Board of Zoning Adjustment
Case 18240
DC Public Library request for a Variance for the Mt. Pleasant Library
July 19, 2011

Testimony of Robin Diener
Director, Library Renaissance Project

Involvement

My name is Robin Diener. I am the Executive Director of the Library Renaissance Project (LRP), founded by Ralph Nader in 2002 to promote and protect the public interest in the DC Public Library (DCPL). Eleanor Holmes Norton, among others, credited our Project with shining the spotlight on the problems of the system. Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper has said that she realizes she would not be here if it were not for Ralph Nader's group. Our group has played and continues to play an important role in bringing about the welcome change and, in many cases, extraordinary progress we have seen.

As LRP Director, I make it my mission to attend as many public meeting concerning libraries in DC as possible. I have attended meetings of the Board of Library Trustees and their subcommittees, meetings of the citywide Federation of Friends of the Library, of which I was Secretary for two years, and meetings of the individual Friends of the Library groups at branches where I am a paying member of many groups. I attend Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) and civic association meetings in neighborhoods throughout DC where libraries were being discussed, planned or designed. I also attend the meetings of the DC Council and its committee on Libraries Parks and Recreation.

I also attended all 13 design meetings referred to by DCPL. I live in Dupont Circle, where I am past president of the citizens association DCCA and current VP. In Dupont, we do not have a library. Mt Pleasant Library is one of five libraries within walking distance of my home in the North eastern quadrant of Dupont Circle territory. Due to their location on bus routes Mt. Pleasant and MLK are the quickest and easiest for me to get to.

Public Input

Some meetings I did not attend, because they were not open to the public, were the meetings of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Libraries (BRTFL) convened in 2004, which issued a draft report in 2006. I believe the "institutional necessities" and "program standards" claimed by DCPL are derived from that entity's report. My organization wrote a critique of the BRTFL draft report, where institutional standards come from. I had participated in the mayor's Citizen Summit of 2005, which included a component on libraries and in all the listening sessions.

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We recommended that neighborhood committees be created to work with library on new designs. Everywhere that serious issues have arisen -- Benning, Shaw, Tenley, Washington Highlands -- the community and epecially the ANC's have spent countless hours and their own money to get the government's attention.

There is no champion for the public on library staff or Board of Library Trustees. One Trustee, Myrna Perralta, who lived in the neighborhood of Adams Morgan close to Mt. Pleasant, promised to get to the bottom of the issues but never had any public meeting and never reported on her findings. Even though Trustee Chairman John Hill maintains the Trustees represent the public, in this case, no one did.

Nonetheless, and partly in response to our pushing, DCPL promised from beginning and Archie Williams said over and over that DCPL would present a model process of community input. DCPL likes to say it held 13 meetings on the Mt. Pleasant design. I must stress that simply holding a meeting does not guarantee meaningful discussion or result. What DCPL provided was a routine question and answer format.

So inadequate was this process, especially in view of what had been promised, that Chief Cooper eventually admitted before questioning at a DC Council Committeee on Libraries Parks and Rec hearing that it may have been a mistake to have led people to believe it would be a collaborative process, but rather one of exchanging information. That's not a model process. By the Chief's own admission, DCPL failed to provide, or overstated their commitment to, a "model process."

No one in Mt. Pleasant had asked for an addition. An historic renovation of the exterior had already been completed in 2007. There was plenty of unused, underused or obsolete purpose space in the library building. Everyone expected that the renovation process would reclaim this space, which is exactly what was done at Georgetown and Petworth, two large historic libraries, both of which were on a lot of land where arguably additions would have been easier to do, yet they were not.

ANC and others who are here today have never been given their due in a meaningful way. One meeting insisted upon by residents of CM Graham was eventually held with Fire Chief Denis Rubin where he said repeatedly that space between buildings was the number one way to keep fires from jumping. The public felt their fears were reinforced by the Chief and retained their sense that fire safety for nearby residents had not been addressed by the library plans.

"Institutional Necessity" and "Library Standards"

The so-called Library Standards were derived from the BRTF report, which is no longer publicly available on line or in the library.

In carrying out its building program across the city, DCPL has exercised flexibility, as it should. For instance:

One entrance standard is not in force at Takoma Park or SE which both have have separate handicappred entrances, and both of which are historic.

New libraries in Anacostia and Benning have two entrances to suit their large but steeply graded sites.

Nowhere has one floor, twenty thousand sq ft, library been built that was the ideal of the BRTF.

100 person meeting room not available at Takoma Park, SE, or Parklands Turner, and those sights did not have additions imposed on them.

Overcrowded children's programs are cited by DCPl as the need for additional space. We have a simialr problem with overcrowding during programs at the brand new enlarged Watha T Daniel Library, rebuilt from ground up. At Shaw the number of times the programs was offered were increased. That can be done at Mt. Pleasant as well. We don't need to build an addition to a program offered twice a week for an hour, when we can easily offer it more times per week.

Not Unique

The desugn DCPL has proposed,a nd which requires a variance, is not the uniquely necessary one-and-only design that meets the needs of their program. The community's concerns about handicapped access and about fire prevention would have been eliminated when addressed by this simple plan, which it is not too late to adopt. The ANC solicited this design.

When you take a look at it, lo and behold, it resembles the very first design presented by the lead architect, Henry Myerberg, who when first engaged by DCPL, followed his trained and honed architectural impulse, which was to bring people in an improved entrance at the front lower level. He was thwarted by HPRB, by CFA, by DCPL who wouldn't allow him to meet directly with the public in a meaningful way.

Best design was the original one – "terrazzo" entrance. Its intention was to bring everyone through the historic front of the building, leaving the historic front and stairs intact. The community presented an additional plan to bring the public through the lower level by placing a staircase beside the monumental stairs, to meet the ramped sidewalk where everyone would enter together.

Respectfully submitted,

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