Museum's planned addition angers some of its neighbors

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[Michael Schantz] said that when the museum proposed the expansion, "we invited the neighbors to come and see the designs." Schantz said [Robert Shusterman] said he "wouldn't be interested in seeing any designs by Robert Venturi."
Schantz said he told Venturi that the museum "wanted something understated." He said the design met his expectations. The Inquirer wrote that the wing "feels as proper as a public school. If anything, it should be less so."

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Apr. 12--The folks at Chestnut Hill's Woodmere Art Museum want to add a wing. They hired an acclaimed Philadelphia architect and earned some support from the community's key business and neighborhood groups. Yet a group of neighbors -- with some legal muscle -- is fighting the $11.7 million project before the Philadelphia Board of Zoning Adjustment, claiming that the proposed expansion is too large for the museum's site and that parking is inadequate in this tony community on the city's northwest edge.
In addition, the leaders of the group of about 40 households say they are concerned about drainage, and they argue that the modern- style wing, designed by architect Robert Venturi, of Venturi, Scott Brown &Associates in Manayunk, would be incompatible with "our residential neighborhood" and the museum's historic Victorian mansion at Germantown Avenue and Bells Mill Road.
"I'm an architect in addition to being a lawyer, and I do a lot of work with historic preservation," said Robert Shusterman, a leader of the group, North Chestnut Hill Neighbors. "You can have a very modern building that's next to an old building that's compatible."
The museum opened in 1940 and features a permanent collection of 3,000 works, including many by artists from the Philadelphia area, such as N.C. Wyeth, Walter Elmer Schofield, Benjamin West and Violet Oakley. Officials say the new two-story wing is needed because the current 25,000-square-foot space is too small. Shusterman said the new wing would be "totally different. It's steel and glass. That makes it sort of into an appendage."
"Venturi likes to do things that are iconographic -- highly recognizable -- which calls your attention," Shusterman said.
Michael Schantz, director and chief executive officer of the Woodmere Museum, said a primary concern among the neighbors appears to be the design. But, he added, "aesthetics is not a part of zoning."
Schantz said that when the museum proposed the expansion, "we invited the neighbors to come and see the designs." Schantz said Shusterman said he "wouldn't be interested in seeing any designs by Robert Venturi."
Schantz said he told Venturi that the museum "wanted something understated." He said the design met his expectations. The Inquirer wrote that the wing "feels as proper as a public school. If anything, it should be less

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Schantz said that the museum's archives are stored in the mansion's basement and that art classes and lectures must be held in the gallery.
The expansion would add 22,000 square feet to the museum, Schantz said. "We're a modern museum stuck in a Victorian mansion," he said.
The case has been before the Zoning Board of Adjustment three times since October, most recently in early March. The board granted a continuance each time.
The case is to resume on April 27. The neighbors are being represented by the Center City law firm of Fineman, Krekstein &Harris.
"What should have been a two-month regulatory review has changed into a nine-month process," Schantz lamented.
The neighbors argue that drainage from the museum's lush 7.5 acres is insufficient. But Martin Soffer, environmental officer for the City Planning Commission, said the Planning Commission and the Water Department had approved the museum's drainage plan.
Schantz added that the museum has 74 parking spaces and that the new design would add about seven.
Gary Krimstock, a lawyer for the plan's opponents, said: "They're doubling the size of the museum and adding about four parking spaces."
Maxine Dorneman, president of the 2,500-member Chestnut Hill Community Association, the biggest neighborhood group in Chestnut Hill, said her group's committees approved the proposal in June.
"I think the community by and large wants [the expansion] to happen," Dorneman said. "Most of the community wants Woodmere to be viable. I think the issue is aesthetics."
Suzanne Biemiller, executive director of the Chestnut Hill Business Association, said her organization supports Woodmere's plan.
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