

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

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| Landmark/District: | U Street Historic District | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda |
| Address: | 1923-1925 Vermont Ave | <input type="checkbox"/> Consent |
| | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept |
| Meeting Date: | March 1, 2018 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration |
| Case Number: | 18-203 | <input type="checkbox"/> New Construction |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Demolition |

Community Three Grimke LLC, with plans prepared by Torti Gallas Urban, seeks conceptual design review for exterior alterations and additions to the Grimke School in the U Street Historic District. The project would convert the former public school into a commercial, cultural and residential building.

Property History and Description

The Grimke School was built in three phases between 1884 – 1937. The original building was constructed between 1884-1887 and had a centered entrance and stair facing Vermont Avenue which were later removed. The building was expanded to the rear in 1935, and more substantially with a large side addition to the south in 1937 with a new front entrance. The gymnasium, also dating from 1937, was constructed behind the 1935 wing with frontage only along the rear alleys.

The school is named after Archibald Grimke (1849-1930), born a slave in Charleston, South Carolina but who became the second African American to graduate from Harvard Law School. The Grimke family was recognized as one of the most prominent African American families in Washington, leaving a remarkable legacy in education, civil rights, religion, and the arts.

The school, including its additions, was constructed within the period of significance for the U Street Historic District (1862-1948).

The gymnasium was renovated and opened as the home of the African American Civil War Museum in 2011. The remainder of the school building was most recently used as offices for the DC Departments of Corrections and Fire and Emergency Services, but has been vacant since 2013. It is currently in deteriorated condition resulting from decades of underinvestment and lack of maintenance.

Planning Considerations

The application is part of redevelopment plans initiated by the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development. The public goals of the project are to obtain a high-quality renovation of the building, commercial and residential uses that contribute to the revitalization of the neighborhood, and to provide a home for the African American Civil War Museum.

The project will require variance relief from the Board of Zoning Adjustment for a rear yard setback and courts to accommodate the addition to the auditorium annex.

Proposal

The project calls for much-needed restoration and rehabilitation work, including replacement of the deteriorated windows with new aluminum clad wood windows; recreating the original entrance in the 1884 school for a dedicated entrance to the museum; new doors on the north side elevation to provide an ADA complaint entrance; replacement of the failing slate roof with synthetic slates to match the original appearance; replication of missing metal cornice elements; and masonry repointing.

A three-story (plus basement) addition is proposed to infill a rear court between the 1884 and 1937 wings. It would be clad with a modern glass curtain wall and its flat roof would be vegetated.

The most substantial alterations are proposed for the gymnasium to facilitate its conversion to residential use. Three-story additions are proposed on the north and south sides and a fourth floor added to the roof, set back from the outside walls. The existing five banks of windows on the east side would be elongated, and new openings added.

Evaluation

The conceptual scope of rehabilitation work is compatible with the character of the building and consistent with the Board's standards and guidelines. The recreation of the missing doors and entrance stairs on the original 1884 portion of the building will achieve both an important preservation goal (restoration of an important missing feature) and greater public prominence and identity for the African American Civil War Museum.

The glass addition within the rear courtyard would be clearly distinguishable as a light, modern infill element. As the design development work continues, it is recommended that it be attached and constructed in a manner that minimizes alteration to the building, and that the detailing and materials use be of a quality commensurate with the building.

While the construction of the gymnasium building falls within the district's period of significance, the structure's modest design is evidently reflective of its location along an inner-block alley that never had any public presence. Its utilitarian design is not of the same architectural or construction quality as the 1935 or 1937 wings. Providing street-facing residential entrances and a greater degree of glazing would be compatible with and substantially improve the character of 9-1/2 Street, while not resulting in the loss of important character-defining features of the Grimke School.

With setbacks on all sides, the roof addition would not change the perceived height of the building or result in an incompatible height relationship with the two- and three-story houses on the opposite side of the alley. While additions to the north and south of the gymnasium could be potentially be compatible, additional design work is needed in the composition of their

elevations, orientation, and relationship to the underlying gym before they can be found to be compatible for the building and district.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept for rehabilitation, the courtyard addition, and the window alterations and roof addition to the gymnasium as compatible with the character of the historic district, but that further design work be undertaken on the side additions to the gym for presentation to the Board when ready.

Staff Contacts: Steve Callcott and Imania Price