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

Landmark/District: **Young, Browne, Phelps and Spingarn Campus** (X) Agenda
Address: **850 26th Street, NE** () Consent Calendar
Meeting Date: **December 21, 2023** (X) New Construction
H.P.A. Numbers: **24-086** (X) Alteration
(X) Demolition

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the District Department of General Services (DGS), along with Perkins Eastman Architects and Ronnie McGhee & Associates Architects, are proposing to modernize the Browne Education Campus by rehabilitating the historic school and replacing the 1970s gymnasium addition with a smaller facility.

Browne Junior High School

Browne Junior High School is a contributing element of the Young, Browne, Phelps and Spingarn Educational Campus Historic District which is listed in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places for its significant architecture and associations with the education of African American students. The school was designed by architect S.B. Walsh in the Colonial Revival Style to complement the earlier Charles Young School which was constructed in 1931. Browne was named in honor of the prominent native Washingtonian educator, minister and civil rights advocate Hugh M. Browne. The central core was constructed in 1932 and is the northernmost of all the schools in the historic district. Additions were constructed on the west in 1937, on the south in 1953, and on the north in 1970.

Following the construction of Young and Browne Schools, Phelps Vocational School was constructed on the western side of the historic district in 1932-1934 while Spingarn High School, the southernmost of all the schools and the last school in DC to be constructed in the Colonial Revival Style, was constructed in 1950.

All the educational buildings share the same architectural style, traditional red brick construction, slate roofs, limestone detailing and similar massing. These features create a highly unified appearance for the historic district. The period of significance extends from 1929 to 1960.

Proposal

The modernization project proposes restoration/rehabilitation of the historic wings of the school and replacement of the 1970 gymnasium with a smaller facility. The restoration/rehabilitation scope includes replacement of the existing, non-historic windows and doors and other relatively minor improvements to the exterior but the most notable change to the school's character will result from the demolition of the non-historic gymnasium and the construction of a new, smaller gymnasium in the same location.

According to DGS and DCPS, the existing gymnasium has structural problems and is much larger than needed. On a related note, several floors of Browne will be mothballed for future use since the amount of available space currently exceeds the anticipated need. Finally, interior rehabilitation/restoration work is included in the project scope. Although the interiors are not designated, this work is subject to HPO review under Section 9b of the Act.

Evaluation

The question of how to best replace the large 1970s gymnasium was the focus of much of the consultation that occurred for this project. Unlike Browne's earlier additions, the 70s gymnasium is sited in a location that projects forward of the historic school rather than being set back. The relatively steep drop in grade helps to mitigate its size and scale, but the existing building still reads as predominant due to its greater proximity to 26th Street.

By contrast, the proposed replacement gymnasium will be set back a few feet from the 1931 historic core and sited in the same plane as the 1950s addition to the south. This placement provides a compatible solution that respectfully defers to the original school and integrates the new addition in with those that preceded it. Compatibility will be further enhanced by incorporating a parapet on the new gymnasium to replicate the height of the 50's addition and by retaining and modifying the existing "connector" between the new gymnasium and the original school, thus creating a well-balanced design.

Although a small section of the existing elevator shaft will be visible on top of the connector, replacement or relocation of the elevator would be cost prohibitive and this relatively small element will be set back from the front of the connector and clad in a neutral-colored metal screen to make it visually recessive. The existing opening at the bottom of the connector will be clad in silicate masonry units that relate well to the limestone base of the historic school and will make the connector appear "grounded" like the rest of the complex. There is, however, one aspect of the connector that does not appear to be compatible, and that is the proposal to clad this feature in variegated fiber cement panels.

As previously stated, the use of traditional red brick is one of the most important unifying and character-defining features of the overall historic district and since the connector is a relatively minor component of the modernization project that is not a new or unprecedented, it does not warrant a unique finish. To the contrary, the connector already exists and was almost certainly constructed of traditional red brick to complement the very similar 1950s connector to the south. Even though necessary modifications will require the connector to be re-clad, HPO recommends that it be re-clad with traditional red brick to better integrate it into the overall composition, avoid drawing undue attention to it, and prevent visitors from assuming the connector is a new primary and/or secondary entrance to the school – which it is not. In order to ensure that the cladding for all newly proposed construction appropriately matches the ubiquitous traditional red brick, physical mock-ups of the proposed brick should be provided for approval.

The remaining façade treatments and fenestration proposed for the new gymnasium, which is to be clad in traditional red brick, are relatively simplistic, read as contemporary interpretations of the Colonial Revival Style and echo the very minimalistic approaches used for the east face of

the 1950s addition. As such, they appear to be compatible, but HPO is looking to the Board for any suggestions it may have to further refine and improve these aspects of the design.

Further refinement of details related to the exterior and interior restoration/rehabilitation scopes of work is needed, specifically those relating to the replacement windows and doors; the location of bioretention areas and other landscape features; the restoration of primary preservation zones such as the lobby and auditorium; and modifications proposed to address accessibility; but the overall concept for these aspects of the project appear to be mostly compatible.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- 1. Find the concept for the modernization of the Browne Education Campus compatible with the Young, Browne, Phelps and Spingarn Educational Campus Historic District on the condition that the connector element be clad in red brick to relate to the existing building and campus;*
- 2. Require physical mock-ups of the exterior cladding materials proposed for all new construction to be provided upon site for HPO approval; and*
- 3. Delegate all remaining design review and permit approval to HPO.*

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