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

Property Address:	3100 Macomb Street, NW	X Agenda
Landmark:	Tregaron (the Causeway)	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	February 27, 2020	X Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	20-095	X Alteration
		X New Construction
		Demolition
		Subdivision

The Washington International School (WIS) seeks conceptual design review for construction of a multi-use building on its Tregaron campus in Cleveland Park. The project would also include relocation of the dacha cottage and landscape work. Architectural plans have been prepared by Shalom Baranes Architects and the landscape plans by Michael Vergason Landscape Architects.

Property History and Description

Tregaron is a 21-acre country estate built in 1912. The mansion, dependency buildings and grounds were designed by Charles Adams Platt, the country’s premier architect of country houses. The formal and woodland gardens were designed over a two-decade period 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 trees. The placement of the mansion and dependencies was based on Beaux-Arts planning principles, sited at the top of the hill with buildings aligned in axial relationship to each other. The symmetry and balance exemplified in the 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.

In Platt and Shipman’s work, gardens and landscape features closer to the house were designed to be more formal in character and became increasingly informal farther from the house. Shipman’s plans for the woodlands at Tregaron enhanced the naturalistic character of the property and the result has come to be acknowledged as one of her best and most intact examples of a “wild garden,” a seemingly natural but actually carefully enhanced composition of naturalistic plantings and man-made features.

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

The property was designated a landmark in 1979 and included within the boundaries of the Cleveland Park Historic District in 1987. In 1980, the site was purchased jointly by the Tregaron Limited Partnership (TLP, a development interest) and WIS and was divided into two lots. The

school purchased approximately 6 acres at the top of the hill including all of the buildings while TLP retained ownership of the surrounding land. Repeated efforts by TLP to redevelop the property were met with resistance by the community, led by the non-profit Friends of Tregaron (FOT), and consistently found incompatible by the HPRB for their failure to respect the character of the site.

At the encouragement of HPRB, an agreement was reached in 2006 between TLP, WIS and FOT that called for ten acres of land to be transferred to a newly-created non-profit Tregaron Conservancy devoted to the goal of rehabilitating the landscape based on a cultural landscape plan. Three additional acres were transferred to WIS, largely on the south side of the house and which allowed expansion of their athletic field, with “an agreement in perpetuity that the three acres ... will be part of the Conservancy landmark and maintained at WIS’s cost.”¹ The agreement created a Conservancy board comprised of community and WIS representatives, and provided partial funding for the operations of the Conservancy by WIS and from limited residential development of the property. The Mayor's Agent found the subdivision necessary to allow development met the standard for a project of special merit, concluding that the proposed rehabilitation and management of the property by a conservancy dedicated to the rehabilitation, stewardship, interpretation and to ensuring public access to the site, would constitute an "unusual and substantial historic preservation accomplishment with clear benefits to the public."

Review of Previous WIS Projects

The Board has reviewed several proposals for new construction on the WIS portion of the property, including a new classroom building (1988), a gym and classroom building (1999), a library and performing arts building (2006), a soccer field and basketball court (2007), and the previous version of the current building (2016-17). With the exception of these last two projects, each building was ultimately found compatible because they were organized along the axis of historic service buildings in the zone where construction was intended by Platt, had limited or no visibility from the mansion or the neighborhood, did not intrude on areas that were originally landscape zones, were designed in a manner that broke down their mass, and used materials and an architectural vocabulary that clearly related to the historic buildings on the estate.

The playing field and basketball court were a challenge for the Board as they were found to visually intrude on the pond valley, change the open character of the south lawn, introduce a large artificial man-made element into what was a naturalistic landscape, and result in construction within the three-acre zone that was committed to as perpetual open space. However, the Board ultimately determined that while not particularly compatible, the adverse impacts of the field and court would be sufficiently mitigated by the school’s long-term financial commitment to the property’s rehabilitation as outlined in the agreement between the parties and consistent with the Mayor’s Agent ruling that the overall project was one of special merit.

