[original version of Recommendations]

The Future of the Charleston County Courthouse:

Recommendations to the Charleston County Council

by

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Introduction:

Many considerations need to be weighed in determining the appropriate course for renovating the Charleston County Courthouse. Most important is the need to protect all early building fabric which has fortunately survived the many destructive alterations. It is also crucial that a sense of architectural and historical dignity be returned to this structure. The resulting scheme should preserve its early fabric, be useful and convenient for court and county requirements, and establish an appropriate relationship between the interior and exterior of the original section, as well as with the addition to the rear.

The county courthouse has been repeatedly subjected to radical and costly renovations during the past century in the pursuit of adequate courtroom and office spaces. If these issues are not successfully addressed now, the courthouse will almost certainly undergo another costly renovation within the next 10 to 25 years. On five separate occasions since 1883, court and county officials have responded to these needs by reducing and reorienting circulation spaces, constructing additions, and removing interior fabric. These efforts to provide for the long-term needs of the community have fallen short of their goal. As a consequence, the original plan is entirely obscured and twentieth-century rear additions now shroud many of the elements that once made this a handsome structure. Most Charlestonians are unaware of the historical and architectural significance of one of their most important public buildings. To make the courthouse once again, in Robert Mill's words, one "of those

substantial and well arranged buildings which do credit to the art," and to spare it the destruction which will surely accompany further renovations, the present remodelling plans must be made in a sympathetic and rational manner.

Despite the many vicissitudes suffered in its nearly two-and-a-half centuries of existence, the county courthouse still plays an important part in the life of Charleston. As a tangible reminder of the state's early heritage, the building is only one of a half-dozen colonial statehouses that survives. For this reason alone, it is of national importance. Many of the dramatic events which precipitated South Carolina's struggle for Independence from Great Britain occurred within the walls of this structure. After the removal of state government from Charleston and the fire of 1788, the building emerged in a new and prominent role as a county courthouse. Serving for more than two hundred years as the focus of the city's legal community, the courthouse has witnessed many important events in Charlestonians quest for justice and the rule of law. Few other courthouses in the country can claim such a long lineage. In both its statehouse and early courthouse form, this structure was one of the finest classical public buildings to be found in America. Unlike many of its parochial counterparts along the eastern seaboard, it is reminiscent of the impressive shire halls and assize courts erected in English towns during the period.

The ceremonial aspects of the building, the logic of its plan, and the purity of its design were compromised by extensive alterations in 1883. The need for additional offices and larger courtrooms consumed large sections of the building's original circulation space. The stair--moved at this time to the east end of the building--became no more than a means to ascend between floors. The vast entrance hall, grand stair, and richly lit north wall

succumbed to the pragmatic needs of an office building. The sense that this structure belonged to its citizens and was to be used and admired by them had been lost.

Other changes occurred during this phase which further jeopardized the character of the building's design. Rustication was added around the perimeter of the first floor and the niches converted to windows in an attempt to lessen the importance of the south facade. The doorway on Meeting Street was enriched to express its importance as the new primary entrance, now that the stair had been moved. For the other openings, the jambs were replaced and new two-over-two sash were added, giving the building a modern look.

Yet as extensive and damaging as these changes were, the 1883 modifications were themselves largely destroyed by later renovations. Virtually nothing remains, for instance, of the 1883 plan. All of the sash were replaced in 1926, and the interior window reveals were rebuilt at the same time. Though the tin cornice dates to the 1880s, the roof covering appears to have been replaced in the present century.

The 1926 alterations merely added space and remade the plan, with no attempt to dignify the interior. These changes simply created more and smaller offices at the expense of early fabric. In 1941, the earlier rear addition was enlarged. On Meeting Street, new decoration matched the existing and thus continued the 1880s scheme--a further distortion of the 1788 design. Centrally located on this addition was another entrance, patterned after the 1883 doorway on the original section. Meanwhile, the Broad Street door was converted to a window--a sign that the grand entrance hall had been given over to office space and that circulation had degenerated into a maze of corridors. The closing of the Broad Street entrance and the two competing doorways on Meeting Street presented a confusing message

about the primary circulation routes. As a result, approaching visitors had to be directed by means of written signs--the architecture no longer could speak for itself.

In 1969, an attempt was made to restore the front to its 1788 form. As part of this effort, niches were reinstalled and a blind door replaced the 1941, central, first-floor window. Still, the door was not made operable--a source of still more confusion, which eventually lead to the installation of an iron fence across this false entrance. Situated in the midst of 1880s rustication, the niches are now an anachronism--made worse by the fact that the adjoining third-floor windows were not returned to their original size. On the interior, the plan was further scrambled and inexpensive interior finish with a short life expectancy was introduced.

