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Subject: [HistoricWashington] Problems with Proposed Historic Mt. Pleasant Library Renovation

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Renovation of the DCPL Mt. Pleasant Branch Library From A Historic Preservation, Restoration and Sustainability Perspective

It was recently brought to my attention by community leaders that the Mount Pleasant Branch Library, located in Ward 1 (of which I am a ten-year resident), is to be renovated and enlarged by a new addition. After taking a tour of the structure, I was asked to comment on the proposed changes because of my background and expertise in historic preservation.

The number of period details from the original 1925 construction that survive is extremely impressive. This includes the windows, doors, exterior light fixtures, oak bookcases, benches, trim and plasterwork. The fireplace mantles, featuring decorative tiles, are particularly endearing. Perhaps the most distinctive decorative feature is the set of murals located in the children's reading room in alcoves flanking the central window. Also surprising is the presence of the original cast iron book stacks, the 1920s elevator and the original circulation desks. Finally, a truly gracious touch is the sunroom off the back that provides patrons with a light-filled reading space.

The vintage quality of this library is incomparable, especially for a branch library. In fact, the building resembles a mansion rather than a library. Architect Edward Tilton, a favorite of the building's namesake and benefactor Andrew Carnegie, won the 1900 Prix Internationale for the Ellis Island Welcome Hall. Tilton's intent for the Mt. Pleasant Library was to achieve a club-like atmosphere. The vintage "feel" that endures today was certainly appreciated by patrons I spoke with about this particular building.

The main entrance to the library is quite unusual in that the doors were placed to either side of a central monumental casement window. During my tour it appeared that there was no interior grand staircase, but there was a simple meandering stack access stair running from the basement to the top floor. Later, I realized that a beautiful exterior staircase, covered by a lovely arched arcade, was provided on the side of the building. It was intended—in the Victorian spirit of children being "not heard"—for use by, and specifically designed for, children to access their reading area on the second (top) floor.

Upon full and careful examination of the proposed exterior and interior renovation/restoration documents, it became clear to me that some of the important features described above would disappear in the renovation.

My comments regarding the renovation are divided into two parts:

Part I includes general observations and recommendations regarding the more major proposed changes; Part II includes specific changes that I feel should not take place and must be modified to protect the historic character and multiple rare surviving aspects of this fine building.

Part I: General Observations Regarding Major Changes

The original circulation desk on the first floor is an irreplaceable survival, composed of solid figured old growth oak with marble skirting. The proposed renovation calls for its removal. At the very least, it should be modified and reused in the new circulation area created during the renovation. Ideally, it should be left in place as it provides a visual anchor between the two adult reading rooms. It could be carefully altered by a competent cabinetmaker to accept modern technical equipment, if necessary.

The proposed replacement is unacceptably inferior in quality.

The proposed removal of original cast iron stacks is regrettable and should have been discouraged. Though less obvious to patrons (and librarians), they provide another character-defining feature of the interior. The bookcases at the general reading room level are faced with figured oak and the mezzanine features a cast and wrought iron balustrade.

While I do understand the need to install an enclosed staircase (modern fire code requires it), it could have been placed elsewhere or the existing staircase and space somewhat modified rather than completely demolished.

One of the most unusual features of the original library is the sunroom. Though parts of it will be salvaged, it is unfortunate that this space is to be needlessly lost, and, in my opinion, it should have been incorporated into or adapted to a new addition.

Additionally, the library windows are restored originals, and are of very fine quality. Again, it is difficult to determine if (and how) they will be treated during the renovation/restoration. Additional efficiency can be obtained by installing storm windows on either the interior or exterior if this is a concern. Under no circumstance should the panes be double-glazed— this was poorly done at the Takoma Park Branch Library, where the glazing is already deteriorating.

Separation of the new addition from the historic structure with an atrium is an appropriate choice by the architect. However, I see little overall need for such an expansive new addition since most of it contains functions that could be accommodated in a renovated/restored building (see Takoma Park Branch Library).

A much smaller less-invasive addition is also possible. For instance, an addition could be an extension of the "English basement" terrace level of the current library building, incorporating and extending the sun room foundation. Retaining the sunroom and installing a green roof around it would create a raised garden outside the sunroom. When looking out the windows, library patrons would see natural plantings. A balustrade could also be installed around the perimeter and a door installed in one of the sunroom bays, allowing passage from the library to the green roof/garden when appropriate.

Part 2: Objectionable Changes That Should Be Modified

The architect calls for the replacement of the original hanging light fixtures in the porch. The bronze patina of the metal fittings can easily be restored and the fixtures rewired to modern code. The opal glass globe shades only require cleaning. The same is true for the lampposts flanking the front stairs. These details are often overlooked by architects that don't specialize in historic renovations, with the quality of replacements never equal to that of the originals.

In looking at the elevations of the proposed interior changes, it is unclear to me if newly installed interior doors and casings in the historic building will be replicated to match the originals. Ideally, original doors and casings, when removed for renovation, should be reused in the original property. For example, how are the doors to the proposed enclosed staircase finished? A simple fire door with a metal frame would be completely out of character and inappropriate.

On the second floor in the children's entrance vestibule, the double oak swinging doors and corresponding wood and tile work should be retained and not demolished. The architect calls for a simple modern replacement of no distinction and not in character with the monumentality of the covered exterior stairway. This area should be treated with much more distinction than proposed by the architect, who clearly does not understand the importance of this unusual arrangement.

Conclusion

It is highly regrettable that the DC Historic Preservation Office, the DC Historic Preservation Review Board, and the US Commission of Fine Arts seem to have failed in the exercise of their oversight responsibilities with regard to this unique gem. That being said, it is not too late for the City to step in and do the right thing. Enclosed, is a rough sketch of an approach to the renovation of the Mt. Pleasant Branch Library that will fulfill community needs without irrevocably destroying part of community history.

See:

<http://historicwashington.org/docs/Library/MtPleasantLibraryPlan.doc>

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