In 2016, WIS submitted a concept application and plans for construction of a 34,000 square foot classroom building located on the hillside north of the gymnasium and west of the carriage house, together with a program of landscape improvements. After several reviews and despite revisions to the plan, the Board found the concept incompatible in its size, design and location. Upon review by

¹ Mayor’s Agent Decision and Order, HPA #04-145, March 30, 2006, page 3. The area is indicated on page A-3 of the applicant’s submission as “Easement Area” as there is also an easement held by the Conservancy on this property.

the Mayor's Agent, the project was found not to meet the standard as a project of special merit. The Mayor's Agent did not make a determination on the applicant's claim that the project was consistent with the purposes of the Act, finding:

While the HPRB made a clear judgment that the proposed new building was incompatible, it did not express any opinion on the degree of harm that the building would inflict on the overall landmark. Nor did it assess the value of the proposed preservation benefits or balance these benefits against the harm caused by the incompatible building. Yet, the Court of Appeals now has directed that historic preservation benefits be weighed against the historic losses, rather than as special merit features. While there may be cases in which the Mayor's Agent is in a good position, based on an extensive record and clear balance, to make this determination in the first instance, it seems clearly preferable in most cases that the Mayor's Agent have the expert judgment of the HPRB, staffed by experts in historic preservation in the HPO. The Mayor's Agent urges HPRB to weigh preservation benefits against preservation losses in future cases as part of its analysis of a project's consistency with the purposes of the Act.

While the case was remanded back to the HPRB to consider this balance, the applicant instead decided to reconsider the proposal, engage in further discussions with the community, and hire a new design team to take a fresh look at the project. WIS is seeking to develop a new plan that the Board can find compatible, in which the project's preservation benefits outweigh any losses, and would not require further review by the Mayor's Agent.

Current Proposal

The new concept plan calls for construction of a 47,300 square foot building with classrooms, science labs, multipurpose room, dining hall and kitchen, and gallery space located just west of the mansion on the location of the dacha. Two of the building's four stories would be located mostly below grade while the top two floors would be broken into two wings that would wrap around two sides of the four-square garden.

The lowest (gallery) level would house labs and receive natural light from double-height spaces, a mid-building atrium and a light well along the building's south side. The second level would have a dining hall, kitchen and labs, with windows and doors opening to the soccer field and to a new half basketball court on the roof of the gallery level. The first above-grade floor would contain a gallery, student hub and maker space and the top floor would have additional labs and the multipurpose room. The building would be clad in dark stone at its base with tan Roman brick above and have a one-story undulating wall of metal fins facing east to the mansion and south to the pond valley. One-story glass pavilions would face on to the Academic Walk and to the four-square garden.

The dacha would be relocated east of the mansion in a small clearing surrounded by mature trees. The form of the four-square garden would be recreated, raised 4 feet in elevation and with slight adjustments to its dimensions; the brick perimeter wall would be removed. Landscape work on the north/Macomb Street side of the property would include clearing invasive plants, supplementing the woodland plantings, incorporating the entrance garden area into the woodland, and constructing a new stone stair up the hillside for students and visitors approaching the school from the neighborhood. Enhancements would be made to the north drive to improve pedestrian safety and drainage, and a plan developed to improve paving and plantings along the Academic Walk.

Evaluation

The concept represents a promising new direction for achieving the school's goal for an additional building. Most importantly, the plan relocates the building out of the north woodland hillside where it would have fundamentally and adversely impacted the character of the property. The new location is in the zone where Platt organized the original buildings and where later buildings have been found appropriate by the Board. With the exception of its seepage into the three-acre open space zone on the south, it is located outside of sensitive natural landscape areas.

Taking advantage of the soccer field's lowered grade and placing two of the building's four floors under ground is a clever and effective approach to reducing the impact of the building's ambitious program. Expressing the above-grade portions as two wings placed at angles to each other and using lower one-story elements are strong conceptual moves in breaking down the building's mass and stepping down its height.

Relocation of the dacha would fulfill a preservation goal anticipated since the 2006 agreement. From its initial construction in 1941, the dacha's placement has significantly compromised the property's most important formal landscape feature, and its relocation would allow the garden's spatial qualities to be reestablished. The dacha's new location within the woodland at the east side of the house would provide an appropriate aesthetic setting for the unusual rustic folly.

