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

Landmark/District:	Bancroft Elementary School/Mt. Pleasant	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	1755 Newton Street, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	June 4, 2015	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	15-369	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demolition
Staff Reviewer:	Andrew Lewis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Conceptual Design

The District of Columbia Department of General Services (DGS) and Department of Public Schools (DCPS), along with Ayers Saint Gross Architects, propose to modernize the Bancroft Elementary School by restoring and rehabilitating most of the historic school and replacing non-historic additions with new additions. However, the concept that is being presented to the Board also includes demolition of the school’s historic auditorium/gymnasium.

Bancroft Elementary School

The earliest portion of Bancroft Elementary School was constructed in 1923 at the northeast corner of 18th and Newton Streets, NW. The building was designed by Municipal Architect Albert Harris in what the Mt. Pleasant Historic District nomination describes as the Italian Renaissance Revival Style. Other sources characterize the architecture as Spanish Colonial.

Within a decade, the school was extended eastward to Mt. Pleasant Street. This 1932 addition introduced the arched corbelled gable, triple arched opening and prominent “campanile” that constitute the school’s principal entrance. Shortly thereafter, in 1938, a new auditorium/gymnasium was constructed behind the school, directly north of the central entrance.

All three of the aforementioned components of Bancroft School were constructed within Mt. Pleasant Historic District’s period of significance (1870-1949) and are considered contributing elements of the district. Subsequent additions constructed further to the north side of the site in 1961 and 1974, are not historically significant.

Proposed New Construction and Demolition

The 1923 and 1932 portions of Bancroft School will be restored and rehabilitated as a part of the modernization project. Architectural details such as the iron balcony railings and the ocular window above the central entrance will be restored while infilled windows and courtyard arcades will be reopened and appropriate replacement windows will be installed. Cleaning, repointing and other general repairs are also proposed. Upon completion, most of the 1923 building will house Bancroft’s administration functions and the co-located Briya Public Charter School. The 1932 building will serve primarily as academic space for kindergarten and first grade students.

Demolition of the 1938 auditorium/gymnasium is proposed in order to establish a new, centrally located, north-south corridor that will connect directly to the main entry lobby and provide a continuous hallway to the new additions proposed to the north. The considerable change in grade between the 1923 and 1932 wings will also be addressed at this central hub via a lift and a ramp that will be located adjacent to the lobby.

The remainder of the program will be accommodated in new buildings that will branch off of the primary circulation corridor. Newly constructed facilities will replace the non-historic additions and provide space for a media center, cafeteria, additional classrooms, multi-purpose functions and other specialized uses. Extensive landscaping will enhance the open areas around the entire complex and a large athletic field will be constructed on the northwest side of the site. A 60-space, below grade parking structure is also proposed for the northeast corner of the site. Access to the parking garage will be provided via a driveway located to the north of the athletic field.

Evaluation

Most of the work proposed for the historic buildings is appropriate and raises no preservation concerns. However, in evaluating the city's historic school buildings, historic auditoria/gymnasiums have consistently been determined to contribute to the significance of District schools. Bancroft auditorium/gymnasium appears to be no exception. Despite having some structural issues that would need to be addressed and being relatively simple in design, Bancroft's auditorium/gymnasium was constructed within the historic district's period of significance, retains integrity, relates architecturally to the rest of the school, and is similar to many other historically significant school auditoria/gymnasiums throughout the District.

HPO requested the project team to develop a variety of approaches that would investigate the feasibility of retaining all or significant portions of the auditorium/gymnasium since razing the structure would constitute demolition "in significant part." Evaluation of the four resulting schemes established that no viable option appears to exist that could meet ADA requirements, reinforce the central entrance and address the critically important need to improve circulation while also maintaining the historical integrity of the auditorium/gymnasium. For this reason, HPO ultimately agreed that demolition may be the most logical course of action even though it is inconsistent with the purposes of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act.

With regard to new construction, the overall site plan generally follows the configuration of the existing 1961 and 1970 additions but augments the center of the site with more square footage than that which currently exists. To establish a visual connection to the historic school, the newly proposed buildings "step down" Mt. Pleasant Street in a manner that reflects the historic conditions closer to Newton Street. A generous use of brick and complimentary materials also help to relate the old to the new. "Punched openings" and metal panels further reinforce the visual connection and provide some variation to the elevations but these facades could benefit from more refinement to respond to their larger context. HPO looks to the Board for possible suggestions about how these refinements could be accomplished.

Additionally, HPO recommends that the new interventions proposed in the southwestern play area (e.g. paving, equipment, etc.) relate closely to the architectural character of the historic building that defines the space – most notably the ornamental corner tower and soon-to-be-reopened arcade. Landscaping nearest to the historic buildings should also be kept relatively simple to reflect the historic landscape conditions that were likely to be restrained. Finally, every effort should be made to limit the visibility of the new rooftop equipment and screening.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- Recognize that many aspects of the concept are appropriate for the historic school and historic district;
- Find the overall concept inconsistent with the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act due to the demolition of the historic auditorium/gymnasium;
- Forward the proposal to the Mayor’s Agent for review as a case of special merit; and
- If the Mayor’s Agent determines that the project is a case of special merit, delegate final design review to HPO, subject to any Board comments.