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

Property Address:	1337 Connecticut Avenue, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Dupont Circle Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	January 24, 2013	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	12-421	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		New Construction
			Demolition

Architect Michael Beidler (Trout Design), representing Valor Development, seeks conceptual design review for construction of two additional floors atop a non-contributing building in the Dupont Circle Historic District.

Property History and Description

1337 Connecticut Avenue, a four-story bank and office building, was constructed for the Hamilton National Bank in 1953. Designed by the local firm of Corning & Moore, its design is illustrative of Modernism in Washington in the immediate post-War period. Rather than being a complete break from the past, the building features a monumental composition, limestone façade (since painted), and abstracted classicism that was common in the 1940s and 1950s as architects synthesized classical and International Style aesthetics.

As a building type, it is also representative of its era. Through the 19th century and until the 1920s, banks were typically designed as imposing and distinctive monumental temples. By the mid-20th century, banks were becoming less iconic and readily-identifiable and were often indistinguishable from commercial office buildings. Indeed, many banks such as this one were designed to include substantial office space that could be leased to outside tenants as a means of maximizing the value of the real estate.

1337 was expanded in the rear, fronting on 18th Street, in the 1980s after the creation of the Dupont Circle Historic District. The addition reads as an entirely separate structure from the Connecticut Avenue frontage and was designed to relate to the residential scale and character of the neighboring historic residential buildings on 18th Street.

While recognized in the Banks and Financial Institutions survey as a distinctive example of the building type from the post-World War II period, it is non-contributing to the Dupont Circle Historic District, as it falls outside the period of significance (1791-1931).

Previous Proposal

The Board reviewed a preliminary proposal in June for recladding the existing 5th floor (which is set back from the floors below on the Connecticut and 18th Street elevations), and adding two additional floors, each floor set back from the one below. The HPO

suggested that one additional floor could be accommodated without fundamentally changing the building's roofline or compatibility within the row of historic buildings but recommended that the proposed seventh floor be eliminated, as it resulted in a complicated massing and inharmonious roof line that was incompatible with the relative simplicity of massing and established heights of surrounding contributing buildings. The Board took no action on the case, but found the massing and design overly complicated and in need of simplification. The Board neither approved nor denied the concept for two additional floors but instead directed the architect to study alternative designs that might make a better case for a compatible addition.

Proposal

The current proposal follows essentially the same general massing as previously developed, with minor modifications to the setbacks. However, rather than treating the additional floors with street-facing glass curtain walls and masonry party walls, it composes them as a series of modulated, geometric masses with fenestration introduced on the exposed side elevations as well as the two street-facing facades. Portions of the brick party walls would be extended up, while portions on existing floors would be cut away for new windows. The geometric blocks would be clad in metal panel. The compositions on each street-facing elevation relate to the underlying buildings: on Connecticut Avenue, the new upper floors evoke the corner tower element below and have a simple mass that spans the width of the building; on the 18th Street elevation, the upper floors are broken down into three sections to relate to the bay-fronted rowhouse vocabulary below.

Evaluation

The Board has evaluated additions to non-contributing buildings using similar criteria as for new construction, which is for general compatibility with the context, streetscape and character of the historic district, rather than for their effect on character-defining features of the building or the potential to otherwise alter the appearance of a historic structure. While the Board has ensured that these changes be reasonably appropriate for the design of the subject property, the primary focus has been in ensuring that the alteration not result in an incompatible alteration to the property's context.

In evaluating compatibility, the Board's guidelines on new construction and additions cite height as one of the important characteristics for consideration. That guidance recognizes that height must be evaluated with consideration of the particular context. Where there is a uniformity of height, new construction and additions should more closely adhere to the established height; when there is greater diversity, there can be more variation in the height of new construction and additions:

“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.....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 an addition does not necessarily need to be exactly the same height as the existing building, it should be designed to be compatible to the existing height of the building and its neighbors.”

The subject property is located immediately adjacent to almost identically scaled four-story buildings on each side. 1341 to the north and 1333 and 1331 to the south all share a common height and cornice line with the subject property. The existing setback fifth floor on 1337 has minimal visual impact on the building or the row so that collectively the four buildings express a unity of height, scale, vertical emphasis and materiality that visually ties them together.

The current proposal has been arrived at after consideration by the architect of a variety of different vocabularies, shapes, and forms. While all of the proposals, including the current proposal, are interesting architecturally, they would all have a noticeable visual impact and presence above and on top of a row of low-scale buildings as previously presented. However, rather than treating them merely as a series of receding penthouse forms, they have been more fully designed with an acknowledgment that they will be seen from surrounding streets and in an attempt to relate to the underlying elevations on which they are placed.

The revised design for the Connecticut Avenue elevation is the more successful of the two street-fronting elevations at respecting the established heights and relationships of buildings on this block. The generous setbacks (24’ for the sixth floor and 48’ for the seventh floor) are sufficiently recessive to limit their impact as seen from surrounding streets, while the design relates in form and roofline to the underlying building so as to result in a compatible and respectful relationship. Similarly, the use of a relatively quiet vocabulary of punched and plate glass windows, brick, and simple roof forms on the side elevations help tie the additional floors to the building below without overwhelming it.

The revised 18th Street elevation is less successful in inserting the floors unobtrusively and with respect to the existing heights on this street face. The setbacks (29’ for the sixth floor and 38’ for the seventh), together with the more complicated massing and roof lines, result in the upper floors being more visible and distracting than on Connecticut Avenue. The problem is exacerbated by the smaller scale of the underlying rowhouse buildings which are inherently more difficult to add to vertically than the monumental bank building on Connecticut Avenue.

If the Board is inclined to support the proposal’s general premise for two additional floors, the compatibility of the 18th Street elevation might be improved with additional design work. Further simplifying the roof lines (e.g. not relating to the underlying vocabulary of the rowhouses but creating a simple unified form) and recessing the balconies could help reduce the mass and visual busyness of the current design.

The HPO continues to recommend that the additional construction atop 1337 be limited to one rather than two additional floors. One additional floor with the appropriate setback could be comfortably accommodated and would have a minimal impact on the height of the subject building, the established and relatively unified height and rooflines of the adjacent historic buildings, and the two streetscapes on which the building fronts. While the latest design work has improved the relationship of the additional floors on Connecticut Avenue, it remains insufficiently resolved on the 18th Street elevation. Even with improvements to the 18th Street elevation, the HPO is concerned that readily visible floors constructed atop this building will set an unfortunate precedent that will encourage owners of the adjacent contributing buildings to seek similar visible roof additions and further erode the established heights and rooflines on this block.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Find the concept for two additional floors to be incompatible with the character of the historic district but find that one additional floor (a sixth floor), with the setbacks shown, could be compatibly accommodated.*