The proposed landscape improvements would provide enhancements to the landmark, many of which are called for in the cultural landscape plan. Converting the Macomb entrance into an extension of the woodland and improving the north slope woodlands are consistent with Shipman's vision for the property. The construction of a new stone hillside stair and renovation of the driveway will result in needed aesthetic, drainage and safety improvements. While not yet developed with specificity, improving the paved and planted qualities of the Academic Walk and the area occupied by condensers, a storage shed, and the barbeque tent would address areas that currently detract from the character of the property.

Other aspects of the concept are not yet compatible. Having grown in square footage by almost 40% since the previous proposal and despite placing some of the program below grade, the new building looms large in its location so close to the mansion, which should uncompromisingly remain the dominant structure in the landmark's hierarchy of buildings. The problem is exacerbated by the building's 14' floor-to-floor heights, the first above-grade floor elevation being raised above the surrounding grades, and the scale of the fenestration and curved metal wall.

The building intrudes into the landscape area on the south side of the mansion that was identified in the 2006 agreement and the cultural landscape plan and previously represented to the Board and Mayor's Agent as a perpetual open space. While the below-grade construction wouldn't impact the landscape once construction was completed, the above-grade portions of the building and the half-court's 10'+ tall chain link fence would further intrude on this space beyond what the HPRB was already reluctant to approve in 2006, and misses an opportunity to improve on the existing compromised condition.

The much-altered context surrounding the four-square garden – not only from the dacha but from other surrounding campus buildings – provides a compelling rationale for repurposing this space as

an academic quad and the centerpiece of a new building composition. However, the elevation of its grade by four+ feet will adversely alter its relationship with the adjacent greenhouse, which historically served as one of its four perimeter walls, and result in the need for exterior ramps and stairs that could be eliminated if the original grade was retained. And while reestablishing Shipman's elaborate plantings wouldn't be practical for an academic courtyard, the landscape plan could provide a better balance between its historic character and new purpose.

Given the amount of new construction the property has already absorbed, the decision to move beyond a red brick/limestone trim/Georgian Revival vocabulary is probably a good idea so as to not further dilute the character of the original buildings. However, the design doesn't yet make a fully convincing case for its compatibility with the campus. The abstraction of the causeway wall is an interesting idea but has a very different feel and scale when rendered in large industrial gray metal panels than when executed in local natural stone. The composition of the north elevation, with the metal fin extending beyond the mass of the building and the glass-and-louvered pavilion, is discordant and makes an unwelcoming first impression for the building and as the entrance to the Academic Walk.

While it will require some redesign and perhaps some reconsideration by the applicant of its programmatic priorities, these design and preservation shortcomings are addressable within the context of the proposed concept. With revisions, HPO believes that this project could be found compatible with the landmark.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board find the general location, massing of the above-grade portions of the building into two wings organized around the four-square garden, relocation of the dacha, and the landscape plans developed to date are appropriate directions for the project, but that revisions are necessary in order for it be found compatible with the Tregaron landmark. The following is recommended for revision and restudy:

- 1) Reduce the size and height of the above-grade portion of the building, particularly on the north side as seen from the front of the mansion. This may require some rethinking and prioritization of the building program;
- 2) Redesign the north end of the building to provide a more compatible frontage on the Academic Walk. This should include pulling the building back to provide some visibility of the greenhouse from the east;
- 3) Continue to refine the scale, materials, and colors of the building to improve its compatibility;
- 4) Retain the existing historic elevation of the four-square garden in order to retain its relationship with the greenhouse and eliminate the need for exterior ramps and steps. A landscape plan for the garden should be developed that achieves a better balance between its historic character and new role as an academic courtyard;
- 5) Remove the half basketball court and tall perimeter fencing atop the southern-most portion of the building within the three-acre open space zone and convert this area to a green roof to serve as a visual extension of the landscape;
- 6) Improve and supplement the landscaping in the area south of the building to mitigate its visual impact as seen from the causeway bridge and pond valley. Plans should be guided by the cultural landscape plan and historic photos that document this area as a layered, evergreen, visually dense garden;

- 7) Develop a planting and hardscape improve plan for the Academic Walk that incorporates and is compatible with the original paving materials;

The project should return to the Board for further review when ready.

HPO Staff Contact: Steve Callcott