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

Landmark:	Embassy and Chancery of Italy	X Agenda
Address:	2700 16th Street, NW	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	December 16, 2010	Demolition
H.P.A. Number:	10-495	X Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	X New Construction

Potomac Construction Group and Valor Development, represented by Michael Beidler of Trout Design, seek conceptual design review for redevelopment of the former Italian Embassy. The project includes conversion of the mansion to apartments, construction of a three-story addition in the north side yard, and construction of a nine-story apartment building at the rear of the site.

Property History and Description

The Embassy of Italy, constructed in 1925, is a free-standing urban mansion designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style. The building sits at the northwest corner of 16th and Fuller Streets, facing 16th Street on a parcel that extends to Mozart Place at the rear. The property consists of the main embassy building facing 16th Street, the attached chancery at the rear of the mansion extending along Fuller Street, and a detached garage. The three-story hip-roofed main block contains the original ambassador's residence, with one-story flat-roofed wings enclosing three sides of an open-air courtyard at the rear. The fourth side of the court is formed by the side of the chancery wing which was extended in the 1930s with a two-story wing facing onto Fuller Street, creating an L-shaped footprint. The embassy is faced in limestone with a terra cotta tile roof and sculptural embellishment concentrated at window and door surrounds; the simpler chancery is finished in stucco with limestone trim and tile roofs. The entire embassy/chancery building and its enclosed courtyard are contributing features of the property; the rear garage and parking area are non-contributing features.

The Embassy of Italy is one of only two known works in Washington designed by Warren and Wetmore, the prominent New York firm best known as the architects of Grand Central Terminal; their only other design in Washington is the Mayflower Hotel. The embassy is one of the many buildings sponsored or influenced by Mary Foote Henderson, the wealthy wife of a former Missouri senator who worked for several decades to improve the Meridian Hill neighborhood through the construction of mansions and embassies, churches, luxury apartment buildings, and the Italian Renaissance Meridian Hill Park. The property is an integral component of the boulevard of distinguished buildings that line 16th Street, which forms one of the country's best examples of "City Beautiful" planning and architectural principles.

Background

Redevelopment of the Italian Embassy was proposed by a different team in 2005, prior to the property being designated a landmark. The plan called for a four-story apartment block at the rear of the site along Mozart Place, and a nine-story tower connected to the mansion at its northwest corner. The project raised such significant preservation concerns that the HPO filed a landmark application to ensure the opportunity for public review and comment. The HPRB

designated the property in February 2006 and determined that the tower overwhelmed the landmark and its courtyard, resulted in substantial demolition of the mansion, and significantly damaged public views of the embassy and one of the city's most important historic streetscapes. The Mayor's Agent concurred that the proposal was incompatible with the landmark and inconsistent with the preservation act. With the economic downturn in the speculative residential development market, ownership of the property ultimately reverted back to the lender and was subsequently sold to the present owner.

Zoning

The previous proposal resulted from a fundamental inconsistency between basic historic preservation goals and the zoning of this property, which had the effect of pushing density onto the historic building and stopping at an arbitrary zoning line in the middle of the site.¹ The zoning for the site dates from 1958, prior to the time when buildings such as this were considered worthy of protection and preservation.

In its review of the previous project in 2006, the HPRB acknowledged that this is a large piece of property that can accommodate substantial new construction, but that if the site was to be redeveloped with respect for the historic building, zoning relief was essential so that the residential tower could be shifted further back on the property. In its review, the Board encouraged a plan in which the new tower was organized around a second courtyard behind the chancery, rather than compromising the mansion.

Proposal

The applicants' proposal has been developed over several months in consultation with the HPO and with careful consideration of the concerns raised by the HPRB in the previous project. As suggested in 2006 by the HPRB, the project seeks zoning flexibility (through a Planned Unit Development) in order to shift the density from the front to the vacant rear of the site. The plan calls for preservation and rehabilitation of the mansion with minor alterations, a two-story wing in the north side yard of the property set substantially back from 16th Street and the mansion's front façade, and an L-shaped apartment building at the northwest corner of the site organized around a second courtyard and the chancery annex.

Embassy

The project would include a full scope of exterior restoration of the embassy and chancery facades, including repairs to windows, doors, and stone, stucco and tile finishes. Although the designation does not cover interior spaces and is therefore not subject to review, the plan includes retention of important interior spaces and finishes in the ballroom, library, dining room and other spaces, and will provide the opportunity for public access.