It is our recommendation that the exterior of this nationally important building be restored to its 1788-1883 appearance and the major circulation patterns of the interior, including the Broad Street entrance, be re-created. This will permit a logical renovation scheme resulting in a handsome exterior and a rational plan. With additional space provided in a rear addition and at the proposed complex further down Broad Street, we anticipate that this scheme will sufficiently address the problems ignored by past generations, and thus preclude a full-scale remodelling for many years to come. This plan respects the integrity of the old building, carefully preserving its early fabric and restoring it to the period of most consequence before its design was severely compromised.

Recommendations:

I. Preserve all building fabric which dates before the 1883 alterations.

None of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century construction, whether it be the exterior brick walls, the roof framing, or sections of plaster finish on the interior, should be removed. The new design must be so configured as to leave this fabric unharmed. For instance, when installing the HVAC system, the ductwork should be brought through the masonry walls where it has already been penetrated by later alterations. Vent stacks rising through the roof could be directed to areas where the sheathing has been replaced. By recognizing the historical value of this material, it will be possible to preserve what evidence remains of this structure's early form for future generations to study and appreciate.

II. Restore the exterior of the original building to its 1788-1883 appearance.

A. Remove later alterations to the original part of the building.

1. Remove 1886 changes to the three pediments.
2. Remove the rustication around the first-floor level except at the front arcade [the quoins at the corners and pediment would remain].
3. Remove the 1883 cornice [the lower parts of the entablature are original].
4. Remove the 1883 doorway on the Meeting Street facade.

B. Restore or reconstruct features that have been obscured or demolished by later alterations.

1. Restore the niches to their proper design.

2. Replace the 1886 cornice with a larger modillion cornice based on 1788 design.

3. Return the third-floor windows to their original size.

4. Replace all exterior doors and jambs with historically accurate ones.

5. Install historically accurate window jambs with six-over-six sash.

6. Restore exterior panelled shutters to all ground-floor windows.

7. Reconstruct the belt courses between each story.

8. Rebuild the four chimney stacks.

9. Add a slate roof to match the original covering.

In addition to these exterior changes on the south, east, and west facades, it is recommended that the fenestration in the central section of the original rear facade be reconstructed. These windows, including the Venetian, lunette, and compass-headed windows and those which flanked them, provide the logical focus for the re-creation of the original central stair and may be used to provide some form of lighting for this space.

In order that these exterior elements be restored in the most accurate manner possible, it is recommended that photogrammetry be employed to produce accurate elevational drawings of the exterior of the courthouse in its 1788-1883 form based on historic photographs of the building. With few exceptions, virtually everything about the building's exterior is known in a sufficient level of detail to allow for an accurate reconstruction of the missing elements. It is also recommended that the design and working drawings should be reviewed by an independent architectural historian well versed in historic details.

III. Restore the original circulation pattern and provide public meeting spaces.

A. The main entrance to the statehouse should be returned to Broad Street.

The once-commanding front facade has been compromised and confused by competing entrances on Meeting Street and by the abandonment of the Broad Street entrance. To rectify this confusion and to help reestablish early circulation patterns, the courthouse should again be firmly oriented south on Broad Street.

B. The principal interior circulation spaces should be returned to their 1788-1883 form.

The central focus of the ground-floor section should be the original entry hall with a large stair at the rear. It is also recommended that one or two large rooms be returned to a public function that will bring the community to the building for special meetings. The former courtroom in the west end of the ground floor could serve either as a small magistrate's court or a public reception room. This function might also be incorporated in the second-floor space on the east side of the building which once housed the colonial council and later the U. S. circuit court. This space, whether on the ground or second floor, is intended as a council room or, alternatively, as a public meeting room. If the second-floor space is used for this purpose, the small adjoining room at the head of the stairs could be used as a smaller meeting room and a place to exhibit and interpret the history of this building. Beyond these spaces, other meeting rooms, offices, and small magisterial courtrooms can be accommodated as deemed necessary but should be arranged in a manner consistent with the re-creation of the 1788-1883 circulation spaces.

The design should take into consideration what is known concerning these spaces. Door and window locations, room heights, floor and wall treatment, and other details

can be treated as they were originally. The east courtroom on the second floor, for example, had plaster walls, was crowned with a twelve-inch cornice, and was otherwise fairly plain. Much of the heart-pine flooring still survives, giving the quality and dimensions of this material. The central stair configuration is known, as is the outline of the stair panelling that ran along the rear wall between the second and third floor.

