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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

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Property Address:	<b>4220 Nebraska Avenue NW</b>	<b>X</b>	Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Under Oak [possible landmark]</b>		Consent Calendar
		<b>X</b>	Concept Review
Meeting Date:	<b>February 25, 2021</b>	<b>X</b>	Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	<b>21-130</b>		New Construction
			Demolition

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The River School, a contract purchaser, with plans prepared by architects Shalom Baranes Architects, seeks conceptual design review for site alterations and new construction on the site of the “Under Oak” estate in Tenleytown for use as a private school campus. While the property is not currently subject to review under the preservation law, the applicants are considering nominating it for landmark designation. As part of that consideration, they are requesting a courtesy conceptual review by the Board to see whether their proposed project would meet preservation standards.

### Property History and Description

Under Oak is a 1.4 acre estate bounded by Nebraska Avenue and 42nd and Van Ness streets; the Gustav Stickley-designed landmark Dumblane abuts the property to the north. The property’s primary building is a two-story, L-shaped stone and stucco house sited to address an open greenspace which contained the estate’s eponymous oak tree (since deceased). The house, sited deep in the property off Nebraska Avenue down a long driveway, was designed and constructed in 1927 by architect Victor Mindeleff in a picturesque French Norman Revival style and was expanded with architecturally sympathetic additions in the 1950s. Additional buildings on the site include a one-story wood frame garage, a two-story brick garage, a two-story brick and stucco gatehouse adjacent to the entrance driveway, a one-story brick pool house and pool, a salvaged cupola from a demolished building that serves as a garden folly, and several utilitarian sheds. The remainder of the site consists of gardens around the house, lawns, woods along the perimeter of the site, and some notable specimen trees.

From 1941-2019, Under Oak was the home of Ruth and Wiley Buchanan. Ruth Buchanan (1918-2019) was the granddaughter of Herbert Henry Dow, the founder of the Dow Chemical Company. Her husband Wiley T. Buchanan, Jr. (1913-1986) came from a family involved in the oil and timber industries and served in diplomatic posts including as Ambassador to Luxembourg and Chief of Protocol of the United States under President Eisenhower and Ambassador to Austria under President Ford. During the period of the Buchanan’s ownership, the house served as a frequent social, political and diplomatic gathering spot.

The property was identified as potentially eligible for historic designation in the HPF-funded Tenleytown Historic Resources Survey prepared for the Tenleytown Historical Society in 2003, in the National Register Multiple Property Document for Tenleytown prepared by HPO and listed in the National Register in 2008, and in the Office of Planning’s 2020 Ward 3 Heritage Guide. The applicants’ submission includes a history and description of the property, with a preliminary finding that the property meets DC designation criteria B (association with prominent individuals) and C (architecture).

## **Proposal**

The project calls for rehabilitating the house and constructing a new school building and underground garage along the south and east edges of the property. A pick-up/ drop-off lane is proposed accessed from Nebraska Avenue using the existing curb cut and a second curb cut to the south. The below-grade parking structure would be accessed from a spiral ramp and incorporate the relocated cupola structure. A landscaped area with playgrounds and the relocated pool house are proposed at the center of the site defined by the new building to the south.

The new building would be broken down into three pavilions and contain classrooms, a gymnasium, theater, and library, a speech and hearing clinic, and administrative and faculty support spaces. The largest pavilion would front Nebraska Avenue and be four-stories, with the fourth level setback on all sides. A smaller two-story pavilion would be located to the north and feature a gabled roof to screen mechanical equipment. A third two-story pavilion would be placed near the intersection of Van Ness and 42nd Streets, also capped by a gabled roof and connected to the first pavilion with a glass-enclosed corridor at each level. The gymnasium, theater, program spaces and parking would all be located below grade.

The project would include relocation of two heritage trees, including a walnut tree to the site of the former oak. The swimming pool, the one-story frame garage, and sheds would be removed.

## **Evaluation**

Although further research remains to be done and context developed (particularly with regard to criterion B), there is a strong case to be made for the property meeting the designation criteria. The property has been identified in survey and planning documents for almost 20 years as likely eligible for designation, and the noteworthy architectural and spatial qualities of the property are self-evident upon visiting the site, with the distinctive architectural and designed landscape resources primarily located on the northern half of the property and the southern portion serving as a more randomly organized and naturalized landscape backdrop.

Appropriately, the property's landmark eligibility and spatial organization have guided the applicant's siting for new construction at the edges of the property farthest away from the house with a generous open space to the south of the house retained as the central green of the new campus. While development along the southern edge of the property will result in some obvious change in character, the proposed plan represents a reasonable balance between the goals of preserving the character-defining features of the property and encouraging its adaptation for contemporary use. With each instance obviously being slightly different, the Board has allowed similar compromise solutions at other landmark estate properties that have been converted to academic campuses (e.g. WIS-Tregaron, Woodley-Maret, and Zartman House-Sidwell Friends) where the important historic and landscape resources have been preserved within the context of substantial new development.

At the encouragement of HPO, the new construction has been organized to break down its size and massing into smaller components rather than expressed as a single building. As developed, the largest and more institutionally-scaled pavilion is flanked by smaller, more domestically-scaled pavilions that provide a transition to the preserved buildings and grounds and to the surrounding neighborhood. Retention and reuse of the two-story garage, pool house, and cupola would preserve a sense of the estate's history and variety of buildings.

## **Recommendation**

HPO is seeking the Board's initial reactions and comments and recommends that no official action on the concept be taken until a landmark application is filed and evaluated to determine the precise significance of the property. The following comments are offered for the Board's consideration:

- 1) The overall site plan is generally respectful to the property's historic buildings and landscape, achieving a reasonable and compatible balance between preservation of the site and adaptation to a contemporary school campus.
- 2) Relocation of secondary structures within a site is a treatment the Board has occasionally found compatible in other situations, and in this instance the proposed relocations of the pool house and cupola appear to be appropriate in retaining their character.
- 3) The removal of the one-story frame garage, pool and sheds do not compromise important historic characteristics of the property.
- 4) Further research and evaluation is needed by a qualified landscape architect or historian on the extent to which the Rose Greeley-designed landscape was executed, what historic spatial qualities to the landscape are most important to retain or recapture, whether the proposed relocation of heritage trees to the proposed site are consistent with those spatial qualities, and how the new landscape should be developed to enhance the historic character of the property.
- 5) Two options for the largest of the three pavilions are shown in the plans – a rectangular option and a more angular parallelogram option, which is the applicant's preferred alternative. HPO supports this direction as the parallelogram relates nicely to the geometry of the site and, in comparison to the rectangular option, the acute and obtuse angles help lighten the mass and weight of the building. However, the post-supported corner element seems a little aggressive in scale, and it is recommended that whichever option is pursued, all three pavilions be developed to have a clear, site-specific relationship to the property.

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