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

Landmark/District: **The Augusta Apartment Building** (x) Agenda
Address: **1151 New Jersey Avenue/
216 New York Avenue, NW**

Meeting Date: **May 24, 2012** (x) Alterations
Case Number: **12-360**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

The applicant, Wiencek & Associates, architects and agent for the current owner, Northwest Church Family Network, and contract purchaser So Others Might Eat, Inc., requests the Board's review of an application¹ to make repairs and alterations to the landmark Augusta apartments.

Historic background

The Augusta Apartment Building was erected along New Jersey Avenue in 1900, one of the first commissions of prominent D.C. architect Arthur B. Heaton. It was also one of the first "mansion type" apartment buildings in Washington.² The following year another building, the Louisa, was added to the Augusta's east side; one can see differences between the bays of the structures, in addition to a second entrance. The two buildings were effectively combined over time, and were landmarked in 1990 under the name Augusta (with the Augusta *and* the Louisa as an alternate name), the first apartment designated under the multiple-property document *Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1870-1945*.

Proposal

In addition to extensive interior work, the project entails replacement of all windows; the construction of a new elevator; the addition of an entrance canopy at the southern entrance to the basement off New Jersey Avenue; the removal of the fire escapes; new and replacement gutters and downspouts; the installation of new mechanical, including numerous rooftop units; the creation of skylights; utility work, including a new gas meter, fire plugs, and two transformers on the New York Avenue side; the introduction of louvered vents to the east side of the building; the installation of security bars over windows; restoring a window well and filling an areaway on the New York Avenue side; the construction of a trash enclosure on public space; masonry

¹ The HPRB application characterizes this as a permit application, although an actual permit for construction was not submitted. The drawings are detailed and seem nearly complete, but they lack demolition drawings and some specifics on windows, locations of the security bars (basement windows only?), proposed canopy details, and other details.

² Apartment builders sought a vocabulary for this new building type, something that had associations with comfortable residential living but could be adapted to these large buildings. The earliest purpose-built apartments took their cues from Queen-Anne rows and then from mansion houses.

repairs and cleaning and the replacement of brick windows sills to match; and a variety of other minor items.

Evaluation

Canopy: Given that the basement and yard have been previously altered in this location, the proposed canopy (see Sheet A3.0.1, drawing 2, “west elevation”) appears sufficiently compatible over the basement door near the south end of the building, assuming it is detailed well and slightly dropped in height. New canopies are often hung too high, limiting their function, which is keep rain off while a visitor is waiting for the door to be opened. This canopy would interfere less with the architecture of the building if it were dropped just below the limestone belt course that tops the water table, to a point even with the door lintel. That would allow the tiebacks to be lowered relative to the first-floor window above.

Windows: The windows are depicted as single-hung, one-over-one sash with metal panning, which suggests that aluminum windows may be proposed. Double glazing is implied. The plans merely state that the windows would be “as approved by HPRB,” presumably with regard to profiles, materials and finish. The Board’s window regulations apply a stricter standard for the replacement of windows in landmark buildings, requiring that new windows match as closely as possible the original windows. The original windows have since been replaced with aluminum ones, but material aside, the present windows, and presumably the replacements, have been installed within the original window frames, reducing the size of the sash and glass. No wrapping of the frames should be required, because either the whole window units, including frames, should be replaced, or just the sash.

Roof: The slate roof would be retained, except for a new penetration on the side of the building, visible from New Jersey Avenue, for a balcony outside the building’s attic-story community room, to be located between the dormers (see Sheet A3.0.2, drawing 1 and photographs). The balcony is intended to provide light and not for emergency egress. As this is a significant intrusion into the roofline and disturbs both historic fabric and the relationship between the dormers, insertion of a skylight over the community room and behind the roof ridge would be a more compatible solution.

Rooftop equipment: As significant an issue as the balcony is the amount of proposed rooftop equipment and appurtenances. The elevator penthouse is the largest, and without a mock-up it is difficult to evaluate how prominently visible it will be; it will certainly be visible from some distance west along New York Avenue. There are large HVAC units (screened) and small (unscreened), and the area around the latter is to be bounded by a guardrail at the eastern parapet. While the smaller units may not be visible from the ground, given the less than twenty-foot gap between the apartment and Holy Redeemer Church, the pipe rail would be quite visible from New York Avenue. The screening around the large unit suggests that it would otherwise be visible.

Front yard: Another significant issue is the treatment of the front yard around the building (see Sheet A0.2.1). First, the entirety could be better maintained, and the minimization of hardscape should be pursued. The site plan suggests that two electrical transformers would be placed in the New York Avenue yard on new and existing pads. It is obviously preferable not to have to do so, but there are limited alternative locations. In the same vicinity, one basement areaway is to

be filled and an adjacent window well reopened. In both instances, there are adjacent paved areas and low walls that could be removed. A “project sign and directional signage” are to be added to the New Jersey Avenue side. As it relates to the project, this is presumably a temporary construction sign and sufficiently compatible for a limited duration. While a permanent, monument sign for the building may also be compatible, it would have to be reviewed in detail.

Trash enclosure: The most problematic site work may be the addition of a trash enclosure near the southwest corner of the building, in the paved driveway in the New Jersey Avenue right-of-way. An unenclosed dumpster now stands on the driveway, as has been the case since before the property was designated. It is probably the reason the driveway was created, but this may be the first time any sort of permit application was made for it. With no alley and a small rear yard accessed by a leadwalk, there are no alternatives other than trash storage inside the building or in supercans behind it. (Unfortunately, what the site plan identifies as an “alley” on the east side of the apartment building is actually a fenced off portion of the church lot). It is debatable whether the construction of a larger enclosure (i.e., larger than the dumpster itself) is better than leaving the dumpster exposed. In any case, the enclosure has not been drawn in detail. In the very few instances where the Board has approved trash enclosures in public space, it has done so as part of a comprehensive improvement or restoration of the public space (301 Massachusetts Ave NE and last month’s 903 N Street NW application). It is reasonable to expect that if exterior trash storage is to be approved in this instance, it should be offset with a similarly comprehensive plan to improve the character and quality of the public space in front of this building. Unfortunately, if one considers the need for a driveway to access a dumpster and a parallel leadwalk to reach the basement entrance, it leaves little room for a green strip between them. But something is better than nothing, and the property owner should undertake a comprehensive landscape plan to address all of the issues above. Vegetative screening would be preferable to a fixed structure. If there is to be an enclosure, it should be as small as possible and as near as possible to the building, even if it means eliminating the planter against the wall, which would be obscured behind it anyway. The District’s Public Space Committee will presumably have to review the trash storage as well.

The staff recommends that the Board support the proposal, with the conditions that:

1. the canopy be attached to the building at the lintel of the basement door;
2. the window sashes only be replaced or, alternatively, the whole window units, with windows to match, as closely as possible, period dimensions and profiles;
3. the roof balcony not be constructed, but a skylight alternative be explored;
4. the elevator penthouse and rooftop mechanical units be cleared for permit subject to a successful mockup or stick test that demonstrates they would not be prominently visible from a distance;
5. the guardrail be eliminated from the east side of the roof;
6. unnecessary paving be removed from the front yard/public space as suggested above, including some of the driveway surface, for the purpose of increasing planting and screening the trash area and transformer(s);
7. only a temporary sign be cleared under this application;
8. no trash enclosure be constructed in front of the building.