Yet, much has been lost by the many renovations undertaken over the past 100 years. Recognizing that the interior must serve modern needs and be convenient, we do not advocate a museum quality restoration. Still, the new work should pay careful attention to details if it is to be successful and worthy of long-term retention. The finish in these public spaces should be in a style sympathetic to the neoclassical architecture of the exterior. For other spaces in the building, the design should not be harsh and discordant. An independent architectural historian, well-versed in historic details, should review the plans of the exterior and the re-created interior spaces to ensure the suitability of the proposed work.

IV. Rear Addition.

From a historical and architectural point of view, the ideal solution to the forthcoming renovation would be to remove the rear addition and reconstitute the original rear courtyard with its wall and three outbuildings. However, it appears that some addition to the original building will be necessary if the downtown site is to meet the growing space requirements of the Charleston County government and courts. Taking this necessity into account, we see two reasonable options regarding treatment of the space bounded by the original building and Courthouse Alley.

A. Construct a new rear addition.

The first option would involve the demolition of the 1926-1941 annex and construction of a new rear wing which would provide more efficient use of space. By reducing excessive ceiling heights of the present wing, a new building would accommodate a greater number of floors, produce a more coherent arrangement of courtrooms and ancillary spaces, and create a more logical circulation scheme.

At the same time, a new structure would serve to clarify the distinction between the old building and its modern appendage. The outward form and exterior detailing of this new structure could relate sympathetically to the historical character of the older structure, of course, but because of different floor levels and fenestration, the old and new buildings would have to function as visually separate units.

New construction could also establish a more satisfactory relationship between the courthouse, the county office building, and the small green space that joins them. At present, there is really no apparent connection between the two buildings.

If the county opts for this course of action, archaeological investigation of the old ancillary building foundations now visible under the annex must precede the work, as demolition and excavation for new construction will almost certainly destroy these important remains.

B. Maintain the present additions.

The second option involves preserving the present addition. If the county chooses this course, we recommend that the north [alley] elevation of the 1926-1941 addition be altered to express the new importance of that elevation as a principal access to the

building. This change would relieve the present insipid appearance of the north entrance and would reinforce the connection between the courthouse and the county office building.

In order to differentiate the design of the original building with the rear additions, it is recommended that the Meeting Street facade of the rear wing be moved back several feet. This would allow the rear portion to be transformed, suiting modern needs as well as preventing any visual confusion as to the original extent of the early courthouse.

V. Monitoring of the historic fabric during construction.

Several additional steps need to be taken as work progresses to insure a complete understanding of the historical development of the building and its site. The studies undertaken by John Milner Associates, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the Center for Historic Preservation at Mary Washington College have significantly advanced efforts to record the building's structural integrity, note its architectural development, and describe those events important to its heritage. This process must continue, especially in the form of investigating and recording what additional knowledge can be gleaned from the building behind its more modern fabric during the course of demolition and renovation.

A. Monitoring of demolition work.

The demolition of the interior should be done at an early stage, under the careful guidance of a qualified architectural historian. The historian should monitor the removal of this fabric and record all new information that comes to light. Additionally, an

inventory of all pre-1883 fabric should be listed to assist in the development of the new design.

B. Archaeological investigation.

Keeping the rear wing would allow the eighteenth-century outbuilding foundations beneath the annex to remain intact. Any new design and reconstruction associated with the renovation of this rear wing should take the preservation of these remains into account. However, if any of the ground is to be disturbed either by demolition of the wing, or any type of soil disturbance due to the alteration of this space, an archaeological investigation should be conducted.

VI. Interpretation of the Building.

A. Name of the building.

In light of the building's significance as South Carolina's first statehouse (it was referred to as such well into the nineteenth century), we recommend that the building be called the "Old Statehouse." This would honor its early history and reduce confusion with the new complex being developed further down Broad Street.

B. Public interpretation.

It is also recommended that some form of interpretative program be developed for the building. The public should be made aware of the historical importance of the courthouse and should share in the use of this building as they did in the earlier years of its existence. The meeting room or rooms on the first or second floors could be made available for public use when not otherwise occupied. The former ground-floor courtroom or the small

room at the head of the stairs on the second floor could also double as a space to exhibit the several artifacts that have survived related to this structure. The lower entrance hall could be made available for public tours.

Some interpretative exhibits and historical artifacts might be placed in the entrance hall, with those needing additional security placed in the meeting rooms. Either the county or a public-spirited group might commission a set of models that detail the building's complex history. These could be displayed in the lower hall and be used to assist visitors interested in the history of the building. Through small efforts such as these, the citizens of Charleston and its many visitors might once again appreciate the architectural and historical importance of this great building.