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

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Property Address:	<b>1328 14<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW</b>	<b>X</b> Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>14<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District</b>	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	<b>December 15, 2011</b>	<b>X</b> Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	<b>12-032</b>	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Steve Callcott</b>	<b>X</b> New Construction
		Demolition
		Subdivision

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Architects John Torti and Sarah Alexander (Torti Gallas and Partners), representing Atlantic Services Group (owners Richard Dubin and Irwin Edlavitch), seek conceptual design review for construction of a six-story residential and retail building on a 80' wide x 130' deep lot in the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District.

**Property Description**

The site is currently occupied by a two-story non-contributing building and a surface parking lot. The property is accessible by a curb cut on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and from a rear alley that runs parallel to 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The remainder of this block front between Rhode Island Avenue and N Street is occupied by one-, two- and three-story contributing commercial buildings, with the exception of the N Street corner which is anchored by a 90' tall, ten-story non-contributing apartment building. The opposing side of the street is occupied by two-, three- and four-story contributing commercial buildings, and several non-contributing buildings, including the seven-story Luther Place apartment building at the corner of N Street.

**Proposal**

The project calls for construction of a six-story residential building with ground level retail. The building would rise to a height of 65'8"; the penthouse and rooftop structures would rise an additional 18'6" at the highest point of the elevator override. The building would have one level of below-grade parking and a loading dock in the rear. The curb cut on 14<sup>th</sup> Street would be eliminated.

The building design is traditional, closely based on the tripartite, stripped classical vocabulary of the automobile showroom buildings that are found along 14<sup>th</sup> Street. On the façade, the first floor base would feature projecting storefront windows, floors two through four would be expressed with a wall of windows and metal spandrel panels organized around monumental piers and capped by a cornice, and the fifth floor would be expressed as a classical attic story. The sixth floor, set back 6'6" from the front and rear elevations and 3'0" from the north side elevation, would be expressed as a differentiated penthouse with continuous windows enframed by metal panels and piers. The side and rear elevations would be finished in the same brick as the facade; the rear elevation would have a commensurate level of design as the facade.

The building would be capped by a shared roof terrace for the residents. The deck would be pulled approximately 15' from the front and more than 20' from the side and rear elevations. It would be accessed by the building's two elevators and two egress stairs, which would be situated close to the south and north side edges of the building respectively. The mechanical penthouse would be located adjacent to the elevator penthouse. The roof enclosures would be clad in metal panels.

### **Evaluation**

The applicants have been consulting with the community and HPO for several months on the project, and the current design was developed after the applicants and community mutually agreed that an earlier scheme ultimately wasn't the right architectural direction. The applicants made the decision that the form and vocabulary of 14<sup>th</sup> Street's automobile showrooms – among the larger buildings in the district, and which coexist among smaller scaled historic commercial buildings – offered the most appropriate model.

While proponents of contemporary design may lament the traditional model and stylistic choice, it is hard to argue that it is incompatible with the character of the district. Automobile showrooms are a building type that is prevalent along 14<sup>th</sup> Street and have provided the inspiration for other new construction projects approved by the Board, including the six-story building at 1539 14<sup>th</sup> Street, a seven-story building at 1400 Corcoran (never built), and, to a lesser extent, the design for the recently proposed project at 14<sup>th</sup> and Wallach Place. 1539 -- the only one that has been built -- is also a good example of how a new building can be based on a traditional form but be detailed in such a way as to be immediately understood as a contemporary building. The applicants should continue to develop the design with the goal of achieving a similar balance.

During the community review, some have expressed concern about the proposed height of the building, particularly in relation to its immediate surroundings. The HPRB's design guideline, *New Construction in Historic Districts*, offers the following guidance on considering height as a component of achieving compatibility:

While a building does not necessarily need to be exactly the same height as its neighbors to be compatible, it should be designed to respect existing building heights. For example, a new five story building in a block of two and three story buildings will usually detract from the character of a street. Similarly, a new one-story building in a block of four- or five-story buildings will be out of character. Typically, if a new building is more than one story higher or lower than existing buildings that are all the same height, it will be out of character. On the other hand, a new building built in a street of existing buildings of varied heights may be more than one story higher or lower than its immediate neighbors and still be compatible.

While this would suggest that the proposal might be incompatible for its height – it is a six-story building in a block of two and three story buildings – this guidance has to be balanced by consideration of not only the immediate context but the larger context of the street, and of other design principles, such as scale, proportion, and vertical vs. horizontal orientation.

The immediate surroundings of a project site are of course always important. However, in this instance, the broader context of the entire commercial strip of 14<sup>th</sup> Street (from Thomas Circle to Florida Avenue) is arguably more important. Unlike residential neighborhoods, which are experienced as a series of blocks of similarly sized and scaled dwellings, commercial strips such as 14<sup>th</sup> Street, are understood and experienced as a linear corridor. Along this corridor, the development pattern of 14<sup>th</sup> Street has resulted in a staccato pattern of smaller (shorter, narrower) and larger (wider, taller) building types that coexist, often with significant disparities in size. Historically along 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the wider the street frontage of a commercial lot, the larger and taller the buildings have become. So while this site may be immediately flanked by shorter buildings, the larger and more important pattern of development along the corridor establishes a precedent for larger and taller buildings being situated adjacent to smaller buildings.

Equally important to ensuring that a building doesn't appear too large or too tall for its context is ensuring that it isn't too squat, too horizontal, or have proportions that are incompatible for its width. One of the issues that architects and the Board have grappled with in the design and review of new construction projects that have involved large sites has been how to break buildings down so that they reflect the rhythms, proportions, and strong vertical orientation that is characteristic of their historic surroundings. Through the use of strong vertical breaks in the façade, a tripartite organization, and smaller scaled window and spandrel elements, the proposal illustrates how even in a building that is substantially larger and wider, these design principles can successfully and compatibly relate to the surrounding context.

The most important aspect of the project that is insufficiently resolved, and remains incompatible both with the design concept and the historic district, is the treatment of the building's top floor and penthouse level. One of the defining characteristics of the street's auto showroom buildings is the simplicity of their block-like forms. Based on classical architectural models, they are strong and forthright in design and massing. By contrast, the form and massing of the upper floors of the proposal are complicated and busy, resulting in a roofline that is at odds with an otherwise ordered and composed design. Particularly as seen in perspective from north and south over the surrounding historic buildings, the layered setbacks and forms of the top floor and penthouse enclosures will detract from the streetscape and from the otherwise compatible nature of the design. Possible solutions might be more closely integrating the design of the top floor into the architecture of the underlying building and relocating the penthouse elements to the center of the roof to eliminate or lessen their visibility.

### **Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Review Board approve the general height, massing and architectural direction, but that the applicant be directed to continue studying the treatment of the sixth story and penthouse levels to better integrate these elements into the design and simplify the building's overall profile, and that the project return to the Board for review when ready.