Alterations include the insertion of two flat skylights on the southern and northern (side) slopes of the roof to allow light into the attic space which, due to their location behind chimneys and on a relatively shallow-pitched roof, will likely not result in visibility from the street. The rear portion of the roof above the ballroom consists of a large open light that would be in-filled to allow outdoor spaces for the upper story apartments. Smaller outdoor terraces would be cut into

¹ The zoning of the embassy buildings is R-5-D, allowing 90 feet, 3.5 FAR, and 75% lot coverage. The zoning on the rear parking lot is R-5-B, allowing 50 feet, 1.8 FAR, and 60% lot coverage.

the rear roof slopes of the chancery building facing the new rear courtyard, and several bricked-up garage door openings would be converted to casement windows consistent with others on the chancery. As the new courtyard would be located one level below the existing grade to allow basement units in the chancery, the exposed basement walls of the chancery would be clad in stone. The basement units would not result in new or expanded areaways on the street-facing elevations of the chancery or mansion.

North Wing

A long thin north wing would be located immediately behind the existing masonry garden wall, set back at the rear of the main block of the mansion. The wing would be two-stories above the existing grade and as seen from 16th Street, but would extend a floor below the existing grade to the level of the lowered courtyard. As the wing would be flush with the property line, it would be masonry on the north side; the 16th Street and mansion-facing elevations are proposed as a glass curtain wall. The wing, housing residential units, would have a one-story bridge connection at the existing first floor level to the mansion.

Apartment Tower

The apartment tower addition would be L-shaped in plan, organized around a center tower at the junction of two wings that would form two sides of the new rear courtyard. The tower would rise to 90 feet in height and capped by a penthouse. The wings would step down in height and mass, somewhat suggestive of smaller-scaled apartment buildings at each end. The styling of the tower would be influenced by the Italian Renaissance landmark, with brick facades, punched windows, red tile roofs, and an animated roofline of towers and arcades.

Evaluation

While the specifics of the rehabilitation scope of work remain to be developed, the conceptual plan for the treatment of the landmark is extremely respectful and consistent with preservation standards for the treatment of a landmark. The proposed alterations are necessary in order to convert the building to residential use, would affect only secondary elevations or features, and would have very limited public visibility.

Similarly, the proposed site plan for new construction is logical, respectful and compatible with the landmark's character. The organization of the tower around a new second courtyard not only provides necessary breathing room between it and the mansion but will create a new space within the complex that continues the Beaux-Arts tradition of landscape elements and architecture being mutually supportive and interrelated.

As the concept continues to be developed, the HPO would encourage further study in two areas: 1) the architectural character of the north wing, and 2) the massing and architectural character of the tower.

In height, mass and footprint, the two-story north wing is deferential to the landmark and would not have a strong presence either from the street or from within the complex. However, in a project that is otherwise uniformly influenced by traditional architecture and the Italian Renaissance characteristics of the landmark, the choice of a glass curtain for this element doesn't seem compelling or to be dictated by any functional rationale. Like the rest of the new construction, the north wing would contain residential units; it will not house a primary entrance,

public function, or specialized use which might provide the basis for a highly differentiated architectural character. Instead, the wing feels capricious and discordant with the rest of the proposal. It is not being suggested that the wing take the form or styling of a traditional building (e.g. a carriage house), but rather that the design and materials be reevaluated to provide a stronger relationship with the landmark and the other new construction.

The massing and compositional issues inherent in designing a tall apartment tower also haven't entirely been worked out yet. While the surrounding Reed-Cooke neighborhood is not an historic district, the architects have laudably worked to be respectful of the rowhouse and mid-rise apartment building context surrounding the site, and they have wisely moved away from taking inspiration from the mansion itself, and have been studying early 20th century apartment building design for cues on breaking larger buildings down into smaller components. This has resulted in improvements to the massing and composition, but additional work remains. In its latest iteration, the design still seems busy and composed of too many elements. The building elements at the base of each wing, capped by the red tile roofs, are nicely scaled and composed. However, the additional floors above them feel bulky and imposed on these smaller elements rather than integrated. The vertical connection between the red tile roofed elements and the larger building awkwardly suggests a façade-retention project, in which only the first few feet of historic apartment buildings were incorporated into a larger different building.

The compositional and design issues could be solved in any number of ways. As a starting point, the HPO recommends study of designs that eliminate the top floor and/or substantially reduce or eliminate the floor above the red tile roof elements, and simplifying the roof line (including elimination of the corner tower element). While not all of these changes may be necessary (nor may they be the extent of revisions worthy of study), they may help bring the tower design into a more coherent whole.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board approve the conceptual site plan and treatment of the landmark, and direct the applicants to restudy the north wing and tower, and return for further review when appropriate.