

Docket Item #9
BAR CASE# 2004-0261

BAR Meeting
March 2, 2005

ISSUE: Signs and alterations

APPLICANT: Commerce Bank, by George Gordon

LOCATION: 119 South Washington Street

ZONE: CD/Commercial

BOARD ACTION, FEBRUARY 2, 2005: On a motion by Mr. Keleher, seconded by Ms. Neihardt the Board deferred the application for restudy. The vote on the motion was 5-0.

REASON: The Board believed that action should not be taken separately on parts of the application, but rather the Board should have an opportunity to review a complete package concerning the design before taking action.

SPEAKERS: Kathy Puskar, attorney representing Commerce Bank, spoke in support
Jim Clark, MFTA Architecture, project architect, spoke in support
Poul Hertel, 1217 Michigan Court, spoke in opposition
Ellen Pickering, Roberts Lane, spoke in opposition
Gregory May, representing the Historic Alexandria Foundation, spoke in opposition

BOARD ACTION, DECEMBER 15, 2004: Deferred at the request of the applicant.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the signage and new doors as submitted and denial of the alterations to the glass in the main entranceway.

UPDATE: The applicant has decided to omit the request to enlarge the three street level windows. Therefore, the permit to demolish (BAR Case #2005-0011) is no longer before the Board. In addition, the applicant has revised the design of the signage.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the installation of signage and alterations to the building located at the northwest corner of Prince and South Washington Streets. The long-time tenant, Pier 1 Imports, will be replaced by Commerce Bank.

Signage

The applicant proposes to remove the blue canvas awnings which served as signage for Pier 1 Imports on the Washington Street side of the building and the pin-mounted letter sign on the Prince Street side of the building and replace them with a total of three signs composed of black letters reading, "Commerce Bank," and the Commerce Bank logo, a stylized red letter "C". The channel letters will be halo lit while the "C" will be internally illuminated. The letters and logos will be mounted on matte finish brass plaques. The plaques will project ½" from the face of the building. By mounting the individual letters on the plaque, the penetrations into the limestone facade will be minimized. A sign will be located on either end of the Washington Street facade, above the paired windows. Each of these signs will be 33.25 square feet (approximately 9.5' long by 3.5' high). Another sign, identical to those on Washington Street but smaller, will be located on the Prince Street facade. The sign will be mounted above the ground level window near the corner with Washington Street where a pin mounted Pier 1 Imports sign currently exists. The new sign will total 26.5 square feet (approximately 7.5' long by 3.5' high). The former rectangular bronze plaque beside the door on Prince Street will be replaced with a 6 square foot brass plaque reading "Commerce Bank" and carrying the "C" logo.

Alterations to building

Washington Street entrance - The applicant proposes to refurbish the metal and glass entrance surround on Washington Street. The internal lighting will be replaced and the metal surfaces will be refurbished. The existing wood and glass double door with brass handles will be replaced with new glass double doors with brass hardware. To increase visibility into the entrance vestibule, which will house two ATM machines, the applicant proposes to replace the existing frosted glass panels with clear squiggles in the entrance surround with clear glass panels with frosted squiggles. The masonry wall inside the building behind the glass panels will be removed to allow views from the street into the ATM vestibule. As this demolition is in the interior of the building, it is not before the Board.

Prince Street entrance - The applicant proposes to replace the existing wood and glass double doors with brass handles with new glass double doors with brass hardware.

II. HISTORY:

The three story masonry building at the northwest corner of the prominent Prince and South Washington Street intersection was built in 1930 for the Virginia Public Service Company. It is Alexandria's grandest Art Deco office building, exhibiting many characteristics of the style such as the contrast between smooth planar expanses with areas of concentrated ornamentation. The Prince and Washington Street facades have a polished granite base with limestone above. The windows are steel. Ornamentation includes a carved stone frieze panel, an ornate metal and glass entrance on Washington Street and metal panels with relief and filigree designs. The main entrance is on Washington Street and is given special emphasis through its concentration of ornamentation and vertical orientation, which contrasts with the overall horizontal form of the building. The ornamentation of the central bay begins with the elaborate door surround with half round glass and metal lighted columns and terminates with the rooftop flagpole. Large metal framed plate glass show windows flank the prominent Washington Street entrance.

The building was begun in May 1929 and completed in September 1930. It was greeted with both praise for its modernity and criticism for its brash non-traditional design. In addition to the Virginia Public Service Company, it housed offices for Seaboard Public Service Company and for the Utility Securities Company. The Virginia Public Service Company was succeeded by the Virginia Electric Power Company, which retained ownership of the building until 1950. For several decades after, it housed a variety of federal government offices. In 1988, the building underwent extensive interior renovations and the first and second floors were transformed into retail space. In 1988 and 1989, the Board approved signage and awnings for Pier 1 Imports (BAR Case #99-78, 6/27/1988 and 4/5/1989). Pier 1 Imports has been the primary tenant from 1988 to today. The exterior of the building has a high level of integrity. With the exception of the elevator tower at the back, it appears largely unaltered from the original elevation drawings. The two large show windows on either side of the front entrance appear to have been replaced with modern metal windows in the same size nearly the same configuration as the original windows.

