



STAFF RECOMMENDATION

May 7, 2007

TO: Historic Preservation Commission

FROM: Jeffrey Winstel, AICP, Historic Preservation Planner

SUBJECT: Evaluation of Significance to Rockville of 99 Maryland Avenue

DESCRIPTION: Subdivision 0201, Block 1, Lot P1

OWNER: State of Maryland, Department of General Services
300 W. Preston St., Suite #601
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Based on an assessment of the history and architecture of the site, Staff finds that this property does meet the adopted Rockville criteria for a local historic district.

Architectural Significance

The Rockville Public Library was completed in 1971 and was designed by noted Bethesda Architect, Arthur Stanley. The building is characterized by broad bands of light brick and continuous bands of tinted windows. The irregular T-shaped building is cantilevered on the east façade, projecting out beyond the lower level dark brick faced walls and resting on widely spaced thin pilotis. Each of the three levels of the building are slightly recessed from the level above. The square plaza at the corner of Vinson Street and Maryland Avenue fronts the main entrance.

The building evidences the principles of the International Style. In 1926, Swiss architect, Le Corbusier formulated 5 points of new architecture that greatly contributed to the development of the style. His new architecture was defined by the use of pilotis elevating mass off the ground, separation of load bearing walls from walls subdividing space, the free façade – not defined by load bearing walls, the long horizontal window, and the roof garden. A 1932 show of major European and American contemporary architecture, organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson was titled “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.” The accompanying book by Hitchcock and Johnson coined the label International Style. They defined formal

principles of the style as the emphasis of volume -- the amount of space occupied by a three-dimensional object – over mass, rejection of symmetry, and rejection of applied ornamentation.

Common features of the 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, with 3 street elevations make the library a noteworthy example of the International Style.

The relationship between the landform and the building is one of reciprocity; rather than the building being imposed on and thereby dominating the site, the library responds to the changing levels of the topography. The lot appears to have a central plateau area that runs from the rear, or west elevation, to the mid-point. Along the Jefferson Avenue side, the lot slopes down into a bowl at the intersection of Jefferson and Maryland. There are three distinct breaks along this side, which are equally spaced along the length of the slope.

The Jefferson Avenue street façade's horizontality is emphasized by the greater setback in the northwest corner. At the first noticeable break in the slope, the first floor windows become longer at the bottom. The subtle and off-center break of the wall plane occurs at the middle break, which is marked by a recessed entrance framed by the darker brick. As the ground continues its downward slope into the bowl, Jefferson Avenue curves toward the building at a near 45-degree angle, while the building becomes higher in relation to the ground level ending in the cantilevered corner. The curve of the street coupled with minor changes in the façade and the cantilevered corner create a sense of a sweeping expanse. This manipulation of space creates a sense of movement although the continuous horizontal bands of the International Style are rectilinear and static.

The Maryland Avenue facade, which contains the entrance plaza and recessed entranceway, is not perpendicular to the street edge. The cantilevered sections, which include the corner of Maryland and Jefferson avenues, and the east elevation of the south appendage (the stub of the irregular "T"), further emphasize the volume of the building. The south side, or Vinson Street elevation, is a downward slope from the high point of the central area, quickly descending to the entrance plaza, and further descending down to the bowl at the northeast intersection of Jefferson and Maryland avenues. As previously noted, the building is cantilevered over the lowest elevation of the lot, at the corner of Maryland and Jefferson. A square plaza, located at the corner of Vinson and Maryland, fronts the principal entry, which is set at an angle. The eastern elevation of the rear appendage (the stub of the "T") has a cantilevered second floor supported by pilotis, creating a covered walkway to the main entrance.

These cantilevered sections do not seem rooted to the ground or the geometry of the existing street grid. Instead, the geometry of the building's form, as articulated by bands of blond brick spaced between bands of tinted windows, is articulated above and in contrast to the geometry of the block and the lot's changing topography.

Cultural and Social Significance

The nominated property is 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 family community for Washington DC's well educated and professional work force. The first library in Rockville was organized in 1869 and consisted of 150 books in the law offices of Anderson and Bouic. In 1916 a small lending library was created and staffed by volunteers at the Woman's Club. In 1921, the Rockville Library Association adopted articles of incorporation and formed a membership-based organization. The library's collection grew and in 1937 the library moved to the Rockville Academy and hired the first paid librarian.

It was not until 1948 that free library service was offered to all residents. At that time the Rockville Public Library was formed and a year later the Mayor and Council of Rockville voted to allocate a stipend for the library operation. The Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries was created in 1951, but Rockville did not join the county system until 1957. Between the 1950 and 1960, Rockville's population grew over 270%, and the library was still operating out of the Rockville Academy. The Suburban Trust Company Bank and office building at 255 North Washington became the 1966 home for the library, while plans for a permanent facility were being made.

The new library opened in September of 1971 and quickly became a well-used community resource. With a growing collection, circulation and patron registration the library staff often felt overwhelmed, but nonetheless pursued an aggressive public outreach program to community and school groups. Exhibits were organized for Black History Month, the Rockville Arts League, and public safety awareness campaigns. The library remained open until 2006, when it was replaced by the new Rockville Library in Rockville Town Center.

