

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

N.Witherell

NCPC File No. 6453



**OLD DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COURTHOUSE
ADDITION AND SITE IMPROVEMENTS
400 E Street, NW
Washington, D.C.**

Submitted by the District of Columbia Courts

April 29, 2004

Abstract

The D.C. Court of Appeals has submitted preliminary site and building plans for the rehabilitation of the Old District of Columbia Courthouse at 400 E Street, NW, including the construction of an entrance pavilion on the north façade, and a site plan that provides both a permanent setting adjacent to the new entrance to the Courthouse and an interim plan for the plaza until the National Law Enforcement Museum is constructed.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary site and building plans pursuant to D.C. Code § 10-603, 40 U.S.C. § 8722(e), and Section 5 of the National Capital Planning Act (40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1)).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the preliminary site and building plans for the entrance pavilion to the Old District of Columbia Courthouse as well as the permanent and interim features of the entrance plaza, as shown on NCPC Map File 1.22(08.21)-41341, as being consistent with the principles of the draft Judiciary Square Master Plan and with the historic setting of the buildings and open space of Judiciary Square.

Commends the simplification of the plaza elements since the concept design, and recommends, in the continuing design development and preparation of final site and building plans, that this refinement continue so that the open space is used as effectively as possible.

Notes that the D.C. Courts have agreed to explore the feasibility of allowing the museum underground access to the Courthouse's service entry from 4th Street, NW.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Site Description

The Old District of Columbia Courthouse is located between Indiana Avenue and E Street, between 4th and 5th Streets, NW. The Courthouse is the southern terminus of the open quadrangle known as Judiciary Square, and sits opposite the National Building Museum to the north. Judiciary Square is one of the most significant squares in Washington, placed prominently in the city plan by L'Enfant and the site of two important nineteenth-century buildings, the City Hall (now the Old D.C. Courthouse) and the Pension Building (now the National Building Museum). In the first decades of the twentieth century, the complex was conceived and implemented as a large outdoor room flanked by court buildings, creating a campus setting. The Courthouse's exterior was last altered significantly in 1917 when the north façade was redesigned and the pedimented portico removed. The historic buildings create a notable architectural ensemble and frame vistas across and through the square that delight pedestrians.

Background

The District of Columbia Courts, GSA, and the Commission initiated the Judiciary Square Master Plan in November 2002 in recognition of the benefits of coordinating the many construction projects anticipated for the Judiciary Square buildings and the improved function of the current and new uses in the Square. Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners L.L.P. was selected in 2003 to design the Courthouse addition, as well as a parking garage and a service loading area for the Courthouse. The project is administered under GSA's design excellence program.

Previous Commission Action

On April 1, 2004 the Commission approved the concept design for the entrance pavilion and for the interim and permanent plaza elements, with direction for further study, especially of the entrance pavilion. The current submission is a revision of the April concept design, in response to the Commission's direction.

On August 7, 2003 the Commission approved the draft Judiciary Square Master Plan, except for the proposed realignment of the traffic lanes along E Street between 4th and 5th Streets, NW. It approved the general concept of the perimeter security elements, but not their specific placement;

and required that the placement of these elements be submitted to the Commission as part of each building project.

Development Program

Applicant: District of Columbia Courts
Architect: Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners L.L.P.
Square Footage: 134,770 square feet of gross floor area for interior renovation and new construction and for new entrance pavilion
Estimated Cost: \$46.5 million
Schedule: Notice to Proceed: February 2005; Substantial Completion: December 2006

Proposal

The changes to the proposal since the April 1 concept design include:

Entrance pavilion:

- The entrance pavilion is reduced by one bay (12 feet) in projection. The design and materials, including the outermost bay with the portico and entrance doors, remain the same. The height (up to the third floor window sills) remains the same.

