
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Property Address:	3100 Macomb Street, NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark:	Tregaron (the Causeway)	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	May 25, 2017	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	16-053	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

The Washington International School (WIS) seeks on-going conceptual design review for construction of a science and technology classroom building on its Tregaron campus in Cleveland Park. The architectural plans have been prepared by Ziger/Snead Architects and landscape plans by Michael Vergason Landscape Architects.

In December, the Board found a previous proposal for the proposed building to be incompatible with the landmark. While stating that a building could potentially be built on this site, the proposal's scale, size, length, continuity along the edge of the hill, and materiality were cited as attributes that were not compatible.

Property History and Description

Tregaron is a 21 acre country estate built in 1912 by Ohio financier James Parmelee. The mansion, dependency buildings and grounds were designed by Charles Adams Platt, the era's premier architect of country houses. The formal and woodland gardens were designed and implemented over two decades by Ellen Biddle Shipman, one of the foremost landscape architects of the early 20th century who often worked in partnership with Platt.

Platt's plan was developed to respect the site's topography and mature trees, with minimal disturbance to grades and taking advantage of existing views. The plan maintained a sense of privacy to the estate, with only selective removal of trees to enhance the views and to reinforce the distinction between open pastures and dense woodlands. The placement of the mansion and dependencies was based on Beaux-Arts planning and design principles, sited at the top of the hill and with buildings aligned in axial relationships to each other. The symmetry, balance and axes exemplified in the English Georgian Revival mansion control the relationship between the house and its surrounding grounds, including the reciprocal vistas, the formal and informal gardens, and the axis along which the greenhouse, gardener's cottage, carriage house and other buildings are organized.

Both Platt and Shipman's work reinforced that gardens and landscape features closer to the house should be more formal in character and become increasingly informal and naturalistic farther from the house. The planting plans developed by Shipman enhanced the naturalistic character with the understory below the tree canopy planted with flowering trees, shrubs, ground covers and flowering bulbs. Shipman's woodland work at Tregaron has come to be understood as a notable example of a

“wild garden,” a seemingly natural but actually carefully enhanced composition of naturalistic plantings and man-made features balanced between open meadows and shaded woodlands.

The estate was sold to diplomat Joseph Davies and his wife Marjorie Merriweather Post in 1941. The Davies’ most significant contribution to the property was the construction of the dacha, a Russian folk cottage obtained when Davies served as ambassador to the Soviet Union, regrettably placed in the center of Shipman’s formal walled garden.

The property was designated a DC landmark in 1979 and is included within the boundaries of the Cleveland Park Historic District. In 1980, the site was purchased jointly by the Tregaron Limited Partnership (TLP) and WIS, and divided into two lots. The school purchased approximately 6 acres, with an entrance off Macomb Street. The school’s property includes the hilltop and all of the landmark’s historic structures. TLP retained ownership of the surrounding fields and woodland with the goal of developing it for residences but repeated efforts to that end were met with strong resistance by the community, led by the non-profit Friends of Tregaron (FOT), for the proposals’ failure to respect the character of the site.

After years of wrangling over various development proposals, a legal agreement was reached in 2006 between TLP, WIS and FOT. The agreement provided for the creation of a non-profit Tregaron Conservancy, with a board comprised of community and WIS representatives. TLP transferred approximately 10 acres of the woodlands to the Conservancy in order for it to be restored according to the vision established by Platt and Shipman for public enjoyment. Three acres were transferred to WIS, largely on the south side of the house to allow expansion of an athletic field but which otherwise would remain open space. TLP was given approval to build two houses along Macomb Street (since completed), a single house on the open portion of Klingle (not yet constructed), and several houses on the closed portion of Klingle Road (which were abandoned when the city permanently closed the street to traffic; this land has since been donated to the Conservancy).

