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

Property Address:	1600 21st Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Phillips Collection		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	November 20/December 4, 2014	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	15-054	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		New Construction
			Demolition
			Subdivision

Architect Cal Bowie (Bowie Gridley Architects), representing the Phillips Collection, seeks conceptual design review for constructing a rooftop penthouse to enclose new and expanded heating and air conditioning mechanical units. The enclosure would be visible from surrounding public streets.

Property History and Description

The Phillips Collection building complex is the result of numerous building campaigns, alterations and additions (helpfully illustrated in the applicant’s submission “House Expansion History”). Its original core is the 3-1/2 story red brick and terra cotta house built in 1896 by Duncan Clinch Phillips, a Pittsburgh glass manufacturer, and Eliza Laughlin Phillips, the daughter of the founder of Jones & Laughlin Steel. The original house and some of its subsequent additions were designed by the prominent Washington architectural firm of Hornblower and Marshall. Alterations began just a few years after the house was built, with construction of a mansard roof and dormers around 1901, a rear wing in 1907, and a second floor to the wing in 1917.

Following the death of his father and brother in 1917, Duncan Phillips (the son of Duncan Clinch Phillips) and his mother founded a memorial art gallery. The house was opened to the public in 1921, with subsequent alterations made during the 1920s to accommodate the growing collection and public use. The Phillips family moved out of the house in 1930 so that it could be used entirely for museum purposes. In the early 1930s, contemporaneous with an art school opening in the fourth floor, a prominent gable skylight was added to the southern section of the roof. Neighboring houses were bought and replaced with a three-story addition in 1959-60, connected over the alley with an enclosed bridge. In the 1980s, the Board approved mansard roofs on the 1907 wing and the 1959 addition, and in the 1990s the Board approved a refacing of the 1959 wing and expansion of the museum into an adjacent apartment building.

Despite so many alterations and additions, the Phillips Collection illustrates a pleasing urban complexity and cohesiveness that is a result of careful attention to design, materials and scale. The property is located in the Dupont Circle and Massachusetts Avenue Historic Districts, and is a landmark listed in the DC Inventory and the National Register.

Proposal

The Phillips seeks to convert existing administrative spaces on the fourth floor of the house and 1907 wing into additional public gallery spaces. In order to do so, the existing roof top mechanical units would be replaced with larger, increased capacity units to meet the climate control requirements of the additional gallery spaces and the lateral internal duct work would be relocated to the roof to allow for sufficient interior head-heights within the expanded gallery spaces. Because the units would be larger and more obtrusive, a screen is proposed in the form of a mansard roof. The mansard would be recessed from but engage the eastern edge of the skylight. It would be clad in copper shingles to relate to the scale and texture of the underlying slate roof, without introducing the substantial weight of a second slate roof.

Evaluation

Altering the publicly-visible roofline of an historic building has typically been found to be an incompatible treatment, as it alters significant character-defining features such as a building's profile, composition, height, and overall form and mass. As the Board's guideline for roof alterations and addition states, it is only "in rare cases, a visible roof addition [or alteration] may be found acceptable if it does not fundamentally alter the character of the building and is sufficiently designed to be compatible with the building."

An argument could be made that this is one of those rare instances in which such an alteration could be found to be appropriate and necessary. To do so, one has to accept the premise that there are no alternative locations for the large, state-of-art mechanical equipment that is required of an art museum. As the existing complex of buildings occupies essentially all of its lot and the 1959-60 wing is already maxed out with mechanical equipment on its roof, this is a reasonable conclusion. The existing structure's lot occupancy would also probably preclude alternative technologies, such as geothermal wells, although the applicants should be prepared to clarify this for the Board.

Similarly, to arrive at the conclusion that some visible alteration may be appropriate, one has to accept that simply having the large mechanical units visible and unscreened is a less desirable alternative than a designed and composed screen. Surely a public museum devoted to the visual fine arts and housed in an architecturally significant landmarked complex deserves a better roofline than one dominated by industrial mechanical units.

Finally, if one accepts that some rooftop mechanical screening is appropriate, there is the question of whether the proposed design is the best and most compatible way to achieve it. Alternative ideas were evaluated, including a screen that imitated the profile of the skylight dormer (which gave the building the appearance of factory) and a minimalist frosted glass screen (which felt entirely foreign and visually obtrusive). The mansard form was arrived at as one that is well established as part of the vocabulary of this complex, having been added to the original portion of the house (around 1901), atop the 1907 wing (in the 1980s), and twice to the 1959-60 wing (in the 1980s and again in the 1990s). The cladding in copper shingles would have a similar scale and texture as the slate mansards below while remaining distinguishable from those earlier roofs.

As is documented in the applicant's submission, the Phillips is an institution and a building complex that has continuously grown and evolved over the past 120 years. Many substantial alterations and additions have been reviewed and approved by the Board since the property's designation. The 1973 National Register nomination does not include a period of significance for the property and short of simply establishing a 50 year cut off (by which alterations that have taken place within the past 50 years would be determined non-contributing to the property's significance), it would be difficult to determine an adequate end-date for the property's significance given its continuous change in response to its original and still ongoing mission as an art museum. The alteration to allow for a roof enclosure is not inconsistent with the long history of alterations and additions undertaken by this evolving public institution, and one that will allow the institution to continue to adapt itself for contemporary use.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the proposal for roof top screening of mechanical equipment to be a compatible solution.