

Docket Item #9
BAR CASE# 2004-0261

BAR Meeting
March 16, 2005

ISSUE: Signs and alterations

APPLICANT: Commerce Bank, by George Gordon

LOCATION: 119 South Washington Street

ZONE: CD/Commercial

BOARD ACTION, MARCH 2, 2005: On a motion by Mr. Smeallie, seconded by Mr. Keleher the Board approved the signage as submitted with the condition that the red "C" not be internally lit and deferred the alterations to the glass at the entry. The vote on the motion was 5-1 (Ms. Quill was opposed).

REASON: The Board agreed with the Staff analysis. Although they found the revised signs to be an improvement, Mr. Smeallie continued to believe the "C" should not be illuminated and that use of a timer for the illumination would not be effective. Ms. Quill thought timed illumination was a reasonable compromise. The Board felt that the issue of the glass at the entry warranted further investigation.

SPEAKERS: Kathy Puskar, attorney representing Commerce Bank, spoke in support
Jim Clark, MFTA Architecture, project architect, spoke in support
Amiee Lala, Cultural Resource Consulting Group, spoke in support
Lincoln Fairchild, Preservation Chair of the Art Deco Society of Washington
spoke in opposition to the alteration of the glass at the entrance
Poul Hertel, 1217 Michigan Court, spoke in opposition to the signs and the
alteration of the glass at the entrance
Julie Crenshaw, spoke in opposition to the signs and the alteration of the glass at
the entrance

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 internal illumination of the red “C” in the previously approved signage with the following condition:

The internally-illuminated ‘C’ shall be equipped with a timer that will automatically shut off the internal illumination of the ‘C’ from 10:00 p.m. to dusk the next day. Any proposed expansion to the permitted hours for internal illumination will require a new application to the Old and Historic District Board of Architectural Review.

and denial of the alterations to the glass in the main entranceway.

UPDATE: The applicant has provided information concerning a timer system to limit the hours of illumination for the internally illuminated “C” element of the proposed signage.

I. ISSUE:

Signage

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the illumination of the red “C” in the three wall signs previously approved at the March 2, 2005 hearing. Two signs will be located on Washington Street and one on Prince Street. The approved signs consist of halo lit, black channel letters and the red “C” logo mounted on a matte brass plaque. The applicant proposes to use a time switch to automatically control the internal illumination of the “C” and has provided a cut sheet showing the timing apparatus that would automatically turn off the illumination on a set schedule. The applicant proposes that the Board approve the illumination with the following condition:

The internally-illuminated ‘C’ shall be equipped with a timer that will automatically shut off the internal illumination of the ‘C’ from 10:00 p.m. to dusk. Any proposed expansion to the permitted hours for internal illumination will require a new application to the Old and Historic District Board of Architectural Review.

Staff believes the applicant’s condition is clarified if dusk is followed by the phrase, “the next day”.

Washington Street entrance surround alterations

Although the applicant has provided no new information regarding the alteration of the glass panels in the glass and metal surround at the main entrance, Staff understands that they continue to seek approval of this alteration. The applicant proposes to replace the existing frosted glass panels with clear squiggles in the entrance surround with clear glass panels with frosted squiggles in order to increase visibility into the interior of the entrance area, which will house two ATM machines. The masonry wall inside the building behind the glass panels will be removed to allow views from the street into the ATM area. As this demolition is in the interior of the building, it is not before the Board.

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].

On March 2, 2005, the Board approved the proposed signage, with the exception of the internal illumination of the red "C" and replacement of the entrance doors. The Board did not approved the alteration of the frosted glass panels in the main entrance surround (BAR Case 2004-0261).

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.

Signage

Staff did not object to the internal illumination of the “C” element previously and believes the proposed timer and condition requiring Board approval of expansion of the permitted hours of illumination is signage may address the Board’s concerns.

Washington Street entrance surround alterations

The applicant has not provided any further historical evidence concerning the original treatment of the panels. The only new development that Staff is aware of is that a prior owner of the building recalls installing the existing frosted glass panels circa 1989. Staff agrees that the existing frosted glass in the flat panels is not original (but also believes that the adjacent frosted glass in the beveled light columns is original). In addition, Staff is willing to accept that prior to the installation of the frosted glass in 1989, the panels may have held clear glass, as is suggested by a circa 1989 photograph and the prior owner’s recollection. However, Staff does not believe this is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the panels were clear as originally constructed. Moreover, Staff believes there is significant evidence to the contrary:

- A newspaper photograph recently obtained by Staff from the January 1, 1931 edition of the *Alexandria Gazette* (copy included in the Board packet) appears to show these panels as having pattern and opacity;
- Glass shards remaining in the cavity behind the existing frosted glass flat panels appear to be frosted or other than clear; and,
- Opaque glass panels with pressed patterns remain intact in the upper level of the entrance feature, indicating that if not frosted glass, another type of decorative glass might have been used in the panels which the applicant proposes to make largely clear;

To conclude, 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. In the absence of conclusive evidence that the original treatment was clear glass, Staff remains unwilling to recommend for the alteration. Thus far, neither the applicant nor their preservation consultant has produced any convincing evidence that the original design for the surround incorporated clear glass panels. 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 illumination of the red “C” in the previously approved signage with the condition that it be equipped with a timer that will automatically shut off the internal illumination from 10:00 p.m. to dusk the next day and that any proposed expansion to the permitted hours for internal illumination will require a new application to the Old and Historic District Board of Architectural Review and denial of the alteration to the Washington Street entrance surround pending conclusive evidence of clear glass panels in the original design.

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.”