NEWTON PUBLIC BUILDINGS SURVEY
PHASE II – ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Building Analysis

Senior Center

Address: 345 Walnut Street
Year of Construction: 1938

Level of Significance: High
Contributing building in the Newtonville National Register Historic District.
Eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Recommended Treatment Level: Preservation/Rehabilitation

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance

Building History

The Newton Senior Center was built in 1938 as the Newtonville Branch Library, or the John R. Prescott Library, named after its largest contributor. The Classical Revival building was designed by the Boston architecture firm of Robb & Little. It was designed to be larger than the other branch libraries constructed during the same time period due to its close proximity to the Newton High School. The site, previously of the site of the Newton Club, was purchased by citizen subscription. The Public Works Assistance, or PWA, funded 45% of the project, the remaining funds raised over three years. The library accommodated many uses, including painting, hobby and educational exhibits.

At its dedication in December of 1939, Robert Frost read his poem "Mending Wall"; lines from his poem were memorialized in the stained glass window medallion designed by noted stained glass artist and Newtonville resident Charles J. Connick.

Harry Britton Little (1882-1944) and Newton resident E. Donald Robb (1880-1942), architects of the Senior Center, were both employees of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson early in their careers. Robb left briefly in 1911 to form Brazer & Robb with Clarence W. Brazer; the Alfred O. Deschong Museum in Chester, PA is one of their designs. In 1914 Robb returned to Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson. Sometime after 1918 he and Little left to create the firm of Robb & Little. They were later joined by Philip Hubert Frohman. The firm of Frohman, Robb & Little is best known for the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York.

In 1981 the Senior Drop-In Center moved into the library. In 1983 an arson fire caused over $100,000 in damage. In the early 1990s the Newtonville Branch Library was one of several branches closed due to funding constraints. The building was renovated in 1993 by the Boston firm of Schwartz/Silver Architects and it re-opened as the new Senior Center. The renovations made some alterations to the building to accommodate the new programmatic needs. The two large reading rooms on the main floor became an activities room and a dining wing. On the lower level, the community room was subdivided to create an art studio and a games room; the children's room was subdivided to create a health maintenance suite and library. Traces of the original configuration of these spaces are visible in the plaster detailing of the ceilings.

Level of Significance

The Newton Senior Center is a contributing structure within the Newtonville Historic District, a National Register Historic District. It is eligible for Individual listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and is significant under National Register Criteria A and C. It was the largest of the five branch libraries built in Newton between 1926 and 1939 and is representative of this period in Newton's civic history. The building is well designed and represents the work of architect E. Donald Robb and stained glass artist Charles J. Connick, both of whom are masters in their respective fields.

References

Bullock, John A. "Alfred O. Deshong Museum" (2006) <http://www.oldchesterpa.com/museum_deshong.htm> (visited 31, October, 2011).

The Charles J. Connick Stained Glass Foundation. "History of the Connick Studio" (April 2011), <http://www.cjconnick.org/history.php> (visited 31, October, 2011).

Herrmann, Jon and Lucy Xu. "Senior Center History: Historically Speaking" (2007) <http://www.newtonseniors.org/about/history.htm> (visited 31, October, 2011).

Massachusetts Historical Commission. "Form B NWT.3639—347 Walnut St" (1997).

Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation. "Howard Gilman Wilbert (1891-1966), Pittsburgh" (2009) <http://www.phlf.org/2008/03/21/howard-gilman-wilbert-1891-1966-pittsburgh/> (visited 31, October, 2011).

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance: Historic Images

Figure 1: East elevation of Newtonville Branch Library,1987. The landscaping of the site has changed considerably since then. The light fixtures on the limestone standards have also been changed. (Credit: Historic Newton)

Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features

Exterior Visual Character

Setting

- Corner lot in downtown Newtonville. Landscaping: outdoor seating areas, benches, site fences.

Shape

- Typically two stories with a third story pavilion at the very center of the building. Roughly rectangular with a projecting center bay. Additions are low and located at the rear elevation, hidden from view.

Roof and Related Features

- Gable roofs at the north and south wings and projecting entrance.
- Hipped roof and cupola at the center pavilion.

Openings

- The windows are typically single openings with 12-over-12 double-hung wood sashes. At the sides of the north and south wings, the windows are tall, with 16/12 double-hung wood sashes.
- Basement level windows are typically pairs of 6-pane casements.
- The gable ends of the side wings have tripartite windows with leaded glass in elaborate wood surrounds.
- The main entrance door is recessed within a relatively elaborate wood surround.
- Octagonal window within the east pediment.

Projections:

- The projecting entrance bay has a pediment supported by engaged wood Doric pilasters on limestone bases.
- Shallow wood bay of windows at the north and south ends.
- Two exterior basement stairs on the west elevation are detailed to not extend above the granite base course at the building perimeter.

