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

Landmark/District: **Anacostia Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **2100 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE**

Meeting Date: **January 28, 2016** (x) New construction
Case Number: **16-156** (x) Subdivision

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

The applicant, DP 2100 LLC (Dantes Partners LLC), agent for property owners 2100 Martin Luther King Associates LP and Carl L. Biggs, requests the Board’s review of a proposal to construct a five-story 62-unit senior apartment building at the rear of the four-story 1990s office building.

The new building would face V Street, but the applicant proposes a subdivision to combine the current property with the narrow 1222 W Street lot behind it in order to build a three-story rear wing to the apartment building.

For zoning purposes, the new construction would be an addition to the office building at 2100 MLK, with the two buildings physically connected by a canopy.

The site is challenging because a zone boundary—between the avenue’s C-3-A zoning, and the adjacent R-4 residential—passes through the site. This requires all the new construction to be west of that line, as nothing but a one- or two-family residence could be built east of it.

Another challenge is the fact that the office building is served by a basement garage which is accessed from the project site. Presently, the rear of 2100 is a ramped parking lot, with an entrance to the garage perpendicular to V Street at the bottom. The new building covers a portion of the parking lot but does not remove the existing excavation; it reorients it.

Height

The major issue to be settled is the overall height of the new building. Although sharing the lot with a large office building, the new construction would face V Street. The historical pattern in the commercial corridor is that the commercial and institutional buildings face the principal streets, and the character of the built environment changes to modest residential immediately behind—a distance which is typically little more than the depth of the building or lot. In this case, the subject lot is deeper, because it is an assessment and taxation lot that overlays previous smaller lots of record and combines the office building with its parking lot.

Given the historical pattern of development, a tall avenue-facing building—indeed, the tallest in the historic district—does not necessarily justify another tall one behind it, off the avenue. A building on a side street should step down, mediating between the heights of the buildings on the

avenue and that of the almost uniformly two-story homes just off it. On the other hand, 2100 Martin Luther King has established something of a maximum height for new construction, and this project does not exceed that.

The proposed main block squeezes five stories into the same height as that of the office building in front of it, totaling 55 feet, not counting the penthouse. But visually, the building steps down by recessing the fifth floor about sixteen feet from the façade. The effect of height relative to the nearby two-story buildings is also mitigated by distance and by the fact that its next-door neighbor, 1229 V Street, sits on a higher grade.

Even as designed, the rooftop appurtenances could almost certainly be minimized; the mechanical equipment shown does not need such high screening. The applicant should make sure that the equipment does not require additional safety rails near the roof's edge.

Massing

The building's main block is essentially a four-story block with a set-back (at least from the north and east) penthouse or attic story. It should be expressed that way, i.e., distinction between parts should largely be a distinction between the main body and the top. And in this location, a large building should be relatively quiet.

The façade attempts to relate to the neighborhood's smaller homes by having an offset brick pavilion of three stories' height. Its advantage is that it introduces a narrower vertical element within a larger, squat façade. Yet, it is a superficial element, given that the rest of the façade wraps over and around, immediately behind it. The attempt to read as smaller modulates the whole somewhat, but the effect doesn't ring true as the larger building stands plainly behind it, and the brick does not truly convey a brick *building*, but a false front.

Typically, the best way to design a new building compatibly is to compose it well. Context is important in determining appropriate materials, massing, height and scale, but nothing replaces a satisfying composition. One way to achieve a quiet, strong composition that is well proportioned is to consider small-apartment-building precedents. If one ignores the specific elements of style—or the number of stories or exact width of or distance between the projections—and looks only at rough shape and materials, the image on the next page might serve as a useful prototype. It is straightforward, with a single primary material, an organic whole suited to a center-corridor plan, and it has a vertical emphasis that balances an underlying blockiness. It offers projection and recess without un-Anacostia-like full-height bays appended. A recessed entrance can also make up for the fact that the building is proposed to stand at the lot line, rather than set back, as nearly all Anacostia residential buildings are.

Materials

On its east elevation, the building has projecting pavilions of brick, with the recesses between in a secondary, cementitious material. The façade's brick pavilion is its focal point, but the expanse of the secondary material makes it a competing primary material. It should not be. There is a generally understood hierarchy of materials based on their historic usage and cost, as well as on their relative weight, real or apparent. Even if a panel is cementitious and heavy, it is understood to be lighter than true masonry, because it is thin and hung off the framing.



The primary and base building material should be the brick, with the panelized material employed as secondary, especially on a piece such as the fifth floor, which should read as a penthouse or attic, separate from the main block below. The reverse, setting a brick penthouse in the middle of a roof atop a panelized frame story, is less convincing. Removing the cementitious panels from the façade also avoids their awkward return around the west side in a manner that reads like an oversized bay, distinct from the building behind.

