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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District: **Anacostia Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **2001 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, SE**

Meeting Date: **May 3, 2012** (x) New construction  
Case Number: **12-266**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

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The applicant, lessee Milani Construction, LLC (with Trout Design, architects), agent for property owner JCX-Right Realty, Inc., requests the Board's review of a permit application to construct what is said to be temporary offices in a nearly vacant lot at the corner of Shannon Place (it is a parking lot with a shed-like office). The former used-car lot is occupied only by a small frame building that served as an office. The building proposed to replace it is a combination of four construction-type trailers to united behind a false front. It is said that the building may be used only for the five-year lease term, preserving the property owner's option to easily redevelop the lot.

The design calls for a false front and stucco cladding around the front and side of the trailers, with Hardiplank at the rear. The applicant was willing to consider even a brick façade, but staff thought it better to have the prominent sides of this corner building be of the same material, although it is conceivable that a brick façade could return and be keyed into another material with quoins. The exterior color would be darker than typical stucco, partly to keep the low-slung building with its stepped parapets from looking too much like Spanish Colonial style.

The façade's parapets are inspired by the one-story commercial buildings across the street on the 1900 block of Martin Luther King. These vertical elements and a recess of the main entrance are attempts to de-emphasize the long, low breaks down the building into two masses more similar to the widths of historic, small shops.

A gate near the south or left side of the façade would admit a pedestrian to an alley-like gap between the trailers and the building next door. If the building is to be constructed so as to continue the façade across that gap, then the gate or door ought to be solid, so as not to belie that illusion.

Because the trailers are set on columns and footers, the floor is several steps above the surrounding grade, something that is not consistent with one-story commercial buildings but does occur with the former houses on the avenue that have been converted to commercial use. The number of steps is partly responsible for the recessed landing, but the steps also project from the building, pushing it back a couple feet from the sidewalk/right of way. This creates a

planting strip which, in the drawings, is supposed to accommodate a hedge-like planting. A planting strip is unusual for the avenue, except in front of the historic buildings built as residences. A planting strip can be an attractive feature, but it can also be neglected or accumulate trash.

The windows are also of a domestic scale and character, unlike the purpose-built shops. The parking would be at rear, as would through-wall or through-window air-conditioning units and an ADA ramp. Acknowledging that most of the lot is now paved, it would still probably be preferable to park along the alley rather than along the Shannon Place property line.

There is no practical distinction between a “permanent” and a “temporary” building in the construction codes. The Board cannot condition approval on it being temporary nor set a sunset date. Once built, the government cannot require a building to be removed unless the government takes the property or the building reaches a state of deterioration or code non-compliance that renders it a nuisance or an imminent danger to health or safety. So, even if the present lessee were to vacate it within five years, there is no guarantee that the building would follow. It is true that this kind of construction does not endure forever, but it can become pretty dilapidated in the meantime. To the extent that the Board may be inclined to apply a different standard for a building considered temporary, it should be kept in mind that that means indefinitely.

It is clear that a collection of trailers alone would not be compatible with the character of the historic district. The question is whether such trailers could be sufficiently disguised so as not to be *incompatible*.

What would a permanent, one-story office look like in this historic district? Any permanent commercial building would almost certainly be of brick, as nearly all those of any era located along Martin Luther King and Good Hope are. We have prototypes for new office construction—also brick—but these are multi-story and they incorporate shop-like expanses of glass, if not actually retail spaces, on the first floor.

As suggested above, there are several ways in which the proposal follows the pattern of local commercial buildings and several ways it differs. In the final analysis, it is still difficult to ignore the presumed temporary nature of the construction and to not find it sufficiently compatible for its purpose. There are numerous ways that the design could be revised—and both staff and the applicant are open to suggestions from the Board—but the underlying structure will remain four trailers.

The staff recommends that the Board approve the proposal, with the conditions that: the parking spaces be located along the alley and not the side street; that any gate in the façade be a solid door compatible with the building and the historic district; and that the building would preferably abut the right of way, but if set back to create planting strips, these areas have low plantings.