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

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Landmark/District:	<b>Capitol Hill Historic District</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>720 L Street, SE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	<b>February 24, 2011</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	<b>11-145</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Amanda Molson</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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Owners Mark Brody and Alan Gaunoux, with drawings prepared by Matthew Battin, request conceptual review for new construction on a vacant lot located at 720 L Street, SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

**Property Description**

Currently divided into two lots (Lots 824 and 825), 720 L Street, SE is a vacant parcel located at the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and L Streets, SE. It is presently occupied by several storage sheds and enclosed by wood and chain link fences. On L Street, the site is abutted by a private driveway providing access to a property fronting on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> Street and Virginia Avenue. On 8<sup>th</sup> Street, a small walkway separates the vacant lot from two nineteenth century buildings. The vacant parcel is located directly across the street from the Navy Yard Car Barn, a local landmark, while smaller rowhouses and two former apartment buildings fill the remainder of L Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Street in the square.

The lower portion of 8<sup>th</sup> Street (from the freeway overpass south to the Navy Yard) was included in the boundaries of the Capitol Hill Historic District in 2002. The extension area contains several vacant lots, including one on the east side of 8<sup>th</sup> Street and one in the 800 block of L Street, SE. Although development activity in the area has been slow in recent years, a number of new projects are currently in discussion. Through careful design consideration of new construction and the thoughtful restoration of the corridor's early buildings, these blocks can certainly echo the historic character of 8<sup>th</sup> Street north of the freeway while also introducing vibrant new buildings and businesses to this section of the historic district.

**Proposal**

The applicants propose to demolish the existing sheds on the property, which are of no historic significance, in order to construct a beer garden. The owners have stated that they envision the proposed structure to be "temporary" in nature, standing for ten years or so while the future of development in the area becomes clearer. Providing limited seating inside, the beer garden would serve most of its patrons at outdoor seating on the property and an uncovered roof deck. The bulk of the new building's massing would be located at the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and L Streets, extending northward along 8<sup>th</sup>.

Finished in either brick veneer or hardipanel, the first floor features the oversized multi-light windows that might be found on a simple industrial building from the early twentieth century. Adding more contemporary elements to the remainder of the building, the applicants plan to use a wood rain screen system to embellish the roof deck area, which is enclosed by opaque hardiplank in lieu of an open deck railing. The angled corner entrance would feature a large, vertical sign and a “deconstructed” rain screen with a visible steel frame. The L Street elevation would screen the exterior staircase leading from the roof deck to the garden below with the application of a rain screen, the use of a standing seam metal roof above the staircase, and a fence with limited views from L Street to garden seating beyond.

## **Design Considerations**

### *New Construction*

The Board’s design guidelines for new construction (*New Construction in Historic Districts*) discourage the exact duplication of historic styles. Instead, the guidelines encourage applicants to consider a new building as an enhancement to the historic district, while respecting the historic context.

*A new building should be seen as a product of its own time. To reproduce a historic building, or to copy exactly a style from the past, creates a false sense of history. By relating to the existing buildings and the environment, but being of its own time, a new building shows a district's evolution just as the existing buildings show its past.*

“Compatibility” with the character of the historic district is generally achieved through careful consideration of key design principles such as setback, orientation, scale, proportion, rhythm, massing, height, materials, details and ornamentation, and landscape features. The pattern of these principles in the surrounding neighborhood should be studied, with modern interpretation of materials and techniques encouraged.

*Compatibility is based on a thorough understanding of the design principles of existing buildings, as well as those used to design landscape features and secondary buildings on the site. Compatibility should also involve analysis of how these design principles are used in the neighborhood and how they can be interpreted using today's materials and construction techniques.*

### *“Temporary” Buildings*

The Board’s guidelines for new construction do not provide recommendations for “temporary” buildings. The lifespan of a project such as this is dependent on the intentions of any future owners, the success of the business, and the impact of forthcoming projects in the surrounding area. Even a building intended to survive five or ten years bears the responsibility of achieving compatibility with the character of the historic district, as it sets a precedent for future new construction projects and will certainly guide the tone for the development of surrounding parcels.

### *Potential Design Direction*

A wise starting point in exploring potential design options at this site is to consider the design of buildings of similar proportions, the design of buildings of a similar use, and the setting in which the building will reside.

