Boards and Commissions

Historic District Commission
Minutes
Meeting No. 7-2007

Thursday, June 21, 2007
Rockville City Hall

PRESENT

Con Hitchcock, Chairman

Max van Balgooy
Craig Moloney
Anita Neal Powell
Janet Hunt-McCool

IV. EVALUATION FOR HISTORICAL, ARCHITECTURAL OR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. Applicant: Peerless Rockville (Nominator); State of Maryland, GSA (Property owner)
Address: 99 Maryland Avenue (former Rockville Library)
Request: Evaluate for significance

Staff Winstel summarized the staff report which he had presented in full at the May 17, 2007 HDC meeting, in favor of the proposed nomination of the former Rockville Library as a single-site historic district in the City. He noted that, while the building is less than 50 years old, National Register Bulletin IX notes that International Style architecture is a category under which the National Register has been able to evaluate and list properties during the past 20 years, indicating that sufficient time has passed for the objective scholarly evaluation of the importance of the architectural style.

The Rockville Public Library was completed in 1971 and was designed by noted Bethesda Architect, Stanley Arthur. Common features of the International Style that are evidenced by the library include the continuous bands of windows and brick that wrap around the corners, the emphatic horizontality of the building, and the use of cantilevered spaces supported by seemingly disproportionate pilotis. In addition, the manipulation of these architectural features on the irregular shaped, sloping lot emphasize the building's volume over its weight and mass, a defining element of the International Style.

In addition, the building is culturally significant as the first permanent library building in the City of Rockville. The library is a reflection of Rockville's transition from a pre-WWII small town to a desirable suburban satellite community for Washington DC's well-educated and professional work force. Mr. Winstel concluded that the former library building is also a familiar feature in an area of the City that contains other important civic buildings.

Mr. Winstel entered into the record a letter received that afternoon. The letter was signed by Isaiah Leggett, Montgomery County Executive, and County Council President, Marilyn Praisner, and stated opposition for historic designation.

Terry Lachin, Historian with Peerless Rockville, made a brief presentation in response to the above-referenced letter, noting that this building is very significant to Rockville's history as the first permanent library in Rockville and it is a distinctive example of the International style that successfully fits in with nearby buildings and its own difficult site. She added that Stanley Arthur was an accomplished architect and this is one of the best examples of his work and one that he was especially proud of. She said there is documentation indicating that the library was very welcomed by the community when it opened in 1971 and that it generated much excitement. Ms. Lachin said that examples of Modernism, like anything else, must be evaluated on the local level. It is unfair to compare to examples from much larger metropolitan areas that have greater access to architectural talent and resources. It is rare to find a Master Architect on a local level equivalent to Rockville.

Eileen McGuckian, Executive Director of Peerless Rockville, described the evolution of the library system in Montgomery County from the 1950s up to 1971 when this library opened.

Commissioner Powell asked the nominator when City Hall, adjacent to the former library, was built and whether or not it would be considered for designation as well. Ms. McGuckian responded that City Hall was built in the early 1960s and that Peerless was submitting the former library as a stand-alone nomination in that it very clearly meets the criteria on its own. Ms. Powell asked if the City had received a demolition application. Ms. McGuckian responded that the State owns the property now and it is the State's intention to demolish the library and use the site for a new District Court. Although no demolition application has been submitted yet, one could be filed at any time. She added that the State's Section 106 review, which is required, had not yet been completed. This review will include the impact of demolition of the library and construction of the new courthouse on the immediately adjacent South Washington Street Historic District, which is both a local and National Register District.

Ms. McGuckian said that the Town Center Action Team, a community group that has been around for many years now, was instrumental in getting the new library built and that the District Court site has been a topic of their discussion for a long time.

Commissioner van Balgooy said that the old library reminds him of the IBM building (50 Monroe Street) that the HDC reviewed in 2005 in that it was also an example of the International style, built by the same architect, and in a prominent downtown location. He said that staff and Peerless Rockville did not support that designation application.

Staff Winstel responded that 50 Monroe Street's demolition actually strengthens the nomination for the library as it removed another notable example of the style in Rockville. Ms. McGuckian added that Ms. Lachin's research on the Recent Past over the past few years has increased public awareness of this issue and Peerless was divided on the nomination 50 Monroe Street but is not in its support for the nomination of the Rockville Library.

Commissioner van Balgooy said that the library looks deceptively simple but is really quite sophisticated in what it achieves. He said the fact that it was the first purposely built library in Rockville and that it came so late relative to libraries in other communities is very meaningful. Its prominent location also says much about its community importance.

Laura Burthum spoke from the audience in support of the nomination. She has been reading the plaques that are located around the downtown area and said that they represent "Lost Rockville", important sites that are now gone and she does not want to see that happen to the library. The old library has community significance. For her and her peers, it is more important than other historic buildings like the Red Brick Courthouse or the Beall-Dawson House because she can directly relate to it as an integral part of her experience growing up and living in Rockville. She said that it is an appealing example of modern architecture. She said that the letter from the County should be taken with a grain of salt and that there is an agenda behind it, which has nothing to do with the building's qualifications as a historic building.

Commissioner Hitchcock asked the nominator if they would be willing to supplement the written research with some of the points made orally at this meeting, including how the City's provision of library services intersected with the County's path of building its library system since the 1950s, and if they could specifically address in writing the points made in opposition to designation in the letter from the County. Commissioner Powell agreed that this would be useful.

Commissioners Moloney and McCool disagreed and felt that they had sufficient documentation to make a recommendation.

> **MOTION:** Commissioner van Balgooy made a motion to recommend that the former Rockville Library, located at 99 Maryland Avenue, be designated as a single site historic district in that it meets the City's criteria for historic designation. Commissioner McCool seconded the motion.
> **VOTE:** 4-1 (Commissioner Powell voted against)

Commissioner Hitchcock again asked the nominator to respond to the points in the County's letter to complete the record and Ms. McGuckian agreed to do that.