Cultural Landscape Report

As a condition of considering future development at Tregaron in 2005, the Board required the preparation of a cultural landscape report (CLR) for the property. A CLR is a comprehensive study of the landscape of a historically significant property that is a compilation of landscape-focused historical research, period plans, existing conditions documentation, integrity and character assessments, and landscape preservation treatment recommendations. A CLR is intended to provide the basis for the treatment, interpretation and management of the landscape into the future. The CLR for Tregaron was codified in the legal agreement between the property owners, acknowledged by the Board as the central guiding document for the future management of the property, and found by the Mayor’s Agent to be “a key component of the Applicant’s special merit case.”¹

¹ The Board and Mayor’s Agent reviewed a 2005 draft cultural landscape report that was prepared by the firm Heritage Landscapes for the Partnership for the purposes of analyzing the development potential of the TLP-owned land; it did not provide an analysis of the development potential of the WIS property. In 2007, Heritage Landscapes finalized the cultural landscape report for the Conservancy. The final report evaluated the entire 21 acre Tregaron property for the purposes of guiding future management and rehabilitation. The link to the CLR is: <http://www.tregaronconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/Tregaron-Cultural-Landscape -Report.pdf>.

The Macomb Entry and Woodland Slope is one of the six distinct landscape areas identified at Tregaron, with its boundaries defined as extending to the crest of the hill “adjacent to the relatively intensive hilltop development of WIS and the residences along Macomb Street.” It is summarized as follows:

The Macomb Street entry was the northern “front door” of the Tregaron landscape. This frontage formed the edge where the estate met the historic residential neighborhood of Cleveland Park. With the 19th century suburbanization of many large Cleveland Park summer home tracts, a new eclectic community came to embrace the Twin Oaks Estate and The Causeway, later to be named Tregaron. Around 1912 shortly after the development of the remainder of the Tregaron, the Macomb entry was constructed to provide a continuous circuit through the property. The graceful curves of the entrance drive reflected the sinuous alignment of the southern entrance and Causeway Bridge as it leads up toward the hilltop and mansion. At this time Ellen Biddle Shipman prepared plans for shaping the small, level space around the entrance and the surrounding slopes. The plans, however, were not carried out in full. A few decades later, aerial photographs revealed that entrance plantings with residential character were thriving in the mottled shade of the surrounding woodland canopy. Beyond the perimeter fence, tall evergreens and a loose cluster of deciduous shrubs created a border along the entrance drive.

Today, the Macomb frontage area consists of level turf, a steep ravine, and a wooded slope along the sides of the entry drive. Referenced as Landscape Unit 6, it includes the remaining historic Japanese maple trees and a small wooded area to the south that frames the Tregaron entry, abuts the TLP lots to the north, and the wooded slopes and hillside up to the WIS facilities to the east. The drive skirts the ravine and creek as it climbs toward the hilltop and WIS. The roadside frontage of Tregaron interfaces with the domestic landscapes of Queen Anne, Shingle, Classical Revival, and Mission homes along Macomb Street. The entry area reflects a degree of disturbance although some historical landscape features persist. Recent work by the local sewer authority has significantly disrupted soils, grades and the stream source arrangement between the drive and the street. Remaining historic built elements in this area include the entry drive, partially obscured cobblestone gutters, and several stone retaining walls on the downhill side between this landscape unit and the adjacent woodland. The frontage fence does not appear to be original. Contemporary stone and wood steps snake down the steep hillside for pedestrian access to the far corner of WIS. However, the eroding path dangerously drops walkers onto the entrance drive without a dedicated route to reach Macomb Street.

The current woodland overstory of the area is characterized by a mixture of American beech and red, white, and chestnut oaks. A small number of tulip trees are also present. A range of remnant ornamental species characterizes the entryway including rhododendron, flowering dogwood, Japanese maple, euonymus shrubs, Japanese andromeda, barberry, and leucothoe. The framing Japanese maple trees at the entry are the green-leaved form and are relatively old but may be either from the Parmelee or Davies-Post ownership periods. With the exception of numerous rhododendron, individual plants and small groups populate the area rather than large stands. Most of these are ground plane plants including pachysandra, English ivy, and Christmas fern. Little regeneration of canopy trees is present in the understory. Invasive species found on the wooded slopes of the area include ornamental groundcovers such as English ivy and pachysandra.

