



UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

ROME STUDIES PROGRAM

Via Ostilia, 15
00184 Roma
Italy

Telephone 06 772.643.306
Facsimile 06 772.643.333
www.architecture.nd.edu

17 February 2022

Palm Beach Town Council

City Hall

Palm Beach, Florida

Dear Sir/Madam:

As a Florida native and admirer of the town of Palm Beach since childhood, I am writing in support of the proposed addition to the Memorial Fountain in Palm Beach designed by Fairfax & Sammons Architects, P.C. As designed in 1929, the original fountain terrace is an excellent example of civic art—a synthesis of architecture, sculpture, and landscape design—that was originally intended both as an embellishment to the public space in front of Palm Beach’s City Hall and the solution to the practical problem of screening an unsightly area in front of the fire station opposite. The fountain’s designer, Addison Mizner, a master of architecture, decoration, and scenography, gave the fountain a raised platform to solve the practical problem while providing a beautiful foreground to City Hall.

Today, the context has dramatically changed, creating another set of aesthetic and practical needs that the current proposal addresses. The addition of a staircase on the “back” side of the fountain terrace will allow the insertion of an elevator to allow access in conformance with the Americans with Disabilities Act while also providing an appropriate backdrop to what is now Town Square, a landscaped public park rather than a utilitarian service yard for the fire station. It accomplishes these objectives without in any way impacting the originally intended appearance of the fountain as viewed from the City Hall side.

This proposal is an exemplary instance of sensitive and contextual design of new elements added to a historic site. The purpose of most historic preservation regulation and National Register designation is not to prevent change altogether, but to manage change so that it does not diminish the historic or artistic significance of the site. In this case, previous changes approved by local authorities create an inharmonious condition that the new proposal seeks to correct—the conspicuous exposure of a blank wall that was originally not intended to be seen but is now the unfortunate visual focus of the new Town Square.

The proposal conforms to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, a document specifically written to permit alterations or additions to historic structures in response to changes in use or surrounding context. In this case, both use and context of the site have changed since the fountain was designed. The proposal conforms to the requirement that changes or additions to historic properties be limited to areas that do not impact the historically significant public view and that new construction or alterations be reversible so that the new work could be removed and the original configuration restored in

the future. Since the proposal neither affects the primary historic view of the site nor permanently alters original features, there is no risk that the site's historic significance will be compromised.

Finally, the Standards call for any new work to be both "differentiated" from the old and "compatible" with it. The current proposal skillfully strikes this delicate balance. The new stair is clearly different from the original one in both configuration and material but, at the same time, is compatible in scale, style, and feeling. An inscription on the new stair would show the date of the addition.

We should remember that many of our most valued monuments and historic sites were the result of successive changes over extended periods of time. This is especially true in urban settings where growth and change are the natural consequence of the life of the city. The Memorial Fountain in Palm Beach, too, shows a record of positive change over time since its first construction. The aim of historic preservation should be not so much to interrupt this process as to ensure that it reinforces the historic character and beauty of the city. The proposal to accommodate the Memorial Fountain's new, more formal setting should be greeted as an appropriate embellishment to the Palm Beach's public realm and an example of sensitive historic preservation practice. For all these reasons, I urge approval of this worthy proposal.

Please let me know if I can provide any further information.

Best wishes,



Steven W. Semes, Professor and Acting Director of Graduate Studies in Historic Preservation

Steven W. Semes, a native of Miami, Florida, is Professor of Architecture and Acting Director of Graduate Studies in Historic Preservation at the School of Architecture of the University of Notre Dame. In addition to many articles in both scholarly and general publications, he is the author of *The Future of the Past: A Conservation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2009). The book was listed by the National Park Service as "Recommended Reading" in *Preservation Briefs 14: New Exterior Additions to Historic Buildings: Preservation Concerns*, revised 2010, and included in "The Essential Preservation Reading List," by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2012. After three decades of architectural practice, Semes joined the Notre Dame faculty in 2005 and since 2007 has divided his time between campus and the School's Rome Studies Program, which he directed 2008-2011. He was founding Director of the graduate program in historic preservation at Notre Dame and is currently preparing *New Building in Old Cities: Selected Writings of Gustavo Giovannoni on Architectural and Urban Conservation* to be published later this year by the Getty Conservation Institute.