



HISTORICAL AFFAIRS AND LANDMARK REVIEW BOARD
ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS STAFF REPORT

TO: Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB)
FROM: Mical Tawney, Historic Preservation Associate Planner
DATE: June 12, 2024
SUBJECT: 3550 Wilson Boulevard, CoA 24-15, Clarendon School Local Historic District (LHD)

Background Information

The three-and-one-half-story Clarendon School was built in 1910 in the Classical Revival style and is the work of noted school architect Charles M. Robinson of Richmond, Virginia. The design illustrates the architectural fashions of the period with projecting front bays capped by enclosed pediments, Palladian windows, limestone keystones, beveled stringcourses, and a prominent wood frame portico with paired Tuscan columns. The former classrooms and hallways have been converted to gallery and studio spaces for the Museum of Contemporary Art Arlington (MoCA), formerly known as the Arlington Arts Center. Although the building is occupied by MoCA, it is owned by Arlington County and maintained by the Department of Environmental Services. The building became a Local Historic District (LHD) in 1984 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. A rear addition was constructed starting in 2002 and the historic building underwent a full rehabilitation. There are no design guidelines specifically approved for this LHD except those for exterior temporary art exhibitions; therefore, the HALRB refers to *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* to evaluate any exterior alterations to the building and grounds.

In April 1987, the HALRB approved a CoA (number unknown) for the installation of three pylons on the grounds of MoCA, two of which would contain identification signage. However, it does not appear that these were ever constructed. In September 1989, the HALRB approved a CoA (number unknown) for the placement of a horizontal nylon banner measuring 9.6' x 3.9' between the columns under the portico of the main entrance for a maximum of 35 weeks per year. In October 2021, the HALRB approved CoA 21-20 for the installation of signs banning the use of firearms on County-owned property. In May 2022, the HALRB approved CoA 22-10 for the installation of four Axis security cameras above the building entrances. In July 2022 and September 2022, the HALRB approved amendments to CoA 22-10. CoA 22-10A was an amendment to the location of the proposed security cameras. CoA 22-10B was retroactive; the applicant installed a different camera type than what was approved due to supply issues and one camera was installed in a different location than approved. In March 2023, MoCA brought forward a proposal for the installation of banners on the front of the building; the project was discussed at the March Design Review Committee (DRC) meeting, but the applicant withdrew the application upon discovering that further information was needed from the County's Zoning division before proceeding with the project.

Over the years, several front lawn art installations have been approved administratively by the Historic Preservation Program (HPP) staff, as allowable per the design guidelines for Clarendon School. The most relevant to the subject application is the following: in June 2023, the HPP staff approved an administrative CoA for the installation of *Reclining Liberty*, an art installation, on the front lawn from August 2023 to July 2024 (ACoA 23-09).

Proposal

MoCA is applying to install two temporary banners, in honor of the 50th anniversary of MoCA, to the front elevation of the building for a consecutive period of 12 weeks (July to October 2024). The banners would measure 48” wide x 180” high and be installed alongside the windows on the front elevation. Composed of vinyl material, the banners would be affixed to the building via grommets and stainless-steel screws inserted into the mortar joints. No drilling into existing brick or wood will occur with the installation.

Additionally, MoCA is requesting to extend the duration of the outdoor art installation, *Reclining Liberty*. The 25’ x 7’ x 5’ art piece has been in place on the front lawn since August 2023 and was approved to be in place until late July 2024. *Reclining Liberty* was created by artist Zaq Landsberg and is composed of plywood, lumber, carved foam, hard-coated plaster-resin, and copper paint. The art piece is sturdy enough for human interaction and touching, climbing, sitting, and leaning on the piece are all encouraged. Since the piece has been immensely popular with the Arlington community, MoCA wants to keep the art installation in place until September 2025.

Design Review Committee Review

The DRC heard this application at its June 5, 2024, hybrid meeting. Mr. Davis did not have any questions or concerns about the banners; he felt they were symmetrical and appreciated their placement. He also took no exception to the proposed extension of the exhibit of *Reclining Liberty*. The DRC placed this item on the Consent Agenda for the June 20, 2024, HALRB hybrid public hearing.

Recommendation

The HPP staff recommends approval of both aspects of the subject application. The Clarendon School’s *Guidelines for Temporary and Permanent Exterior Arts Exhibitions, and Temporary Exhibit Signage* state that if an exterior exhibit is on display for more than one year, MoCA must apply for a CoA from the HALRB (pg. 2). The initial installation of the subject art piece was approved via ACoA 23-09 for a period permissible for administrative approval per the guidelines, but since the extension of the display would surpass a year, it requires HALRB review. The proposed art exhibit would have no physical impact on the Clarendon School building, and it would still be temporary in nature given that it will be removed in September 2025. In this way, the art installation complies with Standard #10 of *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards*:

Standard #10: New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Regarding the proposed banners, the HPP staff finds their placement and material appropriate. Their proposed placement highlights the symmetry of the building and would not obscure any key architectural features. Additionally, the way the banners will be installed, via stainless-steel screws in the mortar joints, is appropriate since no existing brick or wood will be damaged. Mortar is a sacrificial material and can be



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repaired. Since the banners would be a temporary element only placed on the building for a finite period, thereby complying with Standard #10 as outlined above, the action can be easily reversed without an adverse effect to the property. Furthermore, banners have been approved by the HALRB and used at MoCA in the past as a temporary means for advertising.

Pertinent to this application is a brief explanation of a standing variance that applies to the MoCA building. The current proposal for the temporary banners would not be permissible via the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance (ACZO) for a variety of reasons; however, there is a standing variance in place that would permit the installation of signage that does not match the signage requirements outlined in the ACZO. In 1987, the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) issued the following variance for the building:

V-5980-87-1: Allows the installation of two temporary banners measuring 15' x 8' each on the front building wall to be displayed four times a year for a total not to exceed 12 weeks per year.

Since the current banner proposal meets the size requirements and the display time limits as outlined in the 1987 variance, the project complies with other County requirements and is appropriate. Another approved variance from 1989 (V-6586-89-2) also applies to signage at MoCA, but it is not applicable to this current project.