A summary of the CLR’s preservation recommendations for this landscape include:

- Draw on the historical antecedents and recapture the beauty and dignity of the Macomb entrance and drive;
- A clean and simple approach is recommended in order to bring together both sides of the drive to form a more visually apparent entry;
- The entry area can be framed with more intensive plantings with reference to Shipman plans;
- Treatment of the wooded hillside that lies between the drive and newer WIS facilities should begin with removal of invasive plants and hazardous trees, and removal of the winding wooden staircase;
- Replace the existing hillside walkway and develop a new dedicated pedestrian path along the drive;

- Mill down the built-up asphalt drive, restore the cobble gutters, and repair stone retaining walls as required;
- The area can be considered for development extending from and contiguous with the existing houses along Macomb Street, with evergreen and deciduous plantings used to screen the houses from the entrance drive.

Revised Proposal

The current proposal calls for construction of a two-story 21,500 square foot classroom building above a one-story below-grade 14,650 square foot garage. The location of the eastern portion of the building is the same as before, with the portion that wrapped behind the gymnasium eliminated and some of the uses reprogrammed into the carriage house. As before, a one-story element would extend along the side of the gym extending to and connecting to the library. The building's north elevation would be clad in dark, slate-colored brick and a glass curtain wall system what would have overlapping or pleated panes.

As before, the proposal also includes various site alterations: converting the parking area between the gym and carriage house into a courtyard; removing paving in the service court between the mansion's kitchen wing and the walled formal garden and replacing it with landscape, a relocated outdoor grill, and a drive for deliveries; converting the formal walled garden to a courtyard with pavers and gravel; rehabilitating the driveway from Macomb Street to reconstruct its original cobbled stone gutters; redesigning the Macomb Street pedestrian entrance as a woodland garden; replacing the hillside path; and providing enhanced tree and understory plantings on the north hillside below the new building and the gym.

Evaluation

By comparison to the previous submission, the reductions in footprint and length are an improvement. In eliminating the portion of the building below the gym, the building will have that much less visibility from Macomb Street, and the reduced length of the north elevation results in less continuous wall. While the previous design's use of copper and pavilions was intended to break down the building's long north expanse, the simplified design appears quieter and lighter in weight. The lack of any obvious indications of scale results in a beneficial ambiguity as to the building's size.

However, despite these changes, it is still difficult to reconcile how a building of this size, location and overall impact are compatible with the character of the landmark, consistent with the analysis of this portion of the property in the CLR, and consistent with the Board's prior direction on the compatibility of new construction on this property. It remains intrusive for an area that was intended as a natural woodland buffer. It will be a full three stories tall at its highest point, unfortunately at the northwest corner where it is closest and most visible from Macomb Street and projects the most down the descending hillside. The continuous, single plane face that it will present -- 127 feet – will be the longest unbroken elevation of any building on the campus, sited in a location that is important in defining the property's country house character.

The conclusions in the applicant's submission regarding the historical circulation plan through the site (applicant's submission, pages 6-8) and that the chosen site "has no impact on historic view sheds" (page 11) are not supported by the CLR's narrative or view shed analysis (CLR drawing 4, "Platt-Shipman Era Visual Relationships", attached). Characterizing the Macomb Street side of the property as just the back door represents a misunderstanding that the property was conceived and designed by Platt and Shipman to be seen on all sides as a wooded estate distinct from the

surrounding suburban neighborhood. Platt's site plan for the estate was intentional in pulling all buildings but the mansion away from the edge of the hill to diminish their visual impact from within the property and from Macomb Street. With the proposed building pushing substantially forward of the rear of the carriage house and gym, beyond the edge of the hill and down the hill side, the proposal is not consistent with that organizing principle.