- Because the applicants wish to construct a one-story building with horizontal proportions, the vernacular of Washington’s modest industrial buildings and alley warehouses could provide inspiration in selecting appropriate massing, materials, fenestration, and scale. The overall utilitarian nature of these early buildings featured masonry construction to prevent fires, ample windows to allow the infiltration of natural light into work areas, perhaps a small attic area for office space above the main work room, and less “polished” finishes than were typically found on high-style carriage houses and elegant commercial buildings.

Of particular help in this project may be the one-story masonry building that occupied this site as early as the 1920s and as late as the 1950s, at which time it was utilized by “Park Clothes” to provide laundry and tailoring services. Photographed by John Wymer in 1949, that building featured many characteristics typical of modest industrial and commercial buildings, including high ceilings with large windows, brick construction, a parapet wall above the ground level, and decorative touches that are limited to a double cornice, projecting bays, stone lintels, and transom windows.



**View north from the intersection of 8<sup>th</sup> and L Streets, SE (1949)**

- Early beer gardens in Germany were merely tables placed among the chestnut trees that had been planted to naturally cool the beer cellars below-ground. In keeping with that tradition, the largest traditional beer garden in the world - the Hirschgarten in Munich – can now seat thousands of patrons beneath ample tree cover. The applicants do not have

a tremendous expanse of land to work with or the benefit of mature trees that extensively cover the site, and they also require a structure to accommodate indoor seating. Many of the character-defining features of historic and contemporary beer gardens in the United States and in Europe will still address the applicants' needs and would be a good fit for this particular setting as well. Beer gardens typically include lush and loose landscaping, ample lighting for nighttime enjoyment, signage that invites patrons inside the establishment, views from the street into the garden to entice passersby, and long tables for communal seating, often set up in the open-air.

- This particular intersection of Barracks Row is occupied by the subject lot, a vacant lot directly across the street, the side elevation of the Navy Yard Car Barn (which features bricked-up windows on the ground floor along L Street), and several small restaurants along the southern tip of 8<sup>th</sup> Street that are devoid of any outdoor seating. Rather than responding to the somewhat foreboding streetscape at this intersection with more of the same, this project offers an opportunity to attract new visitors to the area and to enliven the sidewalk with activity consistent with the vibrant purposes of a beer garden. The lush landscaping of a historic beer garden would offset the extensive hardscaping and poorly-kept vacant lots at this intersection, while ample lighting would enhance safety for pedestrians. Attractive signage and views into the garden seating area would invite patrons inside, while adding sidewalk café seating would allow activity to spill back out onto the street.

## **Evaluation**

The general site plan, in which the new building occupies only about half of the lot and fronts on the main commercial corridor of 8<sup>th</sup> Street, is compatible with the character of the Capitol Hill Historic District. Likewise, the proposal to combine lots 824 and 825 has no discernible impact on the historic district as the site is currently vacant, already under single ownership, and has historically featured a number of buildings on the parcel.

Referring to the Board's guidelines for new construction in historic districts and potential design direction, the proposed massing reflects the character of the historic district and references recognizable attributes of both industrial buildings and the style of traditional beer gardens. Utilizing contemporary materials, such as the rain screen, in a limited application complements the otherwise traditional style of the building, clearly announces this as a new building along the streetscape, and reflects the whimsy, casualness, and somewhat ad-hoc nature of many outdoor beer gardens. However, there are several aspects of the plan that merit further study to allow the building to achieve compatibility:

### *Cohesiveness of Design Elements*

Although the Board's guidelines encourage the use of modern materials in new construction, the employment of so many finishes (brick walls, brick piers, wood fencing, hardipanel walls, wood rain screens, cinderblock walls, steel rods and exposed steel frames, etc.) applied in so many different directions (vertical, horizontal, angled) results in a somewhat chaotic and unfinished appearance that does not mirror the cohesiveness and balanced proportions of most buildings in the historic district. The selection of one or two key ideas would streamline the design

substantially, more clearly convey the design inspiration, and allow the underlying massing of the building to be showcased in a less hectic manner.

