

---

---

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

---

---

Landmark/District:	<b>Anacostia Historic District</b>	( <b>x</b> ) Agenda
Address:	<b>1234 W Street SE</b>	( ) Consent
Meeting Date:	<b>December 18, 2014</b>	( <b>x</b> ) New construction
Case Number:	<b>15-098</b>	
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Tim Dennée</b>	( <b>x</b> ) Concept

---

---

The applicant, property owner W Street Acquisition LLC, requests the Board's review of a concept for the construction of an additional location for a DC Prep charter school.

Although not explicitly proposed at the moment, a subdivision would be necessary for this project; it would almost certainly be compatible if the new construction is determined not to be incompatible. The subject parcel consists of seven lots, which would have to be consolidated into one. The largest lot has a pipe stem that runs through the block to V Street and would be used as an access to a basement garage for employee parking. The remainder of the lots, all with W Street frontage, are situated between this lot (Lot 1022) and 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

The design is divided into two sections, with the eastern section stepping down to a two-to-three-story height at 13<sup>th</sup> Street. The building would reach a total of about fifty feet or four stories in the higher section, although a large portion of that block of the building would contain a technically single-story gymnasium with one floor above. There would be a mechanical penthouse or screened area atop the larger block, and a fenced rooftop play area on the lower one. The main entrance(s) would be under an L-shaped canopy at the inside corner of where the blocks meet.

The exterior wall materials would be a combination of EIFS, fiber-cement panels, and aluminum.

**Background**

At the time the historic district was designated, the subject parcel contained a single house, the former 1242 W Street, and open-air storage for cars. It has since occasionally been used for overflow parking for the church across the street. Since that time, this block of W has lost a total of six historic houses, four that stood where Union Temple now does, one that stood at 1222 W, and 1242 W itself, which was neglected for decades before collapsing in 2009.

In 2007, the Board reviewed a proposal for three-story townhouses on this site. The Board's principal concern was with the height of those buildings relative to the surrounding two-story historic homes, but after some tweaking of the designs to address these concerns, approved in 2011 a resubmitted concept at that height, but with a single unit on the V Street pipe stem capped at two stories. Another condition was that 1242 W would be reconstructed to break up what

would otherwise be an unrelieved W Street frontage of similar three-story buildings. The project did not come to fruition because of the difficulty of obtaining construction financing.

## **Evaluation**

There is no doubt that this is a sizable parcel, having probably originally consisted of thirteen narrow house lots. Yet, it is not sizable enough to accommodate a building of this size in a way that can comfortably relate it to the surrounding historic residential buildings. The proposal simply packs too much program into a constrained area.

Schools and churches are permitted in all residential zones. On this site, split between an R-3 and an R-4 residential zone, construction would otherwise be limited to single-family and two-family houses not exceeding three stories (despite the historic houses being nearly all two stories in height). But schools are technically permitted to reach as much as 60 feet tall without a variance or special exception.

The preservation law does not concern itself with use per se, and there is nothing about an educational use that is in itself objectionable from a preservation perspective.<sup>1</sup> It is simply the amount of program desired for this site that makes the building incompatible with its surroundings. The project architect has acknowledged the difficulty of adjusting the volume or massing under the constraints that exist.

It is worth considering how schools have historically been inserted into residential neighborhoods in Washington. In the Victorian era, the boxy brick schools were often built nearly against neighboring houses, leaving enough space for natural light to enter through the large classroom windows. Yet these neighborhood schools were most often two stories tall and occasionally three.

During the Progressive Era, pedagogy stressed the importance of adding exercise and fresh air to book learning, and playgrounds were acquired for new schools and old. These yards further separated the school buildings from their neighbors. And while most schools remained two or three stories, the larger ones spread out without adversely affecting neighbors. They were then usually designed as a series of wings that broke down their overall mass. The largest schools were erected in suburban sections of the District because it was there that the land was plentiful, and neighborhoods filled in around schools as much as the schools were inserted into the neighborhoods. Larger sites provided not only play space but loading and parking.

This design makes significant gestures such as breaking the total bulk into two primary masses and stepping down toward the modest houses across 13<sup>th</sup> Street, but this is not enough to be compatible with the scale of the very modest two-story frame buildings that surround it. In eliminating the long-mostly-vacant parcel, this quarter of the square needs to be redeveloped in such a way as to knit together the rest, including the two now-isolated houses west of the site, and potentially the recreation of 1242 W. Indeed, the Board should take the same level of care it did in breaking up the consistent rowhouse streetscape of 2011, despite the fact that the frontage

---

<sup>1</sup> There may, of course, be practical issues with drop-off and pick-up of students, as the site plan allows for no on-site means to do so. The two streets on which the building fronts run one-way counter-clockwise around the site, which may keep traffic moving and cut down on conflicting turning movements, but doesn't necessarily make curbside drop-offs, especially from the passenger side of a vehicle, any easier.

was articulated as about a dozen separate units with a rhythm of porches. The interest in redeveloping these lots does not justify overwhelming the adjacent historic fabric with bulk.

The setback of the tallest section of the building from W Street becomes necessary to relieve its imposition on the narrow street. On the other hand, the street wall—with small setbacks as is the prevailing pattern in Anacostia—ought to be reinforced. This presents a conundrum.

The packet of drawings implies that the construction is compatible for at least two reasons: that there are other institutional buildings sprinkled through the neighborhood, and there is a comparably tall building to the west, 2100 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. But illustrations of the religious and institutional buildings in the immediate neighborhood emphasize how modestly and even residentially scaled they are, with the probable exception of the largest and most recent, Union Temple. Having Union Temple across from the western corner of the subject parcel may reduce the demands of compatibility a bit, but a new building would face several old houses farther east on W as well as those on 13<sup>th</sup>, while abutting similar houses on W and 13<sup>th</sup>. (The church block would also greatly benefit from some small residential infill.)