Perhaps a better argument – one suggested in the comments of some Board members in the previous review – is that the Macomb Street side of the property has suffered some loss of integrity, both by the construction of the gymnasium and by the long-term neglect of the woodland landscape. However, while the proposal includes a commitment to renew the woodland hillside, the introduction of an additional large building in this location will compound rather than improve any perceived loss of integrity in this area.

The proposal is not consistent with the principles applied by the Board in the review of other school projects for the property. The Board's findings of compatibility for the school's classroom building (1988), gym (1999), and library and performing arts building (2006) were made, in part, because they were organized along the axis of historic service buildings in the zone where construction was intended by Platt, because they had limited or no visibility from the mansion or from the exterior of the property, and they did not intrude on areas that were originally important landscape or wooded buffer zones. While the Board often states that its review of a project is based on the specifics of the proposal and is not necessarily precedential, it would be difficult to find future projects incompatible once these consistently-applied principles and the CLR have been compromised.

The landscape improvements proposed immediately surrounding the new building are generally consistent with the recommendations for this area in the CLR. Three aspects of the site plan should be revisited: 1) The first floor north elevation of the carriage house is a designed elevation with the same Flemish bond brick work as the rest of the building and has always remained exposed; some type of areaway should be maintained rather than this elevation being buried below grade. 2) The plans for the paving of the drive that connect the service buildings, and which serves today as the primary pedestrian spine of the campus, should be developed to retain the distinctive original paving outside the carriage house. 3) Paving over the remaining portion of the formal garden will further erode the integrity and design intent of this feature; this portion of the proposal should be developed in a manner that better retains and enhances the original character of the garden. As outlined in the CLR, a solution to the inappropriate placement of the dacha and restoration of the walled garden should continue to guide the future treatment of this area.

