Staff Report- September 11, 2012
Mechanic Theater- 1 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore City Special List: Exterior

Plan: To Demolish Theater Structure, Hearing 1.
Staff Presenter : W. Edward Leon, City Planner III: Historic Preservation
Applicant : One West Baltimore Street Associates
Architect: Shalom Baranes Associates

Background

This project is coming for Demolition Review Hearing 1 of a property that has been placed on the Baltimore City Special List-Exterior. This project is being reviewed in accordance with the Demolition Application Procedure. The site is located on the southwest corner of the intersection of Baltimore Street and Charles Street in downtown. The Mechanic Theater was placed by CHAP on the Special List on August 14, 2007. At the same time, CHAP determined that the structure met landmark criteria and recommended its designation. The Mechanic remains eligible for Baltimore City landmark designation because it continues to meet Landmark designation criteria.

Timeline:

August 14, 2007- CHAP Hearing- Placed on Special List and Recommended for Landmark Designation

June 17, 2008- Planning Director McCoach letter to Shalom Baranes, AIA Stating design goals to yield redevelopment and adaptive re-use of the Mechanic.

July 9, 2008- Shalom Baranes reply letter to Director McCoach Confirming agreement with goals.

September 11, 2008- Planning Commission Hearing

- Commission disapproves designation recommendation as per Planning Staff recommendation, which also states that staff agreed with historical significance of the site.
- Based descision upon facilitating adaptive re-use by UDARP review.
- Agreed upon criteria for adaptive re-use to be applied.

May 2012- Newspaper Article citing Demolition Plans for the Mechanic Theater.

May 17, 2012- CHAP Chairman Kann writes letter to Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake urging proceeding with immediate designation of The Mechanic Theater.

July 13, 2012- Mayor Rawlings-Blake informs Chairman Kann that the Mayor's Office will not be supporting the legislation.

August 12, 2012- CHAP holds hearing to review Demo Application-tabled meeting to consider new motion for next hearing on whether to remove site from Special List

Plan
The plan is to demolish the theater structure.

Analysis
The staff has reviewed the site and found that the structure continues to be an architecturally significant structure in the downtown district.

The Morris A. Mechanic Theater is significant as a part of the Charles Center downtown urban renewal project. Charles Center was the first major redevelopment of Baltimore's downtown area since the 1904 Baltimore Fire. Starting in the 1960s, the successful redevelopment of Charles Center set the stage for future redevelopment activities along Baltimore's Inner Harbor. From its inception, the site of the Mechanic Theater was earmarked for a major theater in the original Charles Center plan providing life to the center after dark (Landmark Standard 1).

The theater is associated with the lives of important people responsible for Charles Center, such as planner, David Wallace; Charles Center administrator, J. Jefferson Miller; business leaders, James Rouse, Walter Sondheim, and Hunter Moss; and Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr. Morris A. Mechanic, who built the theater, played an important role in twentieth century entertainment in Baltimore and was associated with many notable local theaters including Ford's, the Centre Theatre, the Stanley and the Valencia/Century (Landmark Standard 2).

The building is architecturally significant as one of the rare examples of the Brutalism style of architecture in downtown Baltimore. The Mechanic Theater and One Charles Center are generally considered the most significant buildings designed as part of Charles Center. The building's architect, John M. Johansen, was a master of modern architectural design in the mid-to-late-Twentieth Century. He is associated with four colleagues, Philip Johnson, Marcel Breuer, Lanis Gores, and Eliot Noyes, who were influenced by Walter Gropius at the Harvard School of Graduate Design and later went on to practice architecture in New Canaan, Connecticut. In addition to his early houses, Johansen is also known for the US Embasy in Dublin, Clowes Memorial Hall in Indianapolis, Goddard Library at Clark University, the Oklahoma Theater Center (Mummer's Theater) in Oklahoma City and Roosevelt Island Housing in New York (Landmark Standard 4).

The Morris A. Mechanic Theater contributed to Baltimore's cultural heritage as the major venue for Broadway touring shows. Under the leadership of the Baltimore Center for the Performing Arts and its manager, Hope Quackenbush, this unique public-private partnership brought notable plays to Baltimore City until the opening of the Hippodrome Theatre in 2004 (Landmark Standard 5).

The site also meets the current CHAP Landmark criteria (p.23 Procedures and Guidelines) :

1. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history,

2. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in Baltimore's past,

3. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

August 12, 2012 Motion request: Remove the Mechanic Theater from Special List: Exterior.

Staff Recommendation

Action 1: In opinion of staff the Mechanic continues to meet Landmark designation Criteria, in that it is the Criteria used for Special List: Exterior designations.

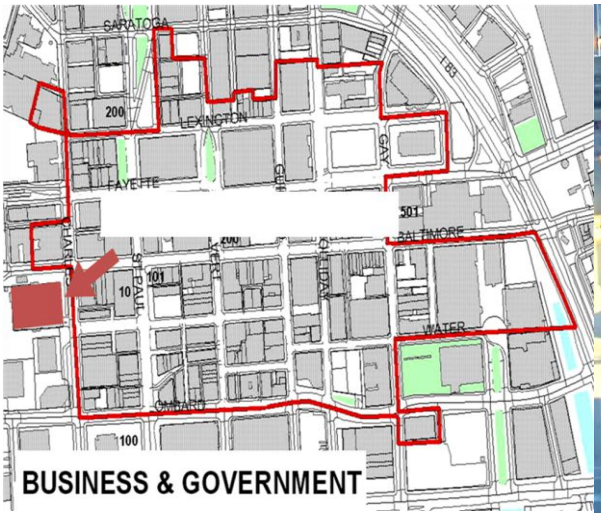
Action 2: For that reason staff recommends disapproval of the demolition request because it is inappropriate due to the fact that the structure continues to meet criteria for the Special List, Standards for designation 1,2, 4 and 5 as well as CHAP Landmark Criteria 1, 2, and 3. Disapproval will begin the 6 month postponement of the Demolition Permit by the Housing Commissioner.