Permanent plaza elements:

- The stairs are pulled closer to the entrance and now fall entirely within the area established in the legislation for the Courthouse's sole use, thereby making them part of the "permanent" plaza elements and creating more clear space in the plaza itself.
- The grass slopes between the water pools and the switchback ramps have been eliminated as a result.
- The landing at the top of the stairs has been increased by almost four feet as a result.
- The second pair of handicapped ramps near the Courthouse has been eliminated (and will be built as temporary structures when needed during museum construction) and the area converted to green space.
- Hedges are proposed for the areas between the flanking courtyards and the Courthouse façade.

Interim plaza elements:

- The switchback ramps have been widened by 2.5 feet to provide a more open appearance and a more spacious landing near the entrance pavilion. The ramps fall partly within the area to be excavated for the museum.

- Grass panels will be placed roughly in the area of the future museum pavilions.
- A security barrier will be installed along the E Street sidewalk, consisting of 30-inch-high retaining walls against the grass panels and 36-inch-high bollards across the middle of the plaza, in a line recessed from the sidewalk. Hydraulic bollards will be installed across the driveways on either side of the plaza. The bollards are not yet designed. When the museum pavilions replace the grass panels, another security barrier may be designed and implemented.

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

The staff recommends that the Commission *approve* the preliminary site and building plans for the Courthouse entrance pavilion, as well as for the permanent and interim plaza elements.

D.C. Courts is actively developing the design in anticipation of Commission review of final site and building plans at the July 2004 meeting. The architects have informed staff of areas where further study is underway, particularly of the grades and the vertical dimensions of plaza elements. Staff meets with the Courts, GSA, and the architects regularly to discuss project development and to manage the Section 106 consultation for the project.

Staff has asked the architects to continue to develop visual materials to convey information about the plaza elements and the entrance pavilion.

Entrance Pavilion

The reduced projection of the entrance pavilion is compatible with the dimensions of the Courthouse and of the spatial character of Judiciary Square. Staff believes the architects have appropriately balanced the desire for a prominent Courthouse entrance with the character of the open space of Judiciary Square. The use of transparent materials for the entrance pavilion minimizes the actual dimensions of the entrance pavilion, although the portico design adds needed articulation against the historic façade.

Permanent Plaza Elements

As a result of the reduction in the size of the entrance pavilion, the architects have been able to move the grand stairs closer to the building. This is the major revision in the current submission and has led to a redesign of the other plaza elements. The stairs are now entirely within the area stipulated for sole Courthouse use and, therefore, they will not be affected by future museum construction. The result will be greater flexibility and redesigning the permanent plaza elements for the museum in the future.

The entry sequence is direct and clear and the landing is more generous. While staff regrets the loss of the sloping grass panels between the water pools and the switchback ramps, it notes the added greenspace to the sides of the flanking courtyards through the elimination of the second set of ramps. The innermost portions of the switchback ramps now become fully integrated with the steps and become vertical design features in the vista toward the entrance pavilion from Judiciary Square and E Street. One of the most successful revisions is one of the most subtle: the ramps have been widened to provide a generous space that not only eliminates the previous slight pinch at the top of the ramps but that, more importantly, makes them commensurate with the spacious and open character of the Judiciary Square setting.

The architects are continuing to study the design of the water pools. The pools mediate the grade changes across the site (still being studied and designed by the architects) and are prominent features flanking the entrance pavilion. The pools will need to look active and attractive to pedestrians year round.

Interim Plaza Elements

The architects have designed grass panels where the museum pavilions will eventually be constructed. The grass panels help to define the edge of the plaza, frame the setting for the Courthouse, and reinforce the landscape character of Judiciary Square.

In addition, the grass panels provide the means for a more varied security barrier line along E Street. The panels will be surrounded by a combination of 30-inch-high retaining walls that will provide a security barrier line and by lower seating walls. A bollard line approximately 60 feet in length will be installed between the two grass panels, set back from the E Street sidewalk. Hydraulic bollards will be installed across the two driveways.

