Clemson architecture center gets first OK

Building to sport glass-concrete design

By Robert Behre
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CHARLESTON — Who says Charleston resists the new?

The city's Board of Architectural Review voted 3-1 Wednesday to give early approval to Clemson University's contemporary architecture center at Meeting and George streets, a glass-and-concrete design at once derided as Martian junk and "two huge lips" and praised as inspirational and exciting.

Architect Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture told those inside the packed meeting room that it's exciting that so many people in the community are passionate about architecture.

But their passions were far from the same.

Even the city's two main preservation groups split. Robert Gurley of the Preservation Society said the building didn't fit on the site and was "an unrefined box." Winslow Hastie of the Historic Charleston Foundation disagreed and said, "We think the boldness is actually a positive step."

Many of the opponents lived in the nearby Ansonborough neighborhood and said they thought the 30,000-square-foot building was too big and not representational of Charleston.

But at least as many spoke in favor of the design.

Bill Wallace, an alternate BAR member pressed into service because three members had conflicts of interest and abstained from the issue, noted he has been involved with the review board off and on for three dozen years.

"I think the biggest problem the BAR has had during those 36 years is we intimidate people into doing replications," he said.

But acting BAR Chair Robert DeMarco said contemporary architecture, unless it's done extremely well, does not age well.

He cast the sole nay vote, calling the perforated curving walls that define the northern and southern facades "two huge lips" and noting that he lives nearby. "If I don't like it, I'm going to have to take another street to walk home."

The design is a concrete-and-glass box with three rectangular masses on Meeting Street that become two rectangular masses closer to Spoleto Festival's headquarters at 14 George St.

It also is designed to maximize the amount of garden area on the site. It's 46.5 feet tall, well below the 55 feet allowed by city zoning.

City Architect and Preservation Officer Dennis Dowd recommended the board approval but suggested several revisions to strengthen the main entrance, improve the connection with Spoleto's garden, reconsider using concrete for the perforated facade walls and hide air-conditioning units and power lines.

Cloepfil said he and Charleston architect Eddie Fava could return to the city early next year with a more detailed design. Wednesday's vote only approved its height, scale, mass and general direction.

He told the board he hoped the Spaulding Palozzi Center not only would be beautiful but also would extend the city's architectural conversation into the 21st century.

At the end, he noted the many varied comments and said, "I think this building also already served the purpose it's intended to do."