

# The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



www.committeeof100.net

**Founded 1923**

October 22, 2014

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**Vice-Chair**

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National Capital Planning Commission

Attn: Jennifer Hirsch

Suite 500 North

401 9th Street NW

Washington, DC 20004

**Secretary**

Meg Maguire

**Treasurer**

Carol F. Aten

Re: Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library Renovation and Expansion  
(Project: #7610)

**Trustees**

Judy Chesser

Dorothy Douglas

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Alma Gates

Stephen Hansen

Erik Hein

Kathy Henderson

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Frank Vespe

Bill Wright

Evelyn Wrin

Dear Ms. Hirsch:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City regarding the proposed renovation and expansion of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (MLK Library). 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 Library and welcomes this opportunity to begin the process.

The following are the Committee of 100's comments as the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) reviews proposals by the District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL) to renovate and rehabilitate MLK Library. The comments respond to NCPC consideration of the project's compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The Committee of 100 request that these comments be considered within the scope of issues to be addressed in the Environmental Assessment and through Section 106 consultation.

The Committee of 100 notes that a critical element for evaluating the design concepts is currently missing. MLK Library staff have undertaken an impressive public outreach to help identify the anticipated amounts and types of space needed within a new central library. However, this information has not yet been shared.

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Providing a written architectural program which includes square footage calculations will allow the public to consider the need for proposals such as a fifth floor addition. We respectfully urge that this information be provided quickly so that it can be considered within the scope of the NEPA/Section 106 process.

#### Alternatives A-D

On behalf of the DCPL, the architects at Martinez+Johnson Architecture PC/Mecanoo have proposed four alternative concept designs labeled A-D. They range from simple renovation to adding four stories to the existing building and modifying other areas subject to its landmark status. NCPC has no preferred alternative and confirmed that elements from each alternative may be combined to later create a fifth concept design. Elements not currently proposed within the four concept designs may also be added to a fifth concept design. While the Committee of 100 generally supports Alternative A (no action beyond renovation), the other alternatives have some elements that would be beneficial to consider and pursue. The following comments respond to the major elements found within the four concept designs and support the creation of a fifth alternative.

#### Alternative E: Fifth Floor Addition

The fact that an extension of the existing outer curtain wall was not included as an alternative concept design proposal is a glaring omission. Mies anticipated such an addition and it should now be the basis for immediately including a fifth option, Alternative E, for the following reasons.

The 2007 landmark registration form for MLK Library cites the potential addition of one or two floors (Section 8 Page 9):

“As specified in Peterson’s *Statement of Program*, the building was expandable. As built, the library could house up to two million volumes of books but was designed to accommodate additional floors. In a library conference session, Milton, S. Byam, Director of D.C. Public Library and successor to Harry Peterson, indicates that one additional floor could be added to the building to accommodate an additional million volumes of books.<sup>32</sup> Harry Peterson, in press reports at the time of the building’s initial design, however, is quoted as saying that the structure “will be so designed that one or two additional floors could eventually increase the library’s capacity to 3 million books.”<sup>33</sup>

32. Milton S. Byam, “Martin Luther King Memorial library,” *Remodeling and Expanding for New Services*, Conference Session, no date. (Vertical Files, D.C. Historic Preservation Office.)

33. Robert J. Lewis, “D.C. Library Design OKd,” *The Evening Star*, February 16, 1966.

Extending the design is an obvious solution that has been widely discussed. Jack Bowman, supervising architect for the Mies building when it was constructed, recently confirmed to the DCPL staff and architects that Mies designed the building with the extension option. The Freelon Group included an extension (below) as one option for consideration as part of a Sept. 2012 study prepared by the Urban Land Institute. The Committee of 100 passed a resolution in 2012 (attached) recommending an extension

if extra floors were deemed necessary. The Committee of 100 resolution was shared with DCPL staff and its Advisory Panel in June 2014 so the proposal was ripe for consideration as the four Section 106 alternatives were being prepared.



The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation* provides guidance for insuring that new additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The *Standards* have institutionalized the precept that new work be distinguishably different from the original structure. However, it should not be applied in so literal and inflexible a manner so as to remove rational options. In this instance, the option would be to extend the exterior already designed and sanctioned by the architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Such an option would be consistent with achieving the *Standards*' ultimate goal of a compatible addition that protects the historic integrity of the property. What would be more compatible?