Archeological resources: Low potential

**CITY OF ROCKVILLE
HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION CRITERIA**

99 Maryland Avenue

Standing structures and sites, including archeological sites, must be determined to be significant in one or more of the following criteria to be found eligible for designation:

I. Historical and cultural significance:

A. Is the site of a significant historic event.

No, this is not the site of a significant event.

B. Is identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society.

No, this is not identified with a person or group who influenced society.

C. Exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historic heritage of the County and its communities. (Refer to Rockville Context in Management Plan)

Although the property is not individually identifies as Resource Type associated with Theme 7: Social, Educational, Cultural, Historic Context #7 Rockville; County Seat to Satellite city of the National's Capital 1931 – Present, the History of the Rockville library is identified as a data gap in the documentation on this period.

As Rockville's first permanent Library building and a regional library in the county system, the property does exemplify the cultural and social heritage of the County and its communities.

D. Has character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, County, State, or Nation.

Rockville's transition from a small county-seat town to a major suburban community in metropolitan Washington DC is conveyed by library's size and prominent location of the library in the community. While there were over 3,500 libraries nationwide by 1929, Rockville did not have free circulation for its citizens until 1949. The importance of the library to Rockville's transition from small town into suburban satellite of the nation's capital is reflected the role relative importance of the library in the pre-WWII community.

II. Architectural and design significance:

A. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction.

Yes, the library evidences the defining characteristics of the International Style including the horizontal emphasis, the continuing band of windows with little or no relief from the wall

plane, cantilevered sections and the use of thin pilotis, and the emphasis of volume over mass and weight.

B. Represents the work of a master.

No. Although Stanley Arthur was a prominent and successful local architect who worked on many civic scale projects in the area, he did not develop a unique style or significantly reinterpret existing styles to the extent of creating a distinctive interpretation of the style.

C. Possesses high artistic values.

No.

D. Represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

This applies to multi-site historic districts, and is not applicable in this case.

E. Represents an established or familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or county due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape.

Yes, the library has occupied a prominent corner in downtown Rockville across from the Old Brick Courthouse, County Office Building, and Rockville City Hall. It's long horizontal form provides a transition from the taller urban buildings of the downtown area to the 2-3 story late 19th century houses that comprise the North Washington Historic District.

III. Structural Integrity:

The structure appears to maintain a great deal of architectural integrity and has been little altered.

"Substantially Altered" (basic shape, original façade plan, windows and doors have been obscured or changed.)

Minor alterations (porch removal or enclosure, roof material replacement, siding added over old siding, basic mass and fenestration intact.

Original or near original condition (all changes reversible)

Outbuildings present and recognizable

Original site and setting largely preserved. (Lot size, environmental character, trees, setbacks, streetscape)

If the site is found to meet one or more criteria and possesses sufficient integrity, it is eligible to be recommended to the Mayor and Council as a potential historic district or landmark site. Determine the level of site significance and list the applicable criteria for the recommendation.

IV. Level of site significance: (Check those that apply)

Local: The library is significant for its cultural and social significance to the History of Rockville and as a significant example of International Style architecture in Rockville.

State

National:

Staff Recommendation

Although the City of Rockville follows the National Register guidelines for assessing significant for buildings less than 50 years old, there is nor requirement in our city ordinance to suggest we cannot consider buildings less than 50 years old for historic designation. City of Rockville Historic Designation guidelines state that the property must be of exceptional importance to the extent that the property's importance is not tied to any particular time period. If a property less than 50 years old is proposed for demolition and "appears to possess qualities that are significant to the City of Rockville" it may be considered historic.

A public library plays a significant role in a community – it provides access to knowledge for everyone in the community. The importance of this function is clearly not limited to a particular time period. The 1971 Library was the first permanent library building in Rockville and is significant to the history of the community.

The State of Maryland authorizing legislation for Historic Area Zoning, Article 66b Land Use Section 8.01., is silent on the issues of age and historic significance.

The National Register of Historic Places guidelines for nominating building less than 50 years old place a great deal of emphasis on the historic context of a building. *National Register Bulletin 9: Justifying the Importance of Properties that have achieved Significance in the last 50 Years* states that properties have, in the last 20 years, been evaluated and listed as significant examples of International Style architecture. Sufficient time has passed for scholarly evaluation of the style as evidenced by the body of work on the subject. The comparative context for the style for the purpose of local significance determination is limited to the City of Rockville. Two of the six examples of this architect's work in Rockville have been razed or substantially altered. Given the popularity of the style, the tremendous growth Rockville experienced during the period of the style's popularity in the United States (late 1940s – 1970s) examples of the International Style in Rockville are very limited, especially in the downtown area.

The Library meets the City of Rockville criteria for historic designation, and appears to satisfy the test for exceptional significance, as defined by National Register Bulletin IX, within the historic context of the City of Rockville, during a period of rapid auto-related suburban expansion, from post WWII – 1982 and the arrival of Metro.