

FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA - Architectural Review Board - 2005

Chairman: C. Richard Bierce, AIA
Vice-Chair: Peter Juanpere, AIA
Treasurer: John A. Burns, FAIA

May 14, 2005, Community Meeting
Presented by C. Richard Bierce, AIA, ARB Chairman

Preservation in Action: The Role of the Architectural Review Board (ARB) @ Lorton Prison

There is no doubt of the historic significance of the rich collection of resources represented in this extraordinary property, nor of the role that this institution has had in the County and in its relationship with the District of Columbia.

Establishing and validating this significance is the responsibility of the historians who will complete the process under discussion today which will result in the nomination of the site to the National Register of Historic Places.

Winston Churchill's observation that "We shape our buildings and afterward they shape us" could not be more relevant to Lorton, when one considers that this corrective facility was created in the Progressive era of the 1st Roosevelt administration, and which was intended to "reform" the character of individuals and to change the way in which society responds to their treatment.

The citizens and leaders of Fairfax County have been handed the physical remnants of this progressive experiment with a mandate to preserve a sense of its ideals and accomplishments as represented in the tangible elements of the architecture and landscapes created and built to house it and to assist in the realization of its goals.

How is this preservation policy carried out in fact? What is the mechanism?

As defined in the Memorandum of Agreement, one of the ways in which Fairfax County will address its responsibility is for the ARB to treat the historic core of the site as if it were a designated local historic overlay district. My task today is to provide a brief overview of how the ARB is constituted, how it functions and to discuss briefly the Standards for Preservation and Design which we are obligated to adhere to in the review of any project within a historic overlay district.

The ARB was created in 1967 shortly after state enabling legislation was enacted and after the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Fairfax County is one of the oldest ARBs in Virginia and by extension, nationally. The Zoning Ordinance, Article 19 establishes the ARBs membership as follows: 10 members, including 2 architects, a landscape architect and an attorney; plus one representative from the History Commission. Currently, we have six architects, 2 of whom have national experience in preservation, and an historical archaeologist also of national repute.

The ARB begins each of its monthly meetings by reading the statement of purpose as follows:
"Historic Overlay Districts are created for the purpose of promoting the general welfare, education, and recreational pleasure of the public, through the perpetuation of those general areas or individual structures and premises that have been officially designated by the Board of Supervisors as having historic, architectural, or cultural significance.

Regulations within such districts are intended to protect against destruction of or encroachment upon such areas, structures, and premises; to encourage uses which will lead to their continuance, conservation, and improvement in a manner appropriate to the preservation of the cultural, social, economic, political, architectural, or archaeological heritage of the County; to prevent creation of environmental influences adverse to such purposes; and to assure that new structures and uses within such districts will be in keeping with the character to be preserved and enhanced.”

The Board of Supervisors established a unique charge for the ARB:
“To preserve and enhance”

There is a duality of mission for the ARB:

- 1) The general preservation provisions are similar to historic preservation commissions & review boards across the US; to ensure preservation and appropriate alteration of historic resources
- 2) “to ensure that new development within the historic district is appropriate and that new structures are *well designed*.” This mandate is not so typically given local historic preservation commissions & review boards.

What are the tools available to the ARB to carry out this broad mandate, to manage the change that is inevitable? And how do we promote the level of excellence for the Lorton Prison site decreed by the BOS when they said it shall be a “world-class project”?

There are three principal tools to deal with these daunting tasks:

- 1) First is the zoning code itself, which spells out in great detail, the specifics of project review and evaluation, and stipulates the extent of ARB authority and our responsibility to the Planning Commission and BOS in these matters within historic overlay districts.
- 2) The second tool is the document known as the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Preservation Projects. How does this Federal Government regulation apply at the local level?

Fairfax County is designated as a Certified Local Government by the Va Department of Historic Resource and the National Park Service. This means that high standards for creating and administering a local preservation program are met through some key requirements:

- a) a clearly articulated policy endorsed by the governing body, the BOS
- b) a legally sound and comprehensive basic ordinance,
- c) qualified professional staff
- d) qualified citizen members appointed to the ARB, with a commitment to periodic training and
- e) enforceable adherence to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards in reviewing and judging applications

Fortunately, the language of one section of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards has been incorporated almost verbatim into the Zoning Ordinance. There are four to the parts to the Standards treatments: preservation, restoration, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Rehabilitation is the most common and most flexible in dealing with historic project review.

3) The third essential tool is district specific Standards and Guidelines, which take into consideration the unique attributes of each local historic district and identify the hierarchy of resources to be preserved and protected.

In Fairfax, there are currently 13 historic overlay districts. Each has a primary preservation purpose embodied in the Standards and Guidelines document created several year ago by DPZ staff with grant assistance. This document is fundamental and it is not possible to do our job without these.

Standard = a specific preservation goal for that district

Guideline = means to achieve goal

We have draft guidelines for Lorton which reiterates many of the basic components and principles found in all similar documents. They are primarily based upon the tenets and practices of good preservation, which we are pretty adept at as the common intent is to ensure the highest degree of integrity is retained in the historic resources.

What we do not yet have, but ARE working on are design guidelines for the adaptive re-use portions of the historic site which will include opportunities for new construction.

Preliminary comments in response to 1st drafts have been helpful. As new drafts are completed and as we get closer to a final product, there will be specific opportunity for public review and comment as well as thorough vetting by County staff and higher authority.

We have had a unique experience in the evolution of the Spring Hill Senior Campus plans and designs and the conceptual development of the Workhouse site by the Lorton Arts Foundation; working without a net, ie, no guidelines, incomplete research and only a vague plan, a collaborative exercise of idealism, pragmatism, preservation and design has emerged. It has been an exciting ride, and I trust that the results will be worthy of the expectations for preservation, quality development and design excellence envisioned by the BOS and by this community when it all began. We all have a stake in this and we share equally the larger responsibilities of stewardship for this remarkable resource and world class community asset as we seek to protect the past, serve the present and guide the creation of a future vision. The ARB is fully committed to this goal.