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

Landmark/District:	Anacostia Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1234 W Street SE	() Consent
Meeting Date:	February 26, 2015	(x) New construction
Case Number:	15-204	
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

The applicant, property owner W Street Acquisition LLC (with architects Shinberg & Levinas), requests the Board's review of a concept for the construction of a branch DC Prep charter school. The Board looked at a concept in December and apparently agreed that that design was too large for the available parcel, but the applicant withdrew that application and filed another.

Although not expressly proposed at the moment, a subdivision would be necessary for this project. Such a subdivision would be compatible if the new construction is determined not to be incompatible. The subject parcel consists of seven lots, which would have to be consolidated into one. The largest lot has a pipe stem that runs through the block to V Street and would be used as an access to a basement garage for employee parking. The remainder of the lots, all with W Street frontage, are situated between that lot (Lot 1022) and 13th Street.

The exterior wall materials would include brick, EIFS, fiber-cement panels, and aluminum column covers.

Background

At the time the historic district was designated, the subject parcel contained a single house, the former 1242 W Street, and open-air storage for cars. It has since occasionally been used for overflow parking for the church across the street. Since that time, this block of W has lost a total of six historic houses, four that stood where Union Temple now does, one that stood at 1222 W, and 1242 W itself, which was neglected for decades before collapsing in 2009.

In 2007, the Board reviewed a proposal for three-story townhouses on this site. The Board's principal concern was with the height of those buildings relative to the surrounding two-story historic homes, but after some tweaking of the designs to address these concerns, approved in 2011 a resubmitted concept at that height, but with a single unit on the V Street pipe stem capped at two stories. Another condition was that 1242 W would be reconstructed to break up what would otherwise be an unrelieved W Street frontage of similar three-story buildings. The project did not come to fruition because of the difficulty of obtaining construction financing.

Evaluation

The school design is still massed in two sections, but it has been reduced in height, and its plan has been shifted some so that the western end of the building stands nearer the street.

There is no reason that the applicant should not have had its ideal program for essentially two schools within the building. It is simply the case that the parcel was too small to accommodate the original plan. Ideally, such a school would be situated on a deeper site, i.e., deeper than a typical Anacostia house lot, with its program arranged in a deeper central section with wings as necessary to accommodate uses such as gymnasium, cafeteria, library, etc. In other words, more like a traditional school. The revision largely retains the old program by sinking the gyms and cafeterias underground, not ideal for egress, light or cost and perhaps for use, if the gym heights have to be reduced to limit excavation.

While there are some educational, religious and government buildings sprinkled through the neighborhood, few are large, and they are islands surrounded by houses. In this instance, the site's proximity to Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue essentially stretches the avenue's larger-building character into the residential neighborhood and, in so doing, isolates the two little historic houses west of the parcel. Such a large building will tend to dominate the remaining residences, likely reinforcing the erosion of residential uses on the block that commenced with the demolitions mentioned above, the construction of Union Temple and its parking lot, and the church's acquisition of many of the adjacent homes.

Still, the zoning regulations permit schools in this zone, and this design is a significant improvement over the initial one. The formerly four-story school has been reduced to three, the height limit for residential buildings in this zone. The third story is set back at points, better relating to the diminutive homes of 13th Street. Also crucial is the elimination of the rooftop play area with its tall fencing. The shift of the west wing toward W Street is also an improvement, as it better reinforces the street wall while managing to break up a long elevation. With that shift, and setting off a bit from the west property line, the building relieves the house next door of overwhelming mass and foundation problems resulting from deep excavation.

The previous staff report made reference to the townhouse project the Board approved in 2011 as representing the likely limit of height and bulk for the parcel (as well as a preferable knitting together of the residential neighborhood). The present school design apparently models itself after that residential project, lacking the porches of course, but rendered as repeating three-story three-window-bay units, with even the formerly proposed mansard roof expressed through a color and module change in the siding material. This gives the building some rhythm, but would be relentless were it not relieved by the various façade setbacks and the introduction of some brick. Overall, the size of the building is comparable to the aggregate size of the 23 rowhouses previously approved in concept as sufficiently compatible with the character of the historic district.

A building of this purpose and size, especially with a tall story sunk below grade, reasonably must economize with its exterior materials, yet it is arbitrary to approve for a school project materials that are considered incompatible for other types of projects, unless there is a particular affinity between a building type and a certain material. The Board has typically considered large expanses of EIFS and fiber-cement panels, especially when prominently visible from a street, to be incompatible materials. The 2011 residential project was to use fiber-cement products on the lower two floors, but applied as narrow-exposure lapped boards, interrupted by corner boards, window and door casings and porches. While lapping the boards exposes the thinness of the material, their shadow lines mitigate it. At a larger scale—a bigger building with less relief of the wall plane—fiber-cement panel is flat and featureless except for very narrow joints, although

there is some flexibility to play with joint width in a rain screen installation with a primary weather barrier behind the cladding. Even a traditional material like true stucco, which EIFS imitates, is less successful when applied over such a large expanse of a rectilinear mass, because such large, boxy construction does not contain the fine-scaled changes in plane that a stuccoed building would historically have.

The staff seeks the Board's comments on the compatibility of the materials as much as on the character and massing of the project as a whole.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that, if the Board finds the project not incompatible with the character of the historic district, it approve the concept of a subdivision (consolidation) of the lots and delegate further review of the subdivision to staff. The new construction will presumably return for revision or design development in any case.