Trim and Secondary Features:

- Brick pilasters at the walls of the side wings, with sloping or stepped brick at the bottom of the recesses between.
- Copper exterior wall sconce on west elevation may be original.

Materials

- The walls are typically red brick with wood and metal trim, a granite base course, brick watertable and a tall, painted wood cornice.
- At the projecting entrance bay, the watertable and cheekwalls are limestone; the front steps are granite.
- Slate roof with copper flashing at the main portions of the building. There are low-slope roofs of unknown material at the additions.
- The cupola is painted wood with copper roofing at its shallow hip roofs and window hoods.

Craft Details

- The stained glass medallions within the large, multi-pane window at the north and south window bays were designed by Charles J. Connick. One contains lines from Robert Frost's poetry.
- Metalwork ornament located above the main (east) door.
- Two globe light fixtures on limestone standards flanking the main (east) entry.
- Ornamental medallion is centered within the south and north pediments.
- The exterior window sills at the first and second floors typically have a large bullnose profile.

Interior Visual Character

Individually Important Spaces

Main Lobby

- Triple-height space, with a mezzanine and 6/6 double-hung windows at upper level
- Square, 28-pane laylight, recessed in ceiling
- Shallow steps in plaster wall and ceiling surfaces
- Stenciling on the walls
- Wood-clad square, fluted columns
- Ornamental metal railings at mezzanine and doors from entry vestibule
- Ornamental metal pattern at lower panels of doors to entry vestibule
- Ceiling-mounted light fixture mounted at center of laylight

Reading Rooms (now repurposed)

- Double-height spaces with shallow barrel vault
- Stained glass medallion at far end
- Wood-clad square, fluted pilasters
- Ceiling-mounted light fixtures
- Built-in wood bookshelves along long (east, west) sides

Related Spaces

Original (east) Entry Vestibule

- Shallow steps in plaster wall and ceiling surfaces
- Ceiling-mounted light fixture
- Wood architrave at exterior door
- Wood paneling at lower level
- Ornamental metal panels at balustrades

Children's Room and Community Room (now subdivided and repurposed)

- Plaster ceiling detail: border of shallow steps in surface
- Wood bookshelves; some relocated
- Windows: steeply sloped interior sills, extensions to the window hardware so they are readily operable

Part 2 – Images

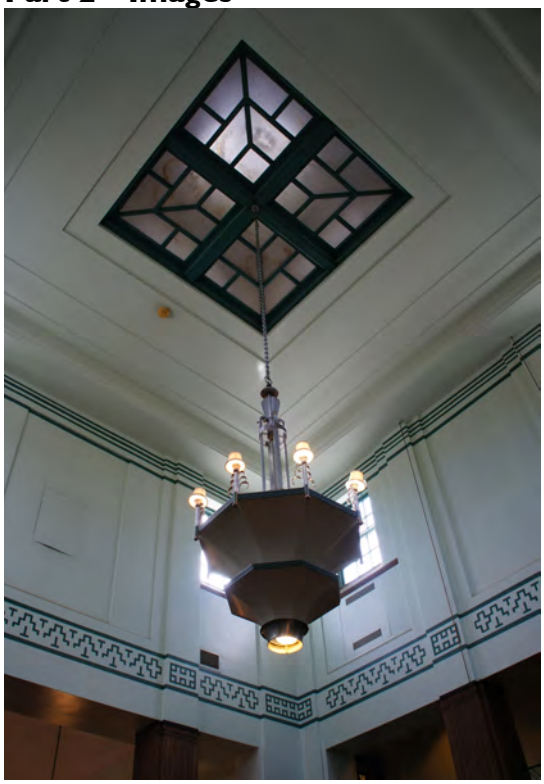

Figure 2: Laylight and chandelier in Main Lobby. Note stepped plaster detail at walls and ceiling.

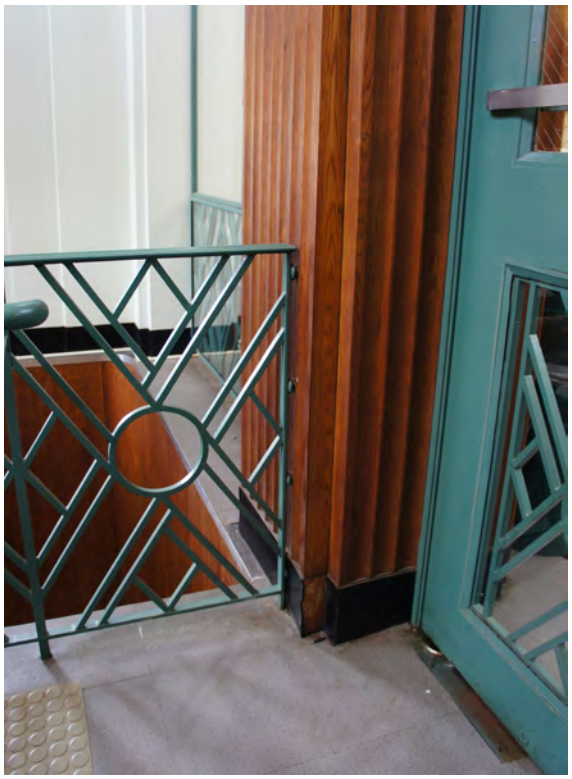

Figure 3: fluted wood column and ornamental metal panels at Entry Vestibule balustrade and door.