Frank D. Chase (1877-1937), a Chicago-based architect, designed the building. Chase founded Frank D. Chase & Company in 1913 and was known for his design of factory and administrative building for industrial firms. Most of his buildings were located in the Chicago area. Interestingly, at one time Mr. Chase was president of the Western Electric Company. This may explain why he was chosen by the Virginia Public Service Company to design their flagship building in Alexandria. [*Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc. 1970; facsimile of 1956 edition), p. 119; Helen P. Ross, "The Last Word in Modern Office Buildings: The Virginia Public Service Building in Alexandria, Virginia," George Washington University, unpublished mss., Board of Architectural Review Staff files; Planning and Zoning Staff, Alexandria Virginia, "Twentieth Century Architectural Resources in the National Historic Landmark, Alexandria Historic District, Alexandria, Virginia," Preliminary Draft, January 30, 1997].

In 1988 and 1989, the Board approved signage and awnings for Pier 1 Imports (BAR Case #99-78, 6/27/1988 and 4/5/1989). In 1988, in anticipation of the use of the ground floor of the building by Pier 1 Imports, a request was made to enlarge the ground floor corner windows on

Washington Street by combining the two paired windows into single large display windows (BAR Case #88-78, 6/1/1988). The request was opposed by Staff and the Art Deco Society of Washington and denied by the Board.

III. ANALYSIS:

The proposed signage and alterations comply with the zoning ordinance requirements.

First, Staff wishes to commend the applicant for dropping the request to enlarge the street level windows. Staff believes this alteration would have done unnecessary violence to the largely unaltered facade of this exceptional building. In addition, Staff commends the applicant for removing the existing awning/signs which obscure the attractive show windows and for proposing to refurbish the columnar light fixtures on either side of the main entrance. A refurbished and lighted entrance will restore the building to its intended prominence and will draw attention to the tenant.

Signage

Staff believes the proposed signage is an improvement over the previous submission. The use of a brass plaque as a backer for the individual letters will significantly minimize the number of penetrations into the limestone facade. In addition, the matte brass plaque should help to relate the otherwise modern looking signage to the Art Deco style building, which features metalwork in the entrance surround as well as metal windows. Staff believes the size of the signage and its placement is acceptable. The signage avoids obscuring or competing with architectural features. Staff notes that the *Design Guidelines* recommend that, in general, “only one sign per business is appropriate” (Signs - page 3). In this case, however, Staff believes the strongly symmetrical nature and the length of the Washington Street facade (over 94 feet long) call for two equal sized signs on either side of the center axis. The fact that the building is located on a corner makes the additional signage on Prince Street acceptable. Staff does not believe the amount of signs proposed is excessive. Staff has no objection to the plaque sign proposed for the Prince Street doorway.

Washington and Prince Street doors

Staff believes the proposed replacement doors are acceptable. Their simple clean lines are appropriate to the Art Deco style of the building.

Washington Street entranceway alterations

Again, Staff commends the applicant for refurbishing the entranceway elements but recommends against the proposed use of clear glass with two frosted squiggles where there is now frosted glass with clear squiggles. Staff agrees that the existing frosted glass panels are replacement panels. They are different in coloration, opacity and quality from the frosted glass in the adjacent columnar light fixtures, which do appear to be original glass. In addition, Staff has located a circa 1989 photograph relating to the Pier I alterations, which shows the glass as clear. However, Staff has not been able to locate any discussion of the original treatment of this portion of the door surround or of the replacement frosted glass panels. The applicant has produced a circa 1976 photograph which may show the panels as clear, but the photograph is quite small and lacking in clarity. Via a letter report dated February 21, 2005, the applicant indicates that it has

located yet another photograph showing the panels as clear glass. This photograph was not made available to Staff and its date is unknown. Thus far, the applicant has not produced any convincing evidence that the original design for the surround incorporated clear glass panels. In lieu of evidence to the contrary and based on its understanding of the Art Deco aesthetic, Staff continues to believe the surround would not have included clear glass. The surround is intended as one sculptural piece. Staff believes the use of clear glass with a view into something else, whether a display case, as the applicant believes was originally the case, or through to the vestibule, as the applicant now proposes, would be distracting to the overall design. For this reason, Staff doubts that the original design used clear glass and is opposed to the proposal to replace the existing frosted glass panels with largely clear glass panels.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the signage and new doors as submitted and denial of the alterations to the glass in the entrance surround.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F- finding

Code Enforcement:

- C-1 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-2 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-3 Construction permits are required for this project.
- C-4 Required exits and accessibility within the building for persons with disabilities must comply with USBC Chapter 11.

Office of Historic Alexandria:

“No comment.”