



HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT

February 12, 2009

To: The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

From: Fay Armstrong

Subject: Proposed Renovation of the Mount Pleasant Branch Library

Please receive the following comments of Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) for consideration in conjunction with the D.C. Public Library's application for your review of its proposal to expand and renovate the Mount Pleasant Branch Library. HMP representatives plan to attend the public hearing next week and would be pleased to provide any additional information or take any questions that you may have. By way of reference, HMP prepared the application for creation of the local historic district in 1985 and has been working with the D.C. Office of Historic Preservation and the Historic Preservation Review Board since that time.

The Mount Pleasant Branch Library, which opened in 1925, was the last of four library buildings in Washington constructed with funds from the Carnegie Foundation and the only one to be funded with a "double gift" of \$200,000 (the usual Carnegie gift being half that amount). The building was designed by Edward L. Tilton of New York, who was also the architect for the immigration center on New York's Ellis Island and for many other Carnegie-funded libraries around the country. As described in the 1985 Application for Creation of the Mount Pleasant Historic District under D.C. Law 2-144 (at page 42):

Funded by a contribution of land by Mrs. John Henderson and monies from Andrew Carnegie, the library was intended to provide adequate facilities for the growing Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights citizenry as well as to be in keeping with the handsome churches of the area. Its broad façade, dominated by a large archway at the center, seems to respond to both Sixteenth Street and the Mount Pleasant neighborhoods. Designed in the Italian Renaissance style of limestone, the two story and basement structure was highly touted from its very beginning. . . . A special feature of the design was the children's library on the second floor which boasted its own private entrance stair on the western façade. The library was the object of several professional library tours. In 1925, the American Institute of Architects awarded Tilton a major award for his library design work.

The library is, without a doubt, the most significant architectural structure in the Mount Pleasant Historic District. It is our crown jewel, and it retains its original design and details. A building of this workmanship and quality would be cost-prohibitive today.

The library building is situated in the center of an irregularly-shaped lot fronted by Lamont Street and a remaining piece of what was originally Fifteenth Street. Two identical wings flank a trapezoidal central space that extends from the arched front entrance and service desk to a small sun room, which overlooks the rear yard. The fact that this is not a large rectangular building makes the space less flexible than that found in other local library buildings. However, the unique shape and symmetry of this building and the way it relates to its site are basic to the building's aesthetic appeal. One side of the building is twenty feet from the neighboring apartment building, while the other overlooks a wide side yard with service area. The proposal submitted by the library would fundamentally alter this scheme – adding on the more open side, the only side from which the overall shape of the library can be appreciated, a featureless cube of glass and manmade stone almost equal in size to the library's original west wing. This large unsympathetic addition would destroy the symmetry of the building, draw the eye away from the central entranceway, overwhelm the distinctive children's exterior staircase, and be a dramatic unwelcome intrusion on adjacent residences.

It is unfortunate that the D.C. Public Library (DCPL) chose to develop a design for this important site without consulting the community. Despite several requests for a meeting, DCPL did not allow its architects to meet with HMP until January 29. At that time, we asked a simple question: why was the addition not located at the rear of the property, where visibility from the street would be minimized and other problems would be avoided? DCPL's answer was that this was the only place on the site that the program requirement for a 100-seat meeting room could be accommodated without disturbing the sun room, which they said they were told not to change. We questioned both that advice and their proposed design, and we urge the Commission to do the same.

Considering the radical changes proposed for the exterior of this building, it is essential to reconsider locating additional program areas at the rear – even at the possible loss of the sun room. The actual seating area of the proposed new meeting room fits readily behind the original main building. The problem, if any, would seem to be that the resulting shape is irregular. But that is the charm of our library building. It is a perfectly balanced irregular shape masterfully designed for an irregular lot. While the sun room is charming, it is a small feature and much less integral to the original design than the overall massing and symmetry of the main wings. If a large unobstructed space of the capacity proposed is indeed required, we urge that it be placed at the rear of the building, utilizing if possible parts of the original sun room. We also note that, because of the large amount of glass proposed for the addition, care should be taken to shield the surrounding residential properties from excessive illumination at night.

Even if this alternative location for an addition were not available, a glass-fronted “cube” is the wrong design for this building. Additions to historic buildings should complement and defer to the original building to which they are attached. The original library building should remain the dominant “object.” The large glass box, however, competes visually with the historic façade and disrupts its dialogue with the major thoroughfare of 16th Street. An addition visible from the street should also consider its broader context, in this case not only Lamont Street but the historic fabric of the Mount Pleasant Historic District. Lamont Street is a narrow residential street. Instead of relating to the pedestrian environment here, the cube looms threateningly over the sidewalk. While a glass-fronted addition may be a striking choice on a

wide commercial avenue, it is inappropriate here, where its brilliant illumination will shine directly into homes, the closest of which is a mere twenty feet away.

When we questioned the choice of an all-glass street façade, DCPL referred us to the Secretary of the Interior's standard that additions to historic structures be visually distinct from the original historic fabric. We wholeheartedly agree with this principle. However, this does not require a glass-fronted box. There is a rich pallet of more appropriate materials from which to choose. An addition should enhance its environment, through careful attention to such details as massing, rhythm, materials, roof shape, and proportion. Design of an addition should involve a careful analysis of how these design principles are used in the surrounding historic neighborhood and how they can be interpreted using today's materials and construction techniques. We urge a more subtle approach be taken in terms of materials and fenestration, to defer to the original building and complement its surroundings.

The other very unfortunate part of the proposed exterior design is the long, switchback ramp that rises seven feet across the Lamont Street façade and would replace the existing ramp to the lower level. A fundamental rule of accessibility with respect to historic structures is to create the highest level of access with the lowest level of impact. Given the fact that the library's main entry sits almost a full floor above the sidewalk and is the most prominent feature of the facade, we question the decision to make this entry the one and only entrance for all users. The new ramp would measure 155 feet in length and would obscure the entire lower level of the original west wing, further upsetting the visual symmetry of the original design.

In contrast, the existing ramp does not detract from the building, running comfortably alongside that same façade. It is used today by many people, both those with special accessibility needs and those without. The more logical approach – particularly if any new construction is placed at the rear of the building – would be to widen the existing ramp and design the interior space to accommodate two primary points of entry into the library. The original front entrance is a beautiful and central feature and should remain, while another respectful and dignified means of access is enhanced.

We are also concerned about the proposed uses of manmade stone and steel on the façade. While manmade stone of a color similar to the original limestone would be unobjectionable for a rear addition, we question its extensive use for freestanding walls that are fully visible from the street and would become the public face of the library to the west in place of the beautifully detailed masonry and staircase that all enjoy now. The proposal to build the sides of the long ramp with COR-TEN steel, a medium intended to rust rapidly, completes the picture of an addition that would not be allowed on the front of any residence in the Mount Pleasant Historic District.

With the substantial changes to the original building fabric now being proposed, the benefits to users of these considerable changes need to be carefully weighed against the permanent damage such changes would cause to the building itself. The limitations of the site may require consideration of other sites for library services in Ward One, as the demand for and variety of these services grow.

These are our concerns, and we look forward to working through these issues with DCPL in a participatory planning process with other members of the community. We urge the Commission of Fine Arts to send this project back to the drawing board. After 84 years of continuous use, the Mount Pleasant Branch Library – a unique and irreplaceable building with a distinguished pedigree – deserves a renovation plan that truly celebrates its distinctive architectural features and design.