

Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society
before the DC Historic Preservation Review Board on August 1, 2019
Folger Shakespeare Library 201 East Capitol Street, SE Hartman-Cox addition
nomination Case 17-07

My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. On July 1 the CHRS Historic Preservation Committee met with Folger Library representatives who informed us about the proposed historic designation of the 1980s Hartman Cox addition and shared with us their reasons for opposing it.

The original Folger Library, built in 1932, was designed by renowned architect Paul Cret. It is a remarkable interpretation of Elizabethan times thru 1930s eyes. As of early 2019 both exterior and many interiors of Cret's creations have been landmarked and are on National Historic Register.

The most recent 1983 addition was constructed on South side of the Library in narrow recessed area between two wings of the original building. It contains the New Reading Room, an elegant extension of grand spaces of Cret's creation. DC Preservation League has applied to add the 1983 addition and the interior of the New Reading Room to the National Register of Historic Places.

The proposed designation of interior spaces and exterior of Hartman Cox addition provides detailed description of the addition and in depth argument for its significance. The addition is located over earlier 1958 building. The structural response to existing conditions resulted in the design, intriguing to passerby, of white columns and the building volume contained within. We find that marble clad volumes express an exoskeleton supporting the reading room, suspended over earlier building elements. The nomination calls the new reading room "an exceptional addition to an exceptional building" and we agree. To quote further "The Hartman Cox addition masterfully carries on Cret's union of style and function and makes reference to his design without imitating it." We believe that the Hartman Cox addition meets National Register Criterion A and C and DC Criteria B, D, E and F. HPO staff believes that an argument can be made that the addition satisfies DC Criteria D and E, and National Register Criterion C, with a period of significance of 1983. The sticking point appears to be the age of the Hartman Cox addition. (Staff report, pp. 3-5).

A property less than 50 years old qualifies if it is an "unusual contribution to the development of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture [which] can clearly be demonstrated." Among the specific criteria for determining that a resource possesses extraordinary importance is that its "developmental or design value is quickly recognized as historically significant by the architectural or engineering profession." The DC regulations state, "To qualify for designation, sufficient time shall have passed since they achieved significance or were constructed to permit professional evaluation of them in their historical context." While Hartman Cox's addition is 36 years old, it represents a highly visible example of how Modernist design can coexist with and complement an older masterpiece. The addition was recognized early as an outstanding design. The staff report faults the AIA award for its lack of rigor in analyzing Hartman Cox's work but then adds, "The Folger Shakespeare Library Bond Reading

Room epitomizes Post-Modern Classicism in its form, volume, features, materials and treatment.” Staff report p. 5. We believe that the Hartman Cox addition qualifies to be listed although it is less than 50 years old.

We are sympathetic to Folger Library’s concerns. If the Hartman Cox addition is added to the National Register, Folger’s expansion of their building on the land to the south will be difficult (but not impossible). They and their architect demonstrated their skill in expanding the building in their current project, the proposed underground expansion on the East Capitol Street side.

The nomination makes a strong argument for nominating the Hartman Cox addition, the argument we find convincing. We support the nomination of the Hartman Cox addition to the National Register.

If HPRB approves the nomination, we believe that the proposed changes to the New Reading Room, to create office and conference space, are compatible.

Thank you for considering our views.