative band with sunk-relief lotus motif and at the top by a fluted cap. Quotes and inscriptions are found across the building. The building was originally U-shaped in plan with an open courtyard at the rear; in 1958, a one-story addition was built filling in this court and in 1983, another addition was constructed over it. On the west side of the building is a marble fountain atop which is an aluminum reproduction of the marble sculpture of Puck designed by Brenda Putnam for this location.

The Stripped Classical white stone exterior belies the rich and highly ornamental wood interiors reflecting the architectural interior styles of the Tudor and Jacobean periods (1485-1625). As noted in the nomination, the authentic period-inspired interior gives the visitor the sense of visiting the world of Shakespeare. On the interior, the Folgers wanted the building to be primarily devoted to the library while also containing spaces for exhibitions and a theater. The interior was thus divided into three zones corresponding with these uses. The Exhibition Gallery and Reading Room span the main block of the building, while the theater occupies most of the eastern wing of the building. The western wing provides the Founder’s Room, a suite for use by the governing board, the Registrar’s Room, Main Stair, service rooms and storage areas. All of these principal and ancillary spaces are thoroughly described and illustrated in the nomination.

Construction of the Folger began in 1929 and the completed building dedicated on April 23, 1932, the anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth. Upon its opening, the library was highly praised by the public and architectural critics who recognized it both for its architectural beauty and the significant contribution that its collection made to Washington. From the outset, the Folger launched itself as an internationally renowned institution for the study of Shakespeare and Renaissance Europe, and it has continued to pursue that mission through programming and continued acquisitions.

In 1959, the Folger conducted a renovation of the library and added a rear addition that provided a combination of offices and storage areas. By the 1970s, the enormous growth of the collections prompted the Folger to examine opportunities for continued expansion. In 1978, the architectural firm of Hartman-Cox was commissioned to design an expansion to the Reading Room; completed in 1983, the new Reading Room, known as the Bond Memorial Reading Room, was constructed in the court of the original U-shaped building where an external steel

frame supports the structure over the 1958 addition. The highly engineered structure encloses a spare barrel-vaulted space reflecting a Post-Modern classical aesthetic on the interior.

Evaluation

The Folger Shakespeare Library meets National Register Criterion A in the areas of Literature, Performing Arts, and Social History; and National Register Criterion C in the area of Architecture. It is also significant under the corresponding D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites Criteria B, D, E, and F. The interior spaces outlined in the pending nomination are extraordinary and fundamental to the building's history and character, and it is appropriate that they be acknowledged as such in amended National Register and DC Inventory designations.

The Folger Shakespeare Library meets National Register Criterion A as an institution built to house the book and rare manuscript collection of Henry C. and Emily J. Folger. The Folgers conceived the library as a way to open their vast collection to the public, at the same time that it allowed the public and scholars to be visually immersed in the world of Shakespeare. The Folger Shakespeare Library became an institution of great importance to national and international study of Shakespeare immediately upon its opening, a position that it has retained over time. It currently holds the world's largest collection of Shakespeare material, ranging from the sixteenth century to the present, as well as a world-renowned collection of books, manuscripts, and prints from Renaissance Europe.

The Folger Shakespeare Library meets National Register Criterion C as an excellent example of the work of architect Paul Philippe Cret. Cret was trained at the École des Beaux Arts in Lyon and Paris but made a marked departure from the highly decorative Beaux-Arts style when he began to design buildings with simpler form and less ornamentation. This style, which Cret termed "New Classicism," is commonly referred to today as Stripped Classicism. The Folger Library is not only among the most outstanding of Cret's designs, it is also an outstanding example of the Stripped Classical style.

More notably, the Folger Library is architecturally unparalleled for its combination of a Stripped Classical exterior with a Tudor and Jacobean Revival interior. The rich detail of the interior, which includes oak paneling, stained glass, and art tile, is exceptional. The interior spaces that are within the Period of Significance and considered significant and thus included in the landmark designation include the East and West Lobbies, the Theatre, the Exhibition Gallery, the Reading Room, the Registrar's Room, the West Corridor, and the Founder's Room. These spaces, embellished with the contributions of decorative artists and craftsmen, are distinguished by their original appearance and high level of detail, specifically intended to provide scholars and visitors with a complete and authentic experience of the work of Shakespeare and his times.

As proposed in this amendment, the period of significance for the building, currently 1928-1932, would remain the same as the date range coincides with the original planning, design, and construction of the building. As argued in this amendment, this period of significance provides an appropriate manifestation of the vision of the Folgers and their architects. However, the Folger has continued to serve as an important cultural institution through the present day and an expanded period of significance should be evaluated in the future. The second amendment to the

Folger Library on-file with HPO indeed proposes such a period of significance with an end-date of 1983 to encompass the 1983 addition to the building. With more passage of time and an end-date of significance that is greater than 50 years, there will be greater perspective and opportunity to evaluate this addition and the continued significance of the legacy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.