Figure 4: South gable end. Note carved pediment ornament and stained glass panel behind storm windows.

Figure 5: East (historic main) entrance.

Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations

Preservation Treatment Level

The Newton Senior Center, with its origin as the most prominent of the branch libraries built in the 1920s-30s, is significant to the civic history of Newton. While the building's use has changed and many spaces have been altered, many of the most significant features remain intact and in good condition. It is recommended that the most important spaces and the historically significant features (listed in Part 2 of this report) be treated at the "Preservation" Level outlined in the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. The Preservation treatment level places a premium on the retention of historic fabric through conservation, maintenance and repair.

In related spaces and ancillary spaces not directly contributing to the historic character, the "Rehabilitation" level of treatment from the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* may be more appropriate. At this level, the emphasis is placed on protecting and maintaining historic building material and significant features while providing an efficient contemporary use of the building.

The following bulleted list contains an analysis of existing conditions and recommended treatments for the significant features catalogued in Part 2 of this report.

Exterior Recommendations

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Clogged area drain at northwest basement stairs. Unclog.
- Evidence of water infiltration and water damage at various locations. Locations of leaks to be determined and repaired. Building elements already damaged identified below to be addressed as part of more comprehensive work.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Roof was not accessible for survey. Survey roof condition and repair as necessary. Coordinate with identifying and repairing leaks.
- Window condition to be thoroughly surveyed, including sash, frame, lintel and hardware. Repair as required. Repaint. Replace missing hardware.
- Steel lintels at basement level windows are rusted, many need to be replaced, all need to be repainted. Reset and repoint displaced bricks where rust jacking has occurred (preserve existing windows) and where removed to replace lintels.
- Peeling paint at steel lintel of current (west) main entrance; repaint to prevent structural damage.
- Basement stairs at northwest and southwest: rusting steel nosings; water stains and biological growth at concrete retaining walls. South: joints below granite coping need to be repointed. North: retaining wall in poor condition- large areas of spalling, cracking, efflorescence, biological growth. Repair and/or rebuild retaining wall. Provide adequate drainage on exterior side.
- Replace rotted wood elements in kind. Paint all wood elements. Includes cornice and base at current (west) main entrance.
- HVAC equipment visible on southwest roof, with insensitive wall penetrations. Coordinate with cupola repair and restoration and overall HVAC strategy (HVAC not part of the scope of this report).
- Cupola: Historic appearance and functionality have been compromised by the insensitive addition of acrylic panels sealing the louvered vents, pipe vents and possibly being sealed off from the laylight below. Investigate original venting, daylighting, and subsequent alterations. Coordinate with HVAC design.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- At the projecting entrance bay: repair the spalling limestone bases, including dutchman repairs as required. Remove ferrous elements, clean and repoint. Repaint all wood surfaces.
- Clean brick walls and watertable, and granite base course. Repoint where necessary for repairs or for better mortar match. Visible locations include:
    - mismatched repointing at the west façade of the southwest projection
    - repointing, some brick replacement needed at west façade, investigate for possible source of water damage here
    - efflorescence at chimney; at southwest corner of south wing; investigate source
    - stained brick, missing mortar at corner of southwest projection; identify moisture source that is causing the efflorescence; repair, clean, repoint.
    - staining of brick and mortar at current main entrance; indicates water, damage at cornice or roof above. Repair leak.
- non-original (non-contributing) corrugated plastic shed roof over north basement stair in poor condition: should be removed and/or replaced with more appropriate roof
- copper exterior wall sconce likely original; to be repaired, restored. Includes removing inappropriate repairs, cleaning corrosion, replacing missing glazing panels, fitting with exterior-appropriate energy-efficient bulb.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Protect and continue to maintain stained glass medallions in north and south window bays.
- The other character-defining features are in generally good condition. Continue regular maintenance.

Interior Recommendations

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Locate and repair source of water damage at entry vestibule wall and ceiling.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Clean laylight. Investigate original functionality and possibility of opening up to cupola. Coordinate with work at cupola and HVAC system.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Repair and repaint entry vestibule wall and ceiling where water-damaged.
- Acoustic tiles affixed to ceilings of significant spaces (reading rooms, entry vestibule, children's room, community room). Determine original surfaces, find more appropriate means of acoustic dampening if necessary.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- The other character-defining features are in generally good condition. Continue regular maintenance.