

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 4, 2012

TO: CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF OLD AND HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA DISTRICT BOARD OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

FROM: AL COX, FAIA, HISTORIC PRESERVATION MANAGER

SUBJECT: 0 PRINCE STREET (FORMER BEACHCOMBERS BUILDING)

By this memo, City Staff is requesting a determination from the OHAD BAR of local historic significance for the building formerly known as the Beachcombers Restaurant, now located at 0 Prince Street. Due to the subject property's location in the established flood plain, any "substantial improvements" to the property must meet the requirements of the City's flood plain ordinance. The character of a historic building can be seriously compromised if all of the flood plain requirements must be met. For instance, the existing building would have to be elevated approximately 2.6' to raise the first floor above the 100 year flood elevation. Therefore, buildings can be exempted from this requirement if they are determined to have historic significance, such as being listed:

- (1) individually on the National Register of Historic Places;
- (2) as a contributing resource to a National Register Historic District;
- (3) individually listed on a state inventory of historic places; or
- (4) individually listed on a local inventory of historic places in certified communities.

The City of Alexandria is a Certified Local Government (CLG) which means its local preservation program meets the state and federal preservation standards and requirements set forth in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Application of the Demolition Criteria

While the Beachcombers building is located within the Alexandria National Register historic district, it falls outside the presently defined 1749 to 1934 period of significance, which was last updated in 1984. Alexandria does not have a locally defined period of significance or published list of historic buildings. By longstanding practice, all buildings within the Old and Historic Alexandria District are considered significant if they meet any of the following criteria listed in zoning ordinance section 10-105(B) when considering a permit to capsule or demolish:

- (1) Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?
- (2) Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into an historic shrine?
- (3) Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and

- material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?
- (4) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?
 - (5) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?
 - (6) Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining and increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions, attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage, and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?

While the Beachcombers building is not of old and unusual or uncommon design and the concrete block exterior could be reproduced with relative ease, Staff believes that the structure at 0 Prince Street has cultural and historic significance to the City of Alexandria. Construction of the Beachcombers Restaurant in this location represented a distinct shift in the public use and perception of the Potomac River, when the Alexandria waterfront transitioned from an industrial area, operating at peak capacity during both World Wars, to a place for leisure and recreation. Although the Old Dominion Boat Club has been located along the waterfront since 1881, the Beachcombers Restaurant was an early, if not the first, example of a recreational place open to the general public when it first opened in 1946. The cinder-block building was constructed on concrete piles in the water with a three-sided porch at the second story and an outdoor dining terrace on the flat roof, creating a unique setting on the waterfront for the nautical-themed venue.

However, by 1954, the restaurant had closed and the building was damaged by fire. After the fire, the International Armaments Corp, also known as Interarmco or Interarms, began to use the building for storage. By 1963, the property became home to various sporting-goods stores and Potomac Arms, the retail outlet of Interarmco. Since 1972, a restaurant ship has been based out of the wood pier at the building and successive dinner boat cruises use the property as a launch site. In 2006, the City acquired the property in order to expand public access to the waterfront.

The Waterfront Master Plan identified the cultural importance of the site and recommended that the City “Continue to pursue reuse or reconstruction of the Beachcombers Restaurant Building as a working restaurant, provided it is financially feasible without public subsidy.” It was also suggested that “a unique water feature could also be incorporated as part of the building’s redevelopment” and the “roof of the building could potentially be used for outdoor dining along with the porches on the second floor.”

The building remains remarkably intact, with a majority of its original features and materials. The building’s most character-defining feature is the second floor wood porch wrapping around three sides and rooftop deck designed to maximize views of the waterfront. These features were distinctly different from the more utilitarian nature of earlier industrial buildings along the waterfront and signaled the building as a place for leisure pursuits. Another important feature is its setting and location—while originally located over the water, it still clearly reads as a raised waterfront structure due to its proximity to the river today and open piers below. However, the building’s craftsmanship and utilitarian materials are not unique or character-defining features

and may potentially be changed without compromising the building's historic integrity or significance. A recent structural assessment commissioned by the City indicated some structural concerns to be addressed with any renovation or restoration, including rebuilding a portion of the first floor, repairing cracks in the masonry walls, and reinforcement of the concrete piers.

Summary

Retention of the building, and its primary character-defining features, provides physical evidence of the evolution of the City's historic commercial waterfront and opens the chapter on the area's history as a place for leisure and recreation. Although the building materials and design, a cinder-block building with extensive porches, are not architecturally significant and may be easily reproduced, the building's cultural and historic significance is unique to Alexandria and specifically suited to its waterfront location. Retention and preservation of this building promotes the general welfare by attracting tourists, generating business and conveying the City's history. Furthermore, the retention of this building is consistent with the Waterfront Master Plan.

It should be noted that the reuse of the building as a restaurant, or other public building, will require significant structural and accessibility improvements, including reconstruction of the porches and the addition of rooftop elements to make rooftop occupation feasible. The design of these alterations must, of course, be compatible with the overall character of the building and will be brought to the OHAD BAR for a Certificate of Appropriateness at that time.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board find the old Beachcombers Restaurant building to be historically significant under criteria #1, #5 and #6 and recommends that it be retained and adaptively reused, with any necessary alterations and modifications to be approved by the BAR in the future.

Attachment: *0 Prince Street: A Timeline*. Diane Riker, 2008. Alexandria Archaeology Studies of the Old Waterfront.