

**From:** [Sally Brown](#)  
**To:** [Ebinger, Matthew J. - PDR](#); [Gray, Kimberly B. - City Council](#)  
**Cc:** [Penny Fletcher](#)  
**Subject:** Support for Ordinance 2020-226/2501 Monument Ave.  
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To all Planning Commission members,

I am writing in support of Ordinance 2020-226 the proposed Special Use Permit for 2501 Monument Avenue (The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design). I have lived in the city of Richmond since 1979. I graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in a degree in Interior Design. I lived in The Fan all this time. Upon graduation I opened my own design practice in Shockoe Bottom (when it was the art scene) and then other places near downtown. I also taught design classes at 2 community colleges, and 2 universities in this area, as well as 20 or more years teaching adults at The Studio School at the VMFA. While commuting to New York City I received my Masters Degree in Architecture and Design Criticism and wrote for The Richmond Times Dispatch, Virginia Living, Oculus Magazine (the AIA-NY monthly magazine) and Architectural Record.

After I finished my degree at Parsons in New York, I was appointed to The Architectural Review Commission and also as their liaison to the Urban Design Committee, working with the late Tyler Potterfield. Each of those were interesting and sometimes challenging experiences.

For the last 15 or more years I have served on the Board of The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design. I was at The Branch when we went to City Council to make what ended up to be minor changes to our SUP maybe 6 or 7 years ago. And here we are again. Our SUP is too limiting. The Branch is a VERY SPECIAL BUILDING here in Richmond. It was designed by John Russell Pope, who also designed the structure that is now the Science Museum. These two buildings were designed and built at the same time and opened the same year. Mr. and Mrs. Branch took possession in 1919 and used The Branch House as their Christmas house where they had room for their whole family. It is the largest house on Monument Avenue and is the only Tudor style house by John Pope that still has all the interior panelling intact. The house has 11 levels inside but it looks like 4 from the outside.

Needless to say, this house needs much work on it as it is old and had previous owners that did not always keep it maintained properly. It is designated a Virginia Historic Landmark and a National Historic Landmark Building as well as. It has so many elements that were rare or experimental, as we have recently discovered some unusual pipes. I could go on and on but suffice to say, it is a very expensive building to repair. We are required to do all work to conform to Department of Historic Resources standards. We have recently repaired most of our roofs which exceeded a million dollars and we have one large last part to complete. And that was just the roof. There are many many rooms that need plaster repairs and I could go on. Our annual costs on just maintenance and upkeep exceeds \$200,000 annually.

That doesn't pay salaries; it doesn't pay for exhibits; it doesn't pay for programs; it doesn't pay for our children programming; it doesn't pay for yard maintenance; it doesn't pay for security; and on and on. We have to raise that money by offering the programs that help the architects earn their "learning credits" which allows them to retain their licenses; we have lectures about all areas of design that people come to for minimal cost; we try to have openings for all our exhibitions. We try to fill 3 or 4 galleries with interesting, informative shows as the exhibits change. How do we fund all this? We try to get sponsors or grants, we have memberships to the museum, and we have to have weddings occasionally. But we currently are only allowed to have twelve evenings to have an event, occasionally a wedding or and most times a learning experience.

Weddings bring in the most money. But that has the neighborhood upset. I know they had problems years ago. But we share the parking lot and have built a gate so everyone can come directly into the courtyard and to the front

door. We put signs up around the block directing people to the parking lot entrances. That has all worked well.

We are trying to save this masterpiece of a house. We are trying to educate people on good design and about what makes up good or intriguing or interesting design. We are asking questions like what might a house look like after the pandemic is over? what might we need differently? MIT and others are working on how to make artificial intelligence that can read someones mind that has lost the ability to speak and speak for him/her. Wouldn't that be interesting to learn about. There is so much out there that we could all be interested in and participate, if we could be open more. This building can be beautiful and be repaired if we weren't so hampered by our current SUP. We can bring in a wider variety of exhibitions.

What we have applied for should certainly help us. The news has written that 30 museums will close in Virginia permanently by the time the pandemic is over. We don't want to be one of those. We believe that we create the best use for this house and the museum is best use for the neighborhood.

Thank you for your attention and consideration,  
Sally Brown