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Washington Highlands Proposal Modified

Redesign, Engagement Draw Praise and Vows to Fight



ABOVE: Older "pod" design for Washington Highlands Neighborhood Library required zoning variance.
RIGHT: Newer design offers consistent "skin" and straighter "pod" supports.



BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

A new building for the Washington Highlands Neighborhood Library – slated to open in 2011 – moved steps closer to fruition in October. But a few hurdles remain.

The DC Public Library filed for a permit to raze the existing building, 115 Atlantic St. SW. The library was granted a variance for reduced parking at the new building and, following design modifications, withdrew its application for a smaller-than-regulation courtyard variance. An interim library, 4035 South Capitol St. SW, opens in December. The library has, therefore, cleared legal and logistical pathways for construction of a new building.

Design modifications, however, require another appearance before the Commission of Fine Arts. Consideration is scheduled for Nov. 19.

In response to community concerns, architects – London-based David Adjaye and local Wiencek and Associates – created a consistent "skin" and straighter supports for the "pods," or pavilions, of the proposed building.

The modified design better reflects the neighborhood, says Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry.

The local Library Friends unanimously support design modifications, says newly-elected president Dionne Brown. "We're thrilled about the design and excited about having the new facility in progress." But the celebration is not universal.

Interpreting Community Sensitivities

"My practice has been to work with communities that have experienced a certain sense of invisibility," Adjaye said last year. An architect should "respond to community needs ... interpret sensitivities of the community in the building. Does it act as an advocate for them? Enable them?"

His success is a matter of controversy. Brown believes that some of the most hotly contested design elements actually respond to ideas expressed in the community planning process.

During early meetings and focus groups, for example, there developed a prevailing feeling that the library now caters more to children and is not conducive to adult endeavors, she recalls. This led to the separate children's and teen's "pods" to help all age groups coexist and thrive. Brown and other members of the community hope the design will encourage middle- and high-school students to take ownership of "their" sections and "avail themselves of programming and services designed for them."

Brown applauds the library's community engagement and argues that opponents of the current design "cut off their own feet" by boycotting the process designed to gain their input earlier. The Rev. Anthony Motley, at-large candidate for DC Council and a past Friends president, sees some flaws in the process but "welcome[s] an attempt to give us a state-of-the-art facility."

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 8D Chair Theresa Jones and neighboring commissioners argue, however, that the library has consistently pursued its own agenda rather than engaging with the community directly enough for Adjaye and team to "interpret their sensitivities." Rather than working through the ANC process, the library called its own meetings – often on insufficient notice and sometimes at a distance from the neighborhood. They believe the library never entered into good-faith negotiations. Moreover, Jones likens the Adjaye-Wiencek design to a school project executed with little knowledge of, or respect for, the neighborhood.

"This disrespect for taxpayers has made people mad," says Jones. "Folks are angry about it, and we're going to continue to fight."

"The community is moving forward. There are a lot of planning initiatives. And a certain group tends to oppose any development plans," Brown counters.

Barry sees opposition differently, declaring recent modifications a community victory over "a reluctant negotiator. ... They thought they could run over the community, run over the councilmember. But it didn't work. We got rid of that old, ugly design." ★

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