Staff believes the security barrier is appropriate for the Courthouse setting, appropriate physically as well as fiscally as an interim measure, and consistent with the principles of security design and location in the draft Judiciary Square Master Plan. (A barrier line closer to the Courthouse, for example, would require barriers crossing the space between the Courthouse and its adjacent buildings as well as in front of the Courthouse.) The proposed scheme keeps the barrier line at or near the inner edge of the sidewalk, which is where it is proposed throughout Judiciary Square as a visual reinforcement of the edges of each block within Judiciary Square. Therefore, staff does not recommend a “building yard” security scheme for the front of the Courthouse but, rather, the barrier location advocated in the draft Master Plan.

PROJECT CONFORMANCE

Conformance with Public Law 106-492

In staff’s opinion, the Courthouse site plan is consistent with the Public Law. The switchback ramps will likely be excavated during museum construction; the security barrier line will be redesigned when the museum is constructed and will be reviewed at that time for its conformance with the terms of the legislation, the Master Plan, and the character of Judiciary Square.

Conformance with the draft Master Plan

The staff finds the Courthouse concept design consistent with the draft Master Plan, in its use of a neoclassical form for the addition, the low site elements, the direct and axial approach to the entrance, the retention of and emphasis on established vistas through the Square, and the apparent simplicity of the overall scheme.

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The proposed design concept is not inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital, and is consistent with the draft Judiciary Square Master Plan.

National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan

The interim security measures to be put in place until the museum is constructed are consistent with the general guidance in the Judiciary Square Master Plan and are designed to be compatible with the architectural character of the historic buildings and the open character of the setting. The use of retaining walls with grass panels and the minimization of the length of the bollard line are appropriate responses to the landscape character and architectural setting of Judiciary Square.

National Environmental Policy Act

In conformance with procedures and the requirements of NEPA, NCPC staff analyzed the prepared June 2003 Environmental Assessment (EA) on the Judiciary Master Plan, which included the submitted Old Courthouse Building renovations. That document was completed by the Commission as lead federal agency and joint lead agency with the District of Columbia Courts. Staff drafted a Finding of No Significant Impact based on the EA, in July 2003, conforming with the Commission's delegated authority to the Executive Director. The EA included the review of the Old Courthouse Building renovation proposal and concluded that the analysis of the project and its potential environmental impacts demonstrated no significant environmental effects from the planned action.

No modifications have occurred in the Courthouse proposal which would significantly affect the environmental analysis of the plan, as described and analyzed by the June 2003 EA, and consequently the determinations of the Finding remain valid. Staff has reviewed the action for extraordinary circumstances as sanctioned by NEPA and has determined none prevail or are attributable to the action in accordance with the Commission's procedures.

National Historic Preservation Act

NCPC is serving as the lead federal agency for Section 106 review, due to our in-lieu-of-zoning approval authority for D.C. public buildings in the Central Area. NCPC is also the lead agency for the Section 106 review of the Master Plan. Furthermore, NCPC will serve as the lead agency for Section 106 review of the National Law Enforcement Museum.

Staff held a consultation meeting on April 7, 2004 and plans to hold regular meetings with the parties as design development progresses between now and final review. Staff will shortly draft a Memorandum of Agreement to address the minimization of adverse effects. Staff has identified the adverse effect as arising primarily from the proposed relocation of the entrance from the south façade to the north façade, from the construction of an addition on the north façade of the courthouse, and from the insertion of a projecting architectural element into the open space of Judiciary Square. Staff anticipates that some of these effects will continue to be minimized during further consultation. The proposed interior alterations appear to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, as do the exterior repairs.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed this project at its meeting on March 10, 2004, and forwarded the project to the Commission with the statement that the project has been coordinated with all agencies participating. The representative for GSA coordinated the project contingent on resolution of outstanding design issues. The other participating agencies are: NCPC; District of Columbia Office of Planning; the Department of Housing and Community Development; the District Department of Transportation; the National Park Service; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Commission of Fine Arts

CFA approved the revised concept for the D.C. Courthouse proposal at its April 15, 2004 meeting, responding positively to the revised dimensions of the entrance pavilions and the landing and upper plaza. CFA reminded the architects that the fountains would not operate during winter months, and discussed various ways of simplifying the landscape design.