At present, there is no obvious “story” or conceptual idea that explains why a low-lying industrial-inspired building would have a roof deck at all, let alone one constructed primarily of hardipanel and rain screens. Using the rain screen as an occasional application on a vertical wall surface and more clearly defining the roof deck railing as a parapet of sorts through the addition of a double cornice and careful study of proportions would allow two design directions that do not logically complement one another to more seamlessly marry together. Likewise, door proportions on the corner and on 8<sup>th</sup> Street seem oversized in width and height and of a traditional design more fitting for a tavern than an industrial building, while the missing transom over the 8<sup>th</sup> Street door and the variety of short openings into the rain screen along L Street do not reflect the otherwise vertical fenestration patterns in the remainder of the building’s windows and doors.

### *Proportion and Scale*

The applicants are on the right track with their proposal to include the roof deck railing as an extension of the ground floor, rather than simply adding a pressure-treated wood deck. The parapet provides safety and privacy for patrons on the roof deck, while also providing a more finished appearance to the overall design. Although the height of the roof deck railing seems to work proportionally, the rain screen application on the north end of the 8<sup>th</sup> Street elevation is currently taller than the historic building next door. This effectively sandwiches this small, nineteenth century building between a towering rain screen and the much taller commercial building on the other side and adds height that would not normally be found on a one-story building with a tall ground level. Simply lowering the rain screen to the height of the roof deck railing should be considered.

Needing the most restudy are the massing of the corner element and the rain screen on the L Street elevation, both of which appear out of proportion with what should be a more dominant ground story and which seem at odds with the otherwise horizontal massing of the building. Including a strong corner element with some additional height will be in keeping with the traditional hierarchy of building heights ranging from lower, mid-block buildings to taller, pronounced corner elements. However, the height of this corner element as compared to the remainder of the building, the introduction of a massive vertical sign that appears to be some 10’ in height, and the collection of solids, voids, vertical elements and angles seems to merit further study, with careful attention to the scale of the ground level.

Finally, the rain screen along L Street, which serves as both a fence around the beer garden and a side wall along the staircase leading from the roof deck to the garden shares the scale challenges of the other rain screen elements on the roof deck level. The height of this section seems to be driven by a standing seam metal roof that covers, but does not enclose, the staircase. There is no obvious design solution, though the applicants may wish to consult with code reviewers at the DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) to verify that the roof covering is required and to ensure that code review will not require revisions to its design.

### *Streetscape Presence*

As is characteristic of lively beer gardens and to encourage additional patronage along this corridor, the streetscape presence of the building should open outward towards 8<sup>th</sup> Street rather than assuming an insular posture that turns its back to the sidewalk. Although the bulk of activity at the site will occur on the roof deck and in the enclosed garden area, the applicants should provide further detailing on the proposed landscaping of the grassy public space along L Street, reflect on whether sidewalk seating could be accommodated in their business plan, consider the addition of planter boxes along 8<sup>th</sup> Street to add vegetation, and give further study to the lighting plan for the building. Visibility into the garden from L Street is presently limited to one gate and a small opening in the rain screen; providing larger, more frequent openings will reduce the visual severity of this continuous wall and invite a more interactive dynamic with the streetscape.

### *Other Issues*

There are several unanswered issues that should be researched as the design develops further. First, there is currently no lighting shown for the roof deck; any lighting should be appropriate for the building in its scale, design, and directionality. Second, there is no shade provided on the roof deck, and the later addition of any covered tenting on the roof will require additional review. Ideally, any tenting or sun screens should be incorporated into the design at this conceptual stage rather than being added as an after-thought later.

Third, the applicants should consult with other agencies and organizations on aspects of the plan, including liquor licensing. The applicants plan to make use of an existing curb cut on L Street, which primarily serves a private driveway belonging to another owner, for loading and trash; the HPO recommends that the owners meet with the DC Department of Transportation to ensure that their planned use of the curb cut is permissible and that any anticipated service trucks have adequate access into the service area. Additionally, the applicants should present their plans to the Office of the Zoning Administrator to ensure that any requirements regarding parking, lot occupancy, and setbacks have been addressed in the current plan.

### **Recommendation**

The HPO recommends that the Board:

- Approve the site plan and subdivision as consistent with the purposes of the preservation act
- Direct the applicants to restudy the issues outlined above as they pertain to the principles of design cohesiveness, proportion and scale, and streetscape presence
- Delegate final approval to staff on the condition that comments from the staff and the Board are addressed in the revisions.