



TESTIMONY OF THE COMMITTEE OF 100 ON THE FEDERAL CITY

Before the

Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation and Planning

Chairman, Councilmember Tommy Wells

Public Roundtable

Future of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library

September 27, 2012

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Stuart Gosswein and I have been authorized to speak on behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City on the future of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (MLK). Founded in 1923, the Committee's mission is to safeguard and advance the fundamental planning, environmental and aesthetic values that give Washington its historic distinction, natural beauty and overall livability. The Committee of 100 has long supported renovation of MLK and its continued use as the city's main library.

Background

In 2006, an enormous battle was waged before the DC Council on whether to sell MLK and build a new central library. The Council rejected the proposal.

Six years later, the Committee of 100 welcomes this roundtable discussion on how to move forward. Much has happened during the intervening time. To follow is a brief summary of key events and findings since they play an important role in upcoming decisions.

Landmark Status: In 2006, MLK was a vulnerable structure that could have been sold, torn-down and replaced with an ordinary office building. Instead, following the DC Council decision, the City, Library and representatives from the historic preservation community joined forces to secure landmark status for the only Mies van der Rohe building in Washington and the only library he ever designed. In a city which has few examples of International Style Modern architecture, the 2007 landmark designation recognized that form, function, geometric precision, rationality, and human-scale interaction are all successfully merged in this unique building. The landmark status was accorded to both the exterior and sections of the interior.

Design Guidelines: The City, Library and historic preservation representatives then collaborated to write Design Guidelines to assist with any design and preservation issues that may arise. In the process, historical data was compiled about the materials, furniture and contractors employed to construct and furnish the building, valuable information that can be applied to current maintenance, renovation and design issues.

Redevelopment Study: In November 2011, Library officials asked the Urban Land Institute to gather experts and stakeholders together to consider the most logical scenarios for redeveloping MLK. They presented three basic options: 1) Rehabilitate the existing building [single user; library]; 2) Establish a co-tenancy in the existing building [library and other tenants]; or 3) Move the library to a new facility, and use sale/lease revenues to help cover land and new building costs.

Redevelopment Options: The Library officials then turned to architects from the Freelon Group and developer Jair Lynch to refine the options. On September 19, 2012, Library officials held a special public meeting to announce their findings. The conclusion was that MLK could be renovated into a world-class library and that there were several options to achieve the goal. Although there is no final decision, one option appears to have been removed from active consideration – selling the building. Such a finding is consistent with the Council’s 2006 decision and the Committee of 100’s longstanding position that the building should continue to be used as a library.

Options

The Committee of 100 has steadfastly maintained that Mies van der Rohe’s building has always possessed the qualities necessary to be a world-class library. This was true 40 years ago when it first opened, and it will be so 40 years from now.

Design Flexibility: As is documented throughout the historic landmark application, the building’s interior was designed for maximum flexibility. The current spatial configuration reflects a logical location of services and core facilities as of 1972. There is no reason that the interior cannot be reconfigured in a fashion consistent with its landmark status to match current and future library needs.

Appropriate Redesign: The Library is currently moving forward with plans to convert the first floor Business Science and Technology Reading Room into a new Digital Commons, to remove the book shop from the Great Hall and to reinstall the original lounge seating, among other

changes. The Library and its architects are to be complemented on developing a solution that is functional and consistent with minimalist aesthetics, with an overarching desire to maintain unobstructed views. Ironically, given the digital revolution over the past 40 years, the first floor will become even more transparent than in 1972. The card catalogs and stacks of bookcases will be replaced with open space and computers. It demonstrates that the facility can adapt to new Library needs.

Renovation Options: The DC Public Library Board of Trustees and the DC Council may soon be asked to select from one of several options for moving forward with MLK: 1) continue to only address ordinary maintenance and repairs; 2) undertake a full renovation; 3) renovate and add one or two floors. Multiple-use tenancy would be accommodated in the third option and possibly the second as well.

New Materials & Systems: Spending an estimated \$5-10 million a year to simply maintain the building is not an option. It is time to renovate the structure. As with many buildings constructed in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, energy efficiency was not a primary concern, and there have been many subsequent technological advances to address this issue. Buildings across the nation are being retrofitted with state-of-the-art HVAC systems, glass and elevators. MLK can accommodate these new materials and equipment, and the operating costs for Library officials can be dramatically reduced.

Design Considerations: Any renovation of MLK should be consistent with the Design Guidelines published in conjunction with its landmark designation. Portions of the building that are not landmarked offer opportunities for flexible design solutions that address current and future needs. As specific solutions are proposed, stakeholders and the public can then provide feedback and guidance.

Financial Study: Library officials have done a commendable service in identifying current options. Likewise, the Freelon Group has provided exciting reconstruction alternatives, and the Jarr Lynch Development Partners has identified basic costs associated with each scenario. Before proceeding further, it is now time to produce a financial feasibility study of the various alternatives since projected costs will assist in making decisions. To follow are just a few sample questions among many others:

- How much would it cost to renovate the building in its current configuration?
- Can an additional tenant be included within the existing 4-floor configuration?
- What are the anticipated operating costs for a 4-story renovated building with energy-efficient HVAC and glass? How different are those costs from current annual costs?
- How much will it cost to add 1 floor or 2 floors to accommodate additional tenants? How long will it take to recoup the costs via tenant rent?
- Is it necessary to add 2 floors if a large amount of central space is then removed for a lightwell?

- Can a lightwell be added within the existing 4 floors since the Library only needs 225,000 of the building's 440,000 square feet?
- If we pursue mixed-use, how will we measure "best use"? If it is simply based on the highest per square foot rent, then that will be ordinary office space. But if the primary public benefit is to enhance the living downtown, the correct approach might be a community college or downtown UDC campus, new home for the DC Archives, new headquarters for a nonprofit like the National Trust for Historic Preservation, or a rooftop restaurant.

Joint Tenancy & Additional Floors: If joint tenancy is proposed for the building, necessitating the addition of floors to the building, it is the Committee's position that those floors be limited to one or two in number and that they match Mies van der Rohe's original design of the building. While there is the option of adding distinguishing new construction, it would be inappropriate since it would undermine the monumental purity of the Mies design and have the effect of creating two architectural statements. A proper analogy would be the Dulles Airport expansion which opted in favor of continuing Eero Saarinen's original vision.

G Street Setting: Despite needing a new coat of paint, MLK has probably never looked better since it was first opened to the public. That is thanks in part to the new First Congregational church and office tower designed by Tod Williams Billie Tsien. The green glass building is a modern minimalist structure that establishes a complimentary dialogue with MLK. That discussion is now being joined with another modern glass structure, the new YWCA building set for completion in a couple of years. Along with the Mather Building, St. Patrick's Church and Carroll Hall, the 900 block of G Street will be an architectural showcase for the city. Any proposed revisions to MLK should take building relationships into consideration.

Finally, the Committee of 100 takes this opportunity to applaud Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper and the Library Board of Trustees for the commitment shown to MLK in recent years. While simultaneously addressing neighborhood library reconstruction, renovation and maintenance projects, Library officials have also pursued a backlog of MLK repairs. These include replacement of ceiling light fixtures, elevator upgrades, bathroom renovations and repainting the ground floor loggia. Library officials are pursuing a redesign of the Great Hall and west Reading Room and have now set in motion other exiting possibilities for a world-class MLK.

The Committee of 100 welcomes the opportunity to share these comments on how to achieve best results for renovating MLK. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

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