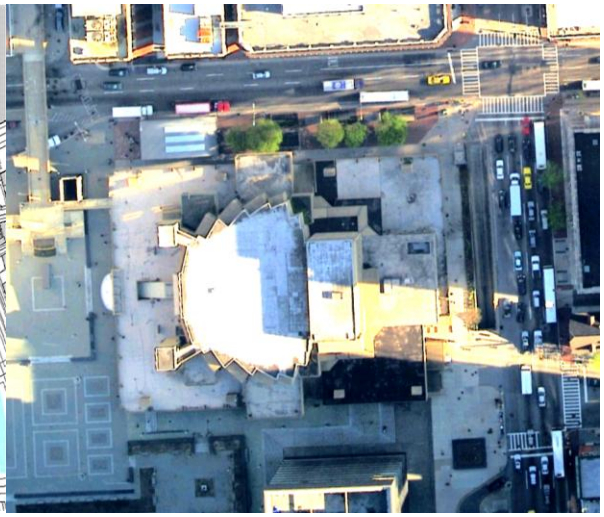
CHAP Demolition Procedure, Hearing I:

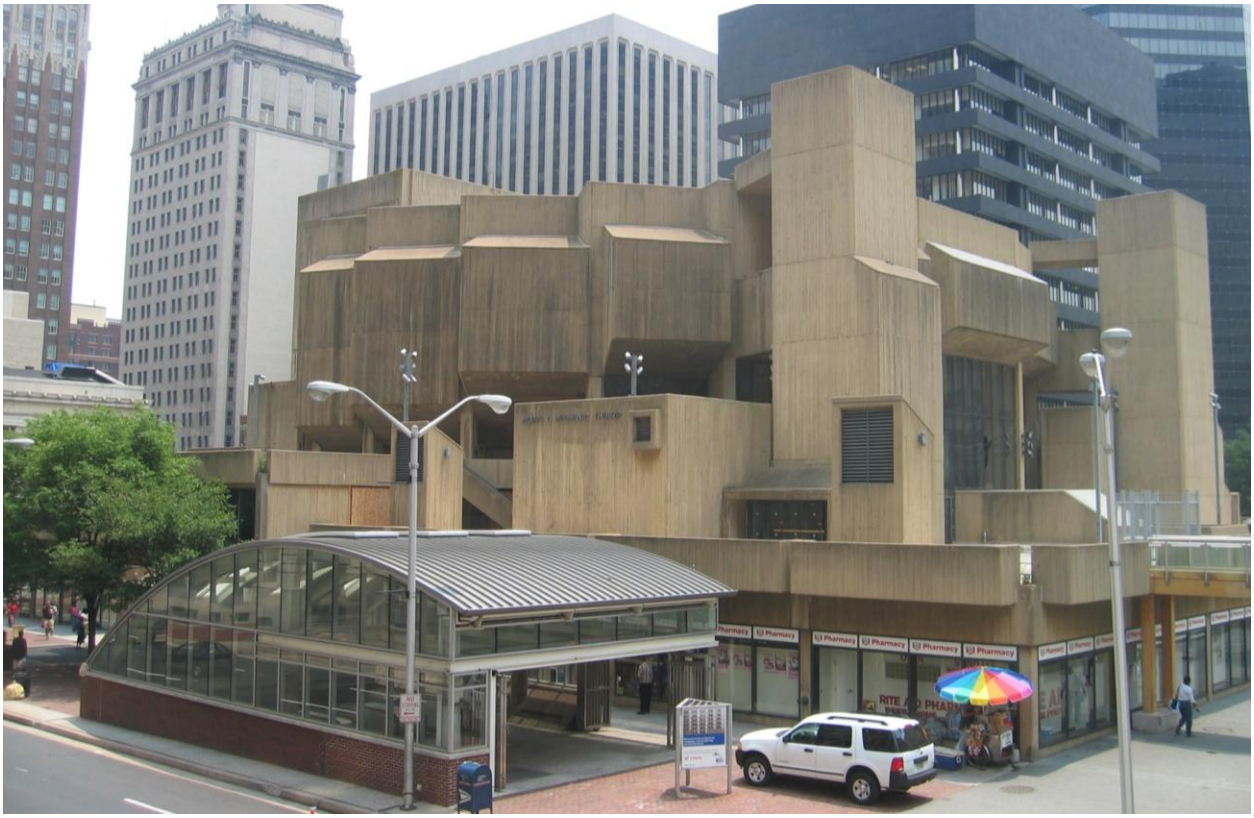
As stated in Article 6, Section 4-5, the commission may issue a Notice to Proceed for plans that are inappropriate, but "without substantial detriment to the public welfare and without substantial derogation from the intents and purposes of this ordinance, and denial of the application will result in substantial hardship to the applicant." As the intents and purposes of this ordinance are to preserve the historical, cultural, educational and/or architectural value of designated buildings in districts or included in the Landmark List, the commission shall make a public determination in a regularly scheduled commission hearing as to whether or not a structure is contributing or non-contributing to the historic district in which it is located, or to the landmark, of which it is a part. This determination shall be made prior to the commission's consideration of a completed demolition application and new plans for the site. Such a decision by the commission shall be based solely on its evaluation of the architectural and/or historical importance of the structure. This evaluation shall be made by applying the commission's "Standards for Designation." (See commission hearing history)

During or after this initial public hearing, the commission may decide that a structure in a historic district or a landmark structure may be demolished because it does not contribute to the historic district or the landmark. In that case, a Notice or Proceed shall be issued.

Site Plan



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