

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



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

July 29, 2004

Abstract

The D.C. Court of Appeals has submitted final 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, as well as a service entrance to the Courthouse from 4th Street, NW.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of final 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 final 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 and other site modifications, as shown on NCPC Map File 1.20(38.00)-41405, 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.

Notes that the D.C. Courts is continuing to study 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 May 6, 2004 the Commission approved preliminary site and building plans for the entrance pavilion and plaza, commending the applicant for the improvement of the design since the previous submission, especially the reduction in size of the entrance pavilion and the simplification of the site plan, including the handicapped ramps. That submission contained the proposed security design (retaining walls and bollards) shown on the final site and building plans.

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.

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 May 6 preliminary site and building plan review include minor modifications to the footprint of the 30-inch retaining walls bordering the grass panels at the north end of the plaza, the placement of two flagpoles on the retaining walls, and the modification of the water pools to provide design interest throughout the year, even in winter when the fountains will not be running. The hedges previously proposed for the area between the flanking courtyards and the north façade of the Courthouse have been removed in this final submission; granite benches will be placed there instead, in order to improve the visibility of the building's facade.

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

The staff recommends that the Commission *approve* the final site and building plans for the Courthouse entrance pavilion, as well as for the permanent and interim plaza elements and other site improvements, including the service entrance from 4th Street, NW. The proposal is consistent with the directives of the Commission at prior meetings, with the draft Master Plan, and with the historic preservation consultation.

Permanent Plaza Elements

The water pools have been modified so that they will be more visually appealing during the winter months when the fountain jets will not be running. The pools have been designed with sculptured walls of polished granite, incised with quotations relating to justice and the law. Water will flow over the text when the fountains are running; otherwise the sculptural and polished quality of the stone and the quotations will provide interest during the winter months.

Granite benches will be placed parallel to the north facade of the Courthouse in the flanking courtyards. The plaza pavement pattern has been developed; it consists of squares of granite in

subtly related finishes. Text identifying the building will be incised on the retaining walls between the fountains and the handicapped ramps.

The staff commends the revised design of the water pools and believes it fully responds to the Commission's concerns about the year-round appearance and interest of the water pools. The staff commends the applicant for the improvements to the project overall since the first review by the Commission in April. The project respects the historic character of the Courthouse and Judiciary Square while adding needed functional improvements in a contemporary architectural idiom.

Interim Plaza Elements

At the May 6 meeting, the Commission approved 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 background for a more varied security barrier line along E Street, NW. The panels will be surrounded by a combination of 30-inch-high retaining walls that will provide a security barrier line along E Street and by lower seating walls. A bollard line approximately sixty 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.

The final site plan is very similar to the preliminary plan approved by the Commission in May, except that the square corners facing the center of the site have been rounded to allow easier pedestrian movement through the site. In addition, the flagpoles have been set on the retaining walls rather than being placed closer to the building entrance. The name and street address of the Courthouse will be incised on the retaining wall parallel to E Street, NW. The bollards across the plaza will be contemporary in design---cylindrical granite sleeves with a simple incised line near the top.

The grass panels and the retaining walls fall within the area given to the National Law Enforcement Museum for construction, so the landscape proposal and security solution are considered "interim" at this time.

The staff believes the final design for the interim site improvements reflects the design direction established in the preliminary site and building plans approved by the Commission in May. They are consistent with the design approach for security established through the Master Plan and with the requirements of the Public Law delineating the shared use of the plaza.

Other Site Improvements

The service entrance from 4th Street, NW is shown as it was presented at the May meeting. It is detailed similarly to the parking garage entrance approved by the Commission on the west side of the Courthouse. The D.C. Courts is continuing to consult with the National Law Enforcement Museum for information on the service needs of the museum that might be accommodated through the Courthouse's below-grade service entrance and facility. Any proposed alterations to

the design or dimensions of the service entrance as a result of an expanded below-grade program would be submitted to the Commission for review.

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. 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 June 2003 Environmental Assessment (EA) on the Judiciary Master Plan, which included the Courthouse renovations. The document was completed with the Commission as the lead federal agency jointly with the District of Columbia Courts. Staff drafted a Finding of No Significant Impact based on the EA in July 2003, conforming to the Commission's delegated authority to the Executive Director. The EA included the review of the Courthouse 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 that none prevail or are attributable to the action, in accordance with the Commission's procedures.

National Historic Preservation Act

NCPC served 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.

NCPC has completed its Section 106 responsibilities for the Old D.C. Courthouse through the development and execution of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The MOA covers the review of the interior rehabilitation of the building as well as the exterior elements reviewed by the Commission. NCPC found that the project would have an adverse effect on the Courthouse (a National Historic Landmark) and on some qualities of Judiciary Square, which is an element of the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site as well as of the L'Enfant Plan.

The signatories concluded that the adverse effects were minimized and mitigated through design development (the shortened entrance pavilion and a simpler ramp design presented at the May meeting, as two examples) as well as through the repair and protection of the exterior fabric. In addition, the D.C. Courts agreed to minimize the closed appearance of the south entrance to the Courthouse by placing appropriately discreet signs directing visitors to the north entrance, by using the sidewalk and plaza at the south entrance for public events when possible, by ensuring that the street trees along D Street not obscure the building along its major vistas, and by installing birdproofing to protect the south portico.

In addition, the exterior fabric of the building will be cleaned and repaired. The interior of the building will be rehabilitated in an exemplary manner, consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, and the staff commends the applicants both for the careful approach to interior alterations and for the creative use of new below-grade space on the south side of the building that alleviated pressure for construction on the north, plaza side of the building.

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.

Commission of Fine Arts

CFA approved the final design at its meeting on July 15, 2004, commenting favorably on the use of benches against the façade of the building and the proposed solution for the water pools.