
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-05

Lansburgh Park

1098 Delaware Avenue SW

Square 593, Lots 50, 51, 822-826; Square 595, Lot 810; Square 645, Lot 816;
Square 654W, Lot 808; and Square 647, Lot 803

Meeting Date: October 26, 2023
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 6D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board *not* designate Lansburgh Park, Delaware Avenue SW between I and M streets, a historic landmark, nor request the forwarding of the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing.

The nomination is a good one, but perhaps it overestimates the park's significance and historic integrity. Importantly, the nomination lacks the context of Southwest's other parks.

As stated in the nomination, in 2020, the State Historic Preservation Officer determined the core of the park—the area of the Modernist pavilions—eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, but not necessarily as a standalone landmark, but rather as a resource contributing to the character of this park, to the system of public parks in Southwest and elsewhere and, perhaps most important, to the entire Southwest neighborhood and redevelopment area. It is an element of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The idea for the park is nearly as old as that of Southwest redevelopment itself. Public open space and private, common open space were central elements of the various Southwest plans, although their realization lagged the construction of housing and other uses.

Laid out in 1964, Lansburgh Park was the first completed within the Southwest Redevelopment Area. It was designed by National Park Service landscape architect LeRoy D. "Lee" Skillman, who expressed some frustration with conflicts among the many government agencies involved in the planning. Like others among the Southwest parks, Lansburgh Park was initially intended to provide play space for an existing, adjacent elementary school (Bowen), but as its plan developed, it was geared instead toward passive recreation for the elderly and a play space for preschool children. Thus, the parcel's center is essentially a room, reached from north and south via narrow, green appendages between buildings, and bounded by a brick wall along the east boundary and a berm screening it from Delaware Avenue. This earthwork itself is an interesting feature in an otherwise flat, alluvial plain. East of this hillock was a small playground area, removed in 1979, and the park's central focal point, the vault-roofed pavilions for concerts, picnics, etc.

The four, separate pavilions, with their groin-vaulted metal roofs supported on steel posts, was the second concept for a shade structure. The first seems to have been a single pavilion with colored fiberglass roofing, supported or ceiled with wood as an organic visual counterpoint to the steel posts and concrete paving. The realized alternative may have been selected for lesser cost, initial or continuing, but it resonated with the refashioned Southwest, and its leitmotifs of vault forms and freestanding pavilions at River Park, Capitol Park, and Town Square. This vocabulary and the minimalist open space tie the park to the larger neighborhood, reinforcing its role as part of a greater whole.

One of the shortcomings of the nomination is the lack of sufficient context for Lansburgh Park within the entire park system for near Southwest.¹ Such context is important for understanding its role within the larger organism and for comparing the elements of each landscape for their importance, innovation, scarcity, success, integrity, etc. We should appreciate both significant “moments” in the parks and their larger-scale relationships and contributions. The nomination points to the importance of the park in the larger Southwest Redevelopment Plan, so it is worth considering the park in light of that plan, and as illustrative of the competing interests that fed into and sometimes failed that plan’s formulation, and that altered the park in the years since. While the pavilions have enduring significance as architecture in the landscape, one can imagine that the park’s core might have had the energy of a great, urban park had it been surrounded by housing, instead of institutional uses. But other portions of the park are pedestrian in both senses of the word. Without signage, the northern and southern approaches between buildings would not be recognizable as a park. One can appreciate the geometry and Modern-minimalism of parallel rows of trees along the walks, but they are not 60-year-old trees,² and they do not engage or draw a visitor with the drama of an allée. HPO’s determination of eligibility acknowledged that the north-south axis recalls the alignment of the closed I Street, but only imperfectly.³ And the area west of the berm appears to have been principally lawn and trees before its more recent alterations.

The concepts of historic significance and historic integrity are closely related, because the first refers to the importance of a resource, and the second to *how good an example* of an important thing it remains. Within a decade and a half of its creation, Lansburgh Park was showing its age. Suffering from deferred maintenance, the property was turned over to the District of Columbia. There was no cause to consider the park historic at that early date, and it was naturally adapted to accommodate other needs. The basketball courts off Delaware Avenue date to 1980 and a rehabilitation that commenced the previous year, responsible, among other things, for removing the original preschool play equipment. This was an innovation that reduced the greensward and diverged from the initial concept of passive recreation. Most of the concrete remains along the original walks, but the area around the pavilions has been repaved. The platform or stage beneath one pavilion has been modified by the addition of an ADA ramp in a different concrete. Three of the original concrete tables remain (with replacement tops, of course) under the two northern

¹ The Southwest redevelopment area is obviously eligible as a historic district, but it seems unlikely at present that that would come to pass. But a piecemeal approach to designation results in anomalies like *parts* of Capitol Park being designated, but not River Park, and Town Center East, but not its twin, Town Center West. Perhaps a gradualist approach is necessary as a practical matter, but a broader view, context, and level of analysis is called for.

² The trees between the police station and the Department of Motor Vehicles were planted six or seven years ago. The trees outside the park’s northeast boundary appear more mature than those within.

³ The main north-south walk is not on the center line of I Street, and the north and south legs of the park are of different widths, neither fully aligning with the former edges of the right of way.

pavilions. Otherwise, the furniture and grills have been replaced or added. The bollards along the west side of the pavilions appear to be original. The retaining walls around the play area are recent. An enclosure was added for a dog park near the basketball courts in 2014. A community garden was added in 2012-2013 near the basketball courts, and it is creeping up the west slope of the berm.

There was a reason, then, that the HPO determination of eligibility focused on the pavilions themselves. The Cultural Landscape Foundation's webpage on the park similarly highlights the pavilion and the adjacent sunken play area, not because it is damning the overall park with faint praise, but because it simply describes it as it is. Both sources honor the crucial features of Lansburgh Park, the pavilions, for reasons of both significance and integrity.

Just as a determination of eligibility is not tantamount to landmark status, neither does a refusal to landmark a property necessarily leave it without protection. Section 9b of the preservation law was enacted to take into account the effect of District agency undertakings upon historic properties. It is the reason for the determination of eligibility, and it shall remain in effect as further alterations to the park are considered, requiring HPO consultation and, when appropriate, HPRB review.