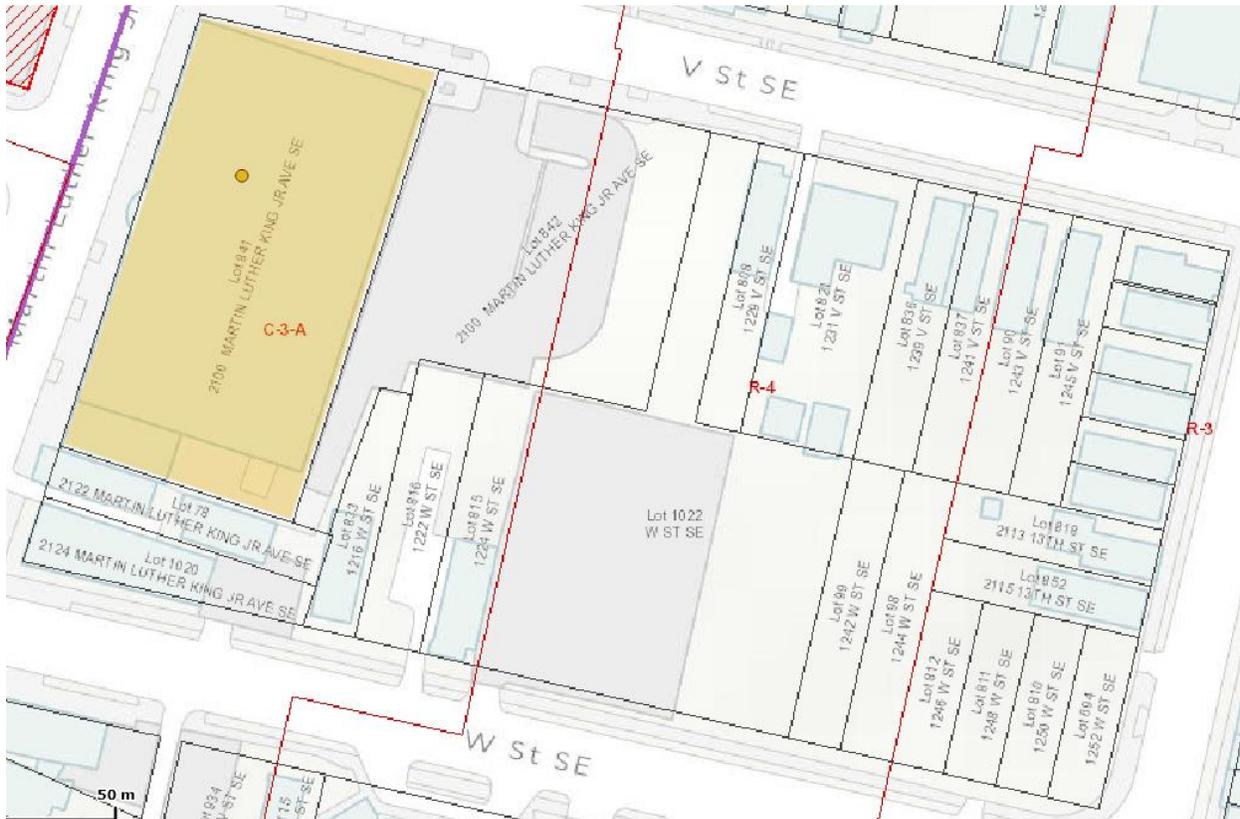
Rear wing

In addition to the five-story rear wing, the applicant proposes a three-story rear wing that would stand on the now-vacant lot at 1222 W Street. This would require the joining of that lot to that of 2100 MLK. The “entrance” door depicted on its W Street face is actually a secondary means of emergency egress from the entire building and would not be active.

Three stories is a sufficiently compatible height for a small apartment building in this context, flanked by two-story frame buildings.

The wing’s connection to the main block is the primary issue. From V Street, the wing would be little visible. From W Street, it would read essentially as a separate building. But truly independent buildings would have some rear yard separating them, if only to provide rear

windows for the units. Connected, the building interrupts the pattern of rear yards that characterizes the residential neighborhood. But a condition of continuous rear yards is less pronounced in this square than it is deeper into the neighborhood, because of all the demolition that has occurred on both W and V Streets. The commercial/residential edge condition has already changed the context here more than most squares. The former house at 1216 W would be the most affected by the wing, but it has already been affected by the surrounding construction and its reuse for commercial purposes.



Ramp

Perhaps the most regrettable aspect of the project is the fact that present ramp will not be removed nor the new one tucked between the buildings. The impediments to the latter approach are the zoning constraint on shifting new construction eastward and the inability to slope the ramp steeply enough to get it under 2100 MLK's rear egress.

It should be noted that the ramp area is already paved. Indeed, most of the project site is parking lot, which makes redevelopment more palatable, while it does not correct all the parcel's defects.

The treatment of the building's only usable green space could partly help. The fact that the side yard is sloped down alongside the ramp emphasizes the whole as a large excavation. If the side yard were instead at the sidewalk grade, the ramp would be more of a cut, screened by higher the surrounding grade. This would mean a higher retaining wall along the inside of the ramp, of course.



The proposed side yard is also sloped to allow light to and access from basement-level community spaces. But the slope leaves essentially only a usable patio, with much of the rest of the area terraced. Including the overhanging balconies (a feature not characteristic of the historic district), many demands are placed on this little sunken yard, and it seems unlikely to satisfy them all.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board support: 1) the subdivision necessary to allow construction; 2) revision of the massing of the main block and the application of materials to it, as outlined above; 3) refinement to the grading of the side yard as outlined above; and 4) construction of a substantial building. The HPO seeks the Board's guidance on the overall height of the new construction, but believes that the most effective approach to ensuring compatibility is to refine the building's design.