Balancing Interests

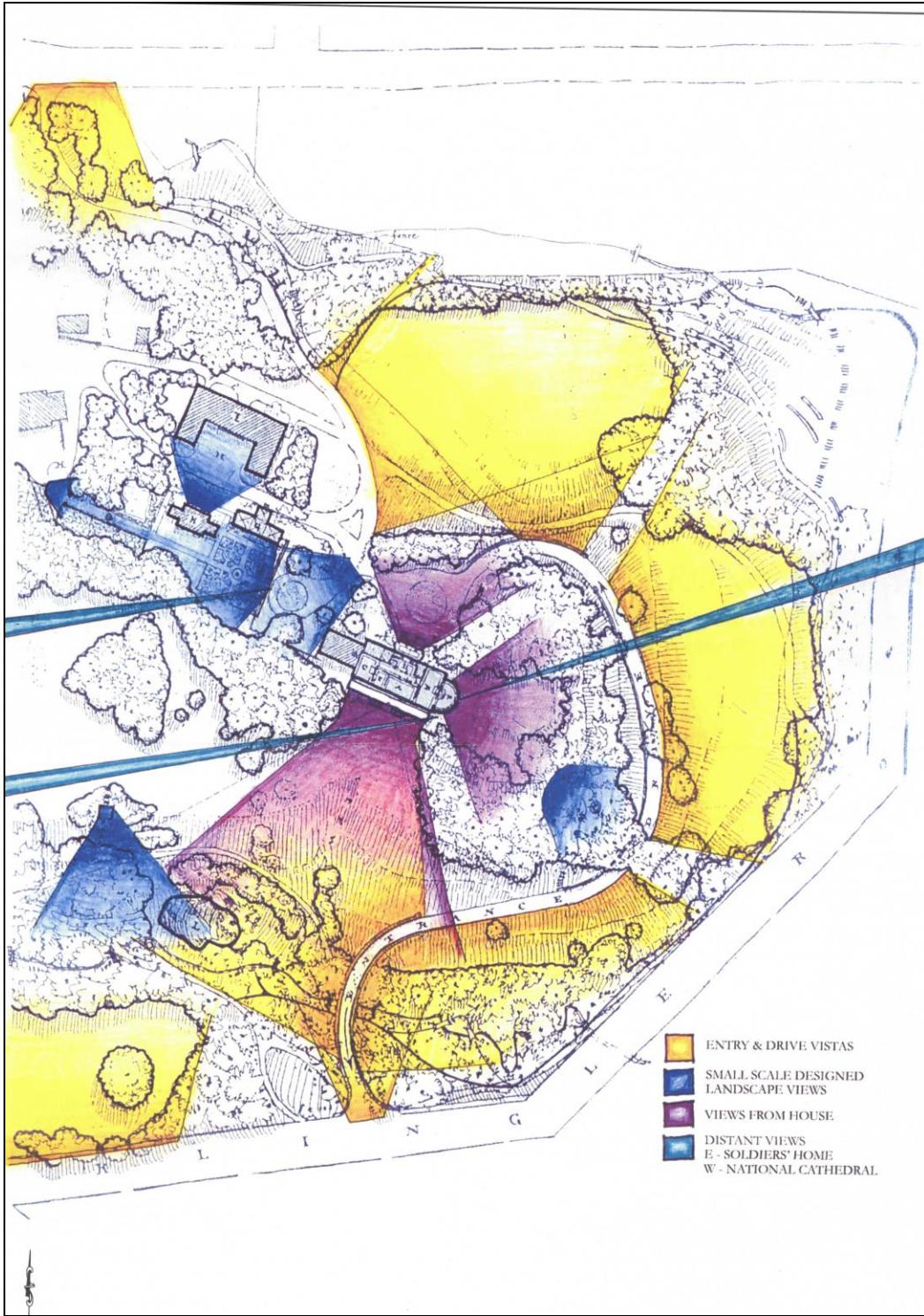
As required under the preservation law, the HPO's evaluation and the Board's review of a project are limited as to whether a proposal is consistent with the law in retaining significant defining characteristics of a property and in ensuring that alterations are compatible with its historic character. However, in an acknowledgement that preservation isn't the only public interest the law provides a process by which the Mayor's Agent can determine a project that has been found inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law by the HPRB to be necessary in the broader public interest.

The HPO recommends that the most appropriate path forward for this project is through the Mayor's Agent. The special merit provision of the act permits for a project that may result in a

treatment that isn't compatible but that is found to have significant benefits to the District or the community by virtue of exemplary architecture, specific features of land planning, or social or other benefits having a high priority for community services. WIS is clearly a valuable asset to the community and to the District, and the issues that this project raises -- the importance of this new facility to the school fulfilling its mission, the lack of viable options for alternative locations, and the mitigation and benefits that the school is offering to the rehabilitation of the landscape and to the Conservancy – are all potentially compelling arguments for a project of special merit.

Recommendations

Based on the character of the landmark as described in the designation application as a country house estate surrounded by woodlands and meadows, the character of the Macomb Entry and Woodland Slope as evaluated in the CLR, and on the principle consistently applied by the Board that new construction should be clustered off of the woodland hillside in axial arrangement with the other buildings on the service drive, the HPO recommends that the Board find the revised proposal incompatible with the landmark.



The vista from Macomb Street, upper left, is identified in the Tregarion Cultural Landscape Report.
“Platt-Shipman Era Visual Relationships”
Tregarion Cultural Landscape Plan, 2007



Figure V1.33. A detail of the Vegetation Management Plan shows the proposed vegetation typology for the Macomb Entry & Woodland slope with meadow, mixed oak upland woodland, and screening plantings around the houses on Lots 1 and 2.

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Heritage Landscapes
Preservation Landscape Architects & Planners

The vegetation plan for the Macomb Entry & Woodland Slope
Tregaron Cultural Landscape Plan, 2007