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

Landmark/District: **Southeast Library/Capitol Hill Historic District** Agenda
Address: **403 7th Street, SE** Consent Calendar
Meeting Date: **November 18, 2021** New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers: **21-561** Alteration
 Demolition

DC Public Library (DCPL) and Quinn Evans Architects are seeking conceptual design review for a new addition and renovation of the Southeast Branch Library located at 403 7th Street, SE. Project goals include expanding useable space and providing a new accessible entry while respecting the historic character of the building which has long contributed to the significance of the Capitol Hill Historic District and just recently been designated a historic landmark.

Southeast Branch Library

The Southeast Branch Library was designed in the Classical Revival style by architect Edward L. Tilton and constructed in 1922. Tilton studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, worked for a time with the prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, and spent much of his later career specializing in library design. Tilton’s approach for the Southeast Branch Library positioned a double-height, limestone, pedimented portico flanked by Corinthian columns on a raised berm overlooking the square to the east. This design, including the extended flight of stairs leading up to the main entry of the elevated first level afforded a civic grandeur to the otherwise relatively constrained brick building whose remaining form is defined by the triangular site. Other notable features include a hipped roof, large arched windows, a water table, a stringcourse and a prominent cornice line that extends along the sides of the building.

In addition to its architectural significance, the Southeast Branch Library is important as one of four District of Columbia libraries made possible through the largess of noted industrialist Andrew Carnegie – the others being the Central Public Library (1903), the Takoma Park Branch Library (1911), and the Mount Pleasant Branch Library (1925). The latter was also designed by Tilton.

Proposal

The concept proposes to meet the difficult challenge of providing additional space within a confined site by excavating a third level below the original basement and by extending that new subterranean space out beneath the existing berm on the south side of the library. Critically important natural light for the lower level will be provided by an at-grade skylight along the southern edge of the building. A restored historic skylight/laylight and a new skylight coupled with new openings in the historic floors above will supply even more

illumination by allowing light to permeate from the roof, throughout the library and down to the lowest level.

An accessible new entry, a public stair, an elevator and the equipment necessary to update building systems will be housed within a new addition constructed in the existing alleyway on the rear (west) of the library. Access to the new addition will be provided via a wide cut into the berm along South Carolina Avenue. This new opening will incorporate a gently sloping walkway leading to a glazed vestibule. The entryway will be bordered by retaining walls, one of which will feature a window to provide additional natural light and views in and out of the new lower level. A panelized wall system, glazing and contemporary materials such as horizontally arranged terra cotta baguettes and building signage will help to denote entry.

The north side of the addition along D Street will be treated similarly to the south side except that the lower half will be composed of a solid panelized wall system and a single service door. The second level mechanical equipment screen will also feature horizontally arranged terra cotta baguettes, but this screen will be separated from the historic library and residence on either side by a slight reveal.

The exterior scope of work also includes replacement of non-original windows and repair/replacement of the existing slate roof, as needed. The landscape plan, which is based upon historic photographs of the original terraced berm, proposes a contemporary reinterpretation of these conditions by removing existing large trees – most of which must be taken down due to their deteriorated conditions and/or to facilitate construction anyway – and introducing bands of colorful, low maintenance plants and a few small trees in the corners.

Evaluation

This concept is noteworthy because none of the proposed interventions will detract from the prominence of the historic library. Additional program space will be accommodated entirely below grade, related functions will be tucked into a discreet, yet distinct new rear addition, and the original, relatively simple landscape will be reinterpreted in a manner that restores historic views. As a result, the visibility of the much-loved landmark is likely to be more pronounced after the project is complete than it currently is.

Two design decisions are critical in this regard. The first is allowing the historic entrance to continue to function as a primary entrance. The second is locating the accessible entrance on the southwest corner of the site rather than the southeast corner where the necessary cut into the berm would have visually competed with and detracted from the primary elevation. These factors will result in a project that reads much like a full restoration of the historic building.

The new interventions are also noteworthy. The entry in the new addition will be distinguished from the original through contemporary design and materials yet related by elements like the vertical fins that project slightly above the cornice line and beyond the façade in a manner reminiscent of the original entry's basic composition. The generous use of glazing will provide a welcoming and light-filled entry while compatible colors will strengthen the relationship between old and new by echoing the historic palette of red brick and light gray limestone on the north and south sides.

Although not designated, the library's interiors are subject to HPO's review of this DC Government project and it should be noted that historic features such as the aforementioned skylight/daylight and other decorative elements like the original "story hour" fireplace and wooden fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals will be retained and fully restored. The interior modifications that will be implemented have been designed to be compatible and/or reversible.

Despite its many qualities, HPO believes two features of the proposed design could benefit from further refinement, specifically the signage and the entry plaza. Using signage to identify the new entry is particularly important given the circumstances, but large, vertically arranged, internally illuminated letters seem more appropriate for commercial buildings than civic ones. This could become more of a concern when considering the predominantly residential character of the avenue and the fact that applicable sign standards discourage internally illuminated signage for institutional buildings such as libraries. Horizontally arranged letters reminiscent of the historic signage in the frieze and above the entry door may be more appropriate. Alternative forms of illumination such as that which could come from an external source or potentially including halo-lit channel letters may also prove better suited for the historic context.

Refinements to the entry plaza could further clarify and emphasize entry. As proposed, the relatively tall, dark retaining walls of weathered steel are not particularly welcoming. Reducing the height of the walls to the extent possible through step-downs or other means might render the space more inviting. And while the dark steel panels will evolve into a warmer color over time, lighter colored materials may lend more of a sense of spaciousness. Introducing other features potentially including benches, plantings or possibly even some engraved signage could also provide interest and help break down the scale of the blank walls.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- 1. Find the proposed concept consistent with the purposes of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act;*
- 2. Provide recommendations for any refinements that could further improve the concept, including any relating to signage and the entry sequence; and*
- 3. Delegate all remaining design review to HPO.*

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