



HISTORICAL AFFAIRS AND LANDMARK REVIEW BOARD
ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS STAFF REPORT

TO: Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB)
FROM: Mical Durak, Historic Preservation Associate Planner
DATE: September 8, 2025
SUBJECT: 3550 Wilson Boulevard, CoA 25-07, Clarendon School Local Historic District (LHD)

Background Information

The three-and-one-half-story Clarendon School was built in 1910 in the Classical Revival style and is the work of noted school architect Charles M. Robinson of Richmond, Virginia. The design illustrates the architectural fashions of the period with projecting front bays capped by enclosed pediments, Palladian windows, limestone keystones, beveled stringcourses, and a prominent wood frame portico with paired Tuscan columns. The former classrooms and hallways have been converted to gallery and studio spaces for the Museum of Contemporary Art Arlington (MoCA), formerly known as the Arlington Arts Center. Although the building is occupied by MoCA, it is owned by Arlington County and maintained by the Department of Environmental Services. The building became a Local Historic District (LHD) in 1984 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. A rear addition was constructed starting in 2002 and the historic building underwent a full rehabilitation. There are no design guidelines specifically approved for this LHD except those for exterior art exhibitions; therefore, the HALRB refers to *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* to evaluate any exterior alterations to the building and grounds.

In April 1987, the HALRB approved a CoA (number unknown) for the installation of three pylons on the grounds of MoCA, two of which would contain identification signage. However, it does not appear that these were ever constructed. In September 1989, the HALRB approved a CoA (number unknown) for the placement of a horizontal nylon banner measuring 9.6' x 3.9' between the columns under the portico of the main entrance for a maximum of 35 weeks per year. In October 2021, the HALRB approved CoA 21-20 for the installation of signs banning the use of firearms on County-owned property. In May 2022, the HALRB approved CoA 22-10 for the installation of four Axis security cameras above the building entrances. In July 2022 and September 2022, the HALRB approved amendments to CoA 22-10. CoA 22-10A was an amendment to the location of the proposed security cameras. CoA 22-10B was retroactive; the applicant installed a different camera type than what was approved due to supply issues and one camera was installed in a different location than approved. In March 2023, MoCA brought forward a proposal for the installation of banners on the front of the building; the project was discussed at the March Design Review Committee (DRC) meeting, but the applicant withdrew the application upon discovering that further information was needed from the County's Zoning division before proceeding with the project. In June 2023, the HALRB approved CoA 24-15 for the installation of two 4' x 15' banners to the front elevation of the building until October 22, 2024.

Over the years, several front lawn art installations have been approved administratively by the Historic Preservation Program (HPP) staff, as allowable per the design guidelines for exterior art exhibitions for Clarendon School. The most relevant to the subject application is the following: in June 2023, the HPP staff approved an administrative CoA for the installation of *Reclining Liberty*, an art installation, on the front lawn from August 2023 to July 2024 (ACoA 23-09). The installation of that same art piece was extended until September 30, 2025, via CoA 24-15 which was approved by the HALRB in June 2023. It was reviewed by the HALRB since the installation would be more than a year in length. Staff are permitted to review and approve installations of one year or less per the design guidelines for Clarendon School.

Proposal

MoCA is requesting approval for the permanent installation of the outdoor art piece, *Reclining Liberty*. The 25' x 7' x 5' art piece has been in place on the front lawn since August 2023 and was approved to be in place until late September 2025. *Reclining Liberty* was created by artist Zaq Landsberg and is composed of plywood, lumber, carved foam, hard-coated plaster-resin, and copper paint. The art piece is sturdy enough for human interaction and touching, climbing, sitting, and leaning on the piece are all encouraged. Since the art has been immensely popular with the Arlington community, MoCA is exploring permanently acquiring the piece as part of their collection. The art would remain in the same location as it currently sits.

Design Review Committee Review

The DRC heard this application at its September 3, 2025, hybrid meeting. Ms. Blair Murphy, who was there to represent the MoCA, explained that they were asking the HALRB to approve the extension of the art piece's installation for another year. Ms. Durak asked for clarification and noted that the application submitted was for the permanent installation of the piece. Ms. Murphy shared that MoCA was also seeking their support and opinion on the permanent installation of the art. Mr. Dudka shared that he supported the project and noted that Arlington should have more attractions that bring people to the County. Ms. Foster and Mr. Wenchel did not have any concerns or comments. Mr. Dudka felt that the item should go on the Discussion Agenda for the HALRB meeting since part of the project request was exploring the permanent installation of the art but wanted to note the DRC's support for the project. Ms. Foster and Mr. Wenchel agreed. Ms. Durak noted that staff also agreed and expressed a desire for the motion from the HALRB for the project to reflect language that conveyed the necessity for ongoing conversations between other County entities and MoCA regarding the permanent installation given that the property was rented from the County. The DRC placed the item on the Discussion Agenda for the September 17, 2025, HALRB hybrid public hearing.

After the DRC meeting, HPP staff sought clarification from the applicant on whether they were seeking an additional yearlong extension or just the permanent installation. MoCA clarified that their proposal was solely for the permanent installation of the art and that they were not seeking the additional yearlong extension of the art piece.

Recommendation

The HPP staff recommend approval of the subject application. The Clarendon School's *Guidelines for Temporary and Permanent Exterior Arts Exhibitions, and Temporary Exhibit Signage* state that if an exterior exhibit is on display for more than one year or if an exhibit will make a permanent change to the grounds, MoCA must apply for a CoA from the HALRB (pg. 2). They also note that "when an exterior arts exhibit is approved through the CoA process, the HALRB may make conditions on the repair of the



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grounds or building materials if the review process determines that such impacts will occur as a result of the installation of the exhibit” (pg. 2). The design guidelines do not prohibit the permanent installation of art at the Clarendon School and offer mechanisms by which the HALRB could request conditions for the repair of the grounds should it be determined that they would be impacted by the permanent installation. Currently, there are no other known permanent art installations on the exterior grounds of the Clarendon School LHD.

While the permanent installation of this piece would visually alter the landscape around the Clarendon School, visual impacts in the form of art are permissible by the LHD’s design guidelines. Furthermore, although this art piece would be permanently installed, it would be reversible. Staff believe that the removal of the art in the future would not leave a significant impact on the grounds of the Clarendon School. Furthermore, the project would have no physical impact on the Clarendon School building. Therefore, the project complies with Standard #10 of *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation*:

Standard #10: New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Staff highly recommend that the HALRB include in their motion, should they support the project, that the approval by the HALRB does not signal a wholesale approval from the County. The motion of the HALRB should state that any locational changes or supporting infrastructure to the art piece would require approval by the HALRB. Additionally, conversations with pertinent County staff may be required since the Clarendon School building and grounds is owned by the County and rented by MoCA. Staff feel it is essential that MoCA staff collaborate with the necessary County partners to ensure they are made aware of the desire for the art’s permanent installation, that it is approved by those offices, and that if there are any proposed changes, that HPP staff be consulted to determine if a review is required by the HALRB.