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

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Property Address:	<b>917 M Street NW</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Blagden Alley-Naylor Court Historic District Shaw Historic District</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	<b>2F</b>	
Meeting Date:	<b>November 1, 2012</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	<b>#12-503</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Brendan Meyer</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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The applicant, PGN Architects, PLLC for owners Altus Realty Partners, seeks conceptual design review for construction of a five-story apartment building on a vacant site in the Blagden Alley-Naylor Court Historic District (and the overlapping Shaw Historic District). The project would incorporate a one-story brick garage building which contributes to the historic district and faces Blagden Alley. The new building is being proposed in conjunction with another new building at 1212 9<sup>th</sup> Street NW (HPA #12-504) by the same development team.

### **Property Description and Context**

The site is adjacent to an unusually elaborate and exuberant terrace of Second Empire row houses (901-915 M Street) dating from 1871-74, which includes the Blanche K. Bruce House, a National Historic Landmark (See Fig. 1). One house in the row (1913 M Street), originally built as a Second Empire house, was significantly altered by an 1895 remodeling. When constructed, these houses were sited set back approximately 10 feet from the front property line, giving them deep front yard gardens.

The street-fronting portion of the subject site is vacant, while the rear of the lot is occupied by a large one-story garage. Permit and map research indicate that the garage's eastern-most portion was built as two-story alley dwellings in the 1880s which were combined, added on to in the rear, and altered by the removal of their second floors in 1922 for conversion to an automobile garage. The building was expanded to the west again in 1924, and again to the south in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with a concrete block addition. The building's early residential use, conversion to automobile use in the 1920s, and vernacular brick construction are consistent with themes established in the Blagden Alley Historic District nomination; due to its date of construction/alteration prior to 1941 and basic integrity of form and materials, all but the concrete block portion of the building should be considered contributing to the historic district.

### **Proposal**

The proposed new construction would align with the face of the Second Empire row to the east and comprise a variety of materials and façade elements. The front elevation is broken down into three sections of relatively equal height: a section of honed block 17 feet wide adjacent to the existing row, a glass and aluminum central section of 14 feet which contains the main entrance at

grade, and a 27 foot wide free-standing brick wall with punched openings screening balconies and a glass and aluminum curtain wall.

The long side elevation along Blagden Alley continues with the same materials as the front. Brick is used in a large block at the front, at the ground floor along its length, and in a smaller three-story block at the rear. The infill between the front and rear brick sections is proposed as a three story gallery of glass with steel balconies (similar to those called for at 1212 9<sup>th</sup> Street, HPA #12-504). Rather than set right against the west property line at the edge of Blagden Alley, the building is setback a little more than 6 feet. The resulting space affords a 4-story glass and metal bay above the ground floor at the front corner and enclosed patios for the residential units along the alley.

At the rear, the building's northern three bays would come to rest on top of the one-story garage. Currently blocked in original window openings on the garage would be restored as metal windows. The interior of the garage would be excavated on the interior to accommodate a vehicle ramp down to basement parking under the majority of the new construction.

## **Evaluation**

The basic concept of an apartment building of this general height and mass is not incompatible with the Blagden Alley and Shaw Historic Districts, which have a variety of apartment buildings that were constructed in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the neighborhood became more densely redeveloped.<sup>1</sup> The height of the new building would be relatively the same as the historic row to the east. The use of masonry materials to recreate a large block at the front and a smaller block at the rear is evocative of the historic massing seen in a main house/carriage house relationship common to alley contexts.

However, on several other criteria for new construction, the design could benefit by continued study and further review from the Board. The front elevation has only the vaguest relationship to its historic neighbors. The Second Empire buildings have strong bases and caps. They exhibit attenuated proportions in not just their overall dimension, but also their individual components. The buildings have robust and exuberant roof forms. Building details like dormers, window hoods, projected bays and stairs give a richly detailed sculptural quality. Materials and articulation have a level of detailing which provides scale and visual interest. By comparison the new M Street elevation does not take up the baton of any of these qualities; it presents an austere four-story wall system of window openings and little else relative to its context.

It is rare for a design in a downtown neighborhood of attached buildings to miss the mark on the criteria of orientation and hierarchy, but Blagden Alley is a rare historic context itself. The alley elevation is very activated and compatible in many ways along this very long side, but in juxtaposition with the starkly blank face at M Street, the orientation of the building becomes ambiguous. This ambiguity is only highlighted by the distinct four-story glass projection at the corner. Does it mark the main entrance or the way to it somewhere down the alley, when in fact the main entrance is under a low, metal canopy off to the side? The M Street elevation should

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<sup>1</sup> A project of similar height and mass for this site was approved by the Board in 2005 (HPA #05-281) but was never constructed.

clearly read and express itself as the primary elevation with a more prominent entrance and a composition that leaves no ambiguity as to its importance in the hierarchy of building's elevations. Eliminating the expression of M Street as a group of disassociated façade elements of different materials and consolidating it into a single composition could help orient the building in a manner that is more consistent with the rest of the historic district.

### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board:*

- *find the general height and massing of the concept compatible with the historic district and consistent with the purposes of the preservation act,*
- *but direct the applicant to continue studying the M Street elevation to improve its compatibility with the streetscape and historic district, as discussed above, and return to the Board for further consideration.*
- *reiterate that no part of this recommendation shall be construed as a recommendation for approval or disapproval for any necessary zoning relief or interpretation.*



**Figure 1** 901-915 M Street NW, c. 1990, at the time of designation of the Blagden Alley-Naylor Court Historic District designation.