There is already a nearby precedent for taking such an approach: Dulles Airport. The main terminal was designed in 1958 by Eero Saarinen. The architect included a plan for expanding the building that was not fully realized until 1996. The result was a seamless extension which preserved one architectural vision. The same can be accomplished with the Mies structure.

If the Mies addition is not the obvious choice, how can we consider placing another architectural vision on top of the city's only Mies-designed building? Can we identify any other Mies van der Rohe buildings with roof top extensions designed by other architects? Beyond the floor addition, why would it be acceptable to plant trees on top of a Mies building? Why would it be acceptable to allow people to wander around the roof so that they become part of the urban view plane seen from 9<sup>th</sup> and G Streets? Phrased differently, height restrictions have been placed on some distinguishably different projects whereby the new construction combined with the historic fabric cannot be seen from across the street at six feet high. Applying this principle, why would it then be acceptable to see trees and people on top of MLK Library? Why is there no concern that a non-Miesian addition could threaten MLK Library's landmark designation?

Until recently, the Mies building has lived an uncomfortable life in Washington. Its minimalist architecture definitely fulfilled the precept of being "distinguishably different." Other than the fact that its low level profile complimented the Patent Building across the street, MLK Library was largely incompatible with most of the downtown urban fabric at the time of its construction in 1972. It specifically clashed with the 1961 First Congregational United Church of Christ (FCUCC) building with which it shared the block, both in terms of style, materials and height.

That is no longer the case. The city is now home to a myriad of new, glass minimalist towers. Two neighboring structures have been specifically designed to pay homage to the Mies building:

the ten story FCUCC/Jamestown building constructed in 2012 and the nine story 900 G Street building nearing completion. They are 21<sup>st</sup> century minimalist gems placed as tributes to our 20<sup>th</sup> century minimalist landmark. Quite simply, the 900 block of G Street, NW has the chance of becoming an International Style architectural showcase once the library is renovated. Why would we compromise that vision?

By definition, minimalist architecture is reduced to its essential elements. For a Mies structure, it is a sophisticated design that achieves geometric balance and harmony with the least amount of materials. It is a singular vision. There is no balance and harmony when the viewer is confronted with a second architect's distinguishably different vision.

Given the compelling evidence provided for a simple extension of the Mies design, the Committee of 100 respectfully requests that it be included as a fifth concept design (Alternative E) within the scope of the Environmental Assessment and Section 106 consultations.

#### Fifth Floor Design

Alternative B offers a stepped-back Miesian rectangular design as an option for the fifth floor. While the design is compatible, it includes outdoor patios allowing people to walk around the roof. As noted, the Committee of 100 opposes an outdoor terrace.

An extended Mies fifth floor would provide ample opportunity for a dynamic public space. It could include a glass ceiling allowing visitors to view the city from a spectacular enclosed, light-filled event space that would be available throughout the year. Similar to Alternative B, the building's penthouse infrastructure would be enclosed within the fifth floor thereby creating a flat rooftop when viewed from the street.

The Committee of 100 opposes the curvilinear event space (Alternative C) and three-story addition (Alternative D) as "distinguishably different" designs that are incompatible with the Mies structure. The curvilinear roof design is a clumsy, amorphous shape. In contrast, an oval shape could be compatible since it would be symmetrical and the opposite of a rectangle. The three story angled bar is an unwelcome parody of the FCUCC/Jamestown building. It would block the view of the adjoining building and undermine its architectural inventiveness.

Attention must also be given to MLK Library's height and color. Anything beyond five floors threatens to eliminate the juxtaposition and balance that currently exists with the neighboring buildings. The visual weight of MLK Library's black color must also be taken into consideration, especially since the building will be repainted and likely appear a bit darker. The structure's visual heaviness is now in accord with its surrounding buildings. This will not be the case if multiple floors are added.

#### Is a Fifth Floor Needed?

For the past decade, library officials have testified that MLK Library is too large. Therefore, it is a bit surprising that following recent public outreach, it has been determined that the building is actually too

small and needs an additional floor. While the Committee of 100 supports the efforts to reconstruct a facility that addresses the current and future needs of the community, we recommend that further analysis be undertaken to confirm the anticipated space demands. For context, MLK Library is 400,000 sq. ft., Seattle is 363,000 sq. ft. and Salt Lake City is 240,000 sq. ft. Since MLK Library was chronically underfunded for decades and allowed to deteriorate, we must seek guarantees that a newly enlarged building would not suffer the same fate.

### Public Cores & Loading Dock

A redesign of the four public cores could be accomplished in a manner that is harmonious with the Mies architecture, including within the landmarked restoration zone. This could include installation of new glass-enclosed staircases that make building navigation more apparent and welcoming to the visitor. Nevertheless, the brick walls within the first floor reading rooms and central hall should remain intact since they are important contributing elements for visually defining those rooms within a minimalist vocabulary. Also, the new stairwell elements must be symmetrical and balanced, using Miesian proportions. For example, the staircase in Option B-2 is off-center and the glass/brick wall in front of the staircase is asymmetrical.

Elimination of the street level loading dock provides an opportunity to expand the central hall and visually connect the building with G Place. It should be possible to retain the central hall's main east-west axis while adding a new north-south axis.

### Ground Floor Exterior

Brick Walls: The exterior brick walls under the logia were originally intended to be clad in green marble and be flush with the rest of the building's glass facade. This could be accomplished in a redesign and would be consistent with Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation* since it was part of the original Mies design and the choice of bricks was based on cost, not aesthetics. In fact, since the new FCUCC/Jamestown and 900 G St. towers have green-tinted glass, the green marble might be a dynamic complement that would also enhance the MLK Library entrance. Other materials might be acceptable such as the proposed etched glass. While the current brick walls are not as attractive as marble, they do serve as visual clues for locating the building entrance. Any replacement construction must achieve the same effect.

Light Wells: Alternatives C and D include a proposal for glass light wells in front of the current exterior brick walls. This is an innovative idea that raises a number of practical questions. How would you stop people from walking across it or playing on the glass? How would you keep it clean? If a fence is needed, this would not be very attractive and may not be harmonious with the Mies design. The glass light well would also reduce the amount of public space under the logia and become a barrier to pedestrian access.

MLK Library's West Side: Public use of the open area on the building's west side along with the adjoining pocket park shared with FCUCC/Jamestown needs to be fully explored. The current bike kiosk operation is an innovative experiment but other uses should also be considered. Turning the

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pocket park into a sculpture garden honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. is just one example. Since the pocket park is shared with FCUCC/Jamestown, any use must be mutually agreed upon and simultaneously complement (and not obstruct) the Church's green light box and gray brick wall.

MLK Library's North Side: The G Place side of MLK Library has always been an underserved building element. It includes a loading dock and awkward brick walls and metal fencing installed to address security concerns and the inclined ground. Efforts to enliven the space with designs and materials consistent with the Mies vocabulary are welcomed.

### Interior

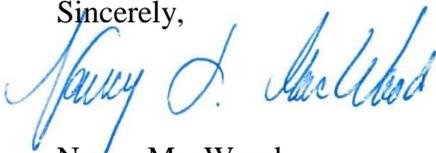
The architects should be given freedom to design the building's interior so as to create well-planned, rationale, exciting and engaging spaces. Any new designs must be compatible with the Mies vocabulary. Such elements might include square or rectangular designs and grids; use of glass, steel, brick and stone; and smooth and undecorated walls. If seeking to be distinguishably different within areas of the building not subject to a landmark designation, the design can pursue elements that provide a rationale and compelling compliment to the Mies vocabulary – circles, 45 or 60 degree angles, secondary colors, etc.

### Summary

The Committee of 100 prefers retaining the current four-story structure. The Committee of 100 respectfully requests that a fifth concept design (Alternative E) consisting of a one-story extension of the Mies designed building be included within the scope of the current Environmental Assessment and Section 106 consultations in case a fifth floor is deemed necessary based on further analysis. The Committee of 100 supports a combination of compatible elements from the other four Alternatives described above within a newly renovated building although this should not include rooftop trees or outside access.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these comments. Feel free to contact me or C100 member Stuart Gosswein (202/777-1220, [sgosswein@aol.com](mailto:sgosswein@aol.com)) if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Nancy MacWood  
Chair

**Committee of 100 on the Federal City**

# **Resolution**

RESOLVED, that the Committee of 100 on the Federal City advocates continued use of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library building as a library. Any renovation of the building should be consistent with the Design Guidelines published in conjunction with the landmark designation. If joint tenancy with the library is proposed for the building, necessitating the addition of floors to the building, those floors should be limited to one or two in number, as originally envisioned by the building's architect Mies van der Rohe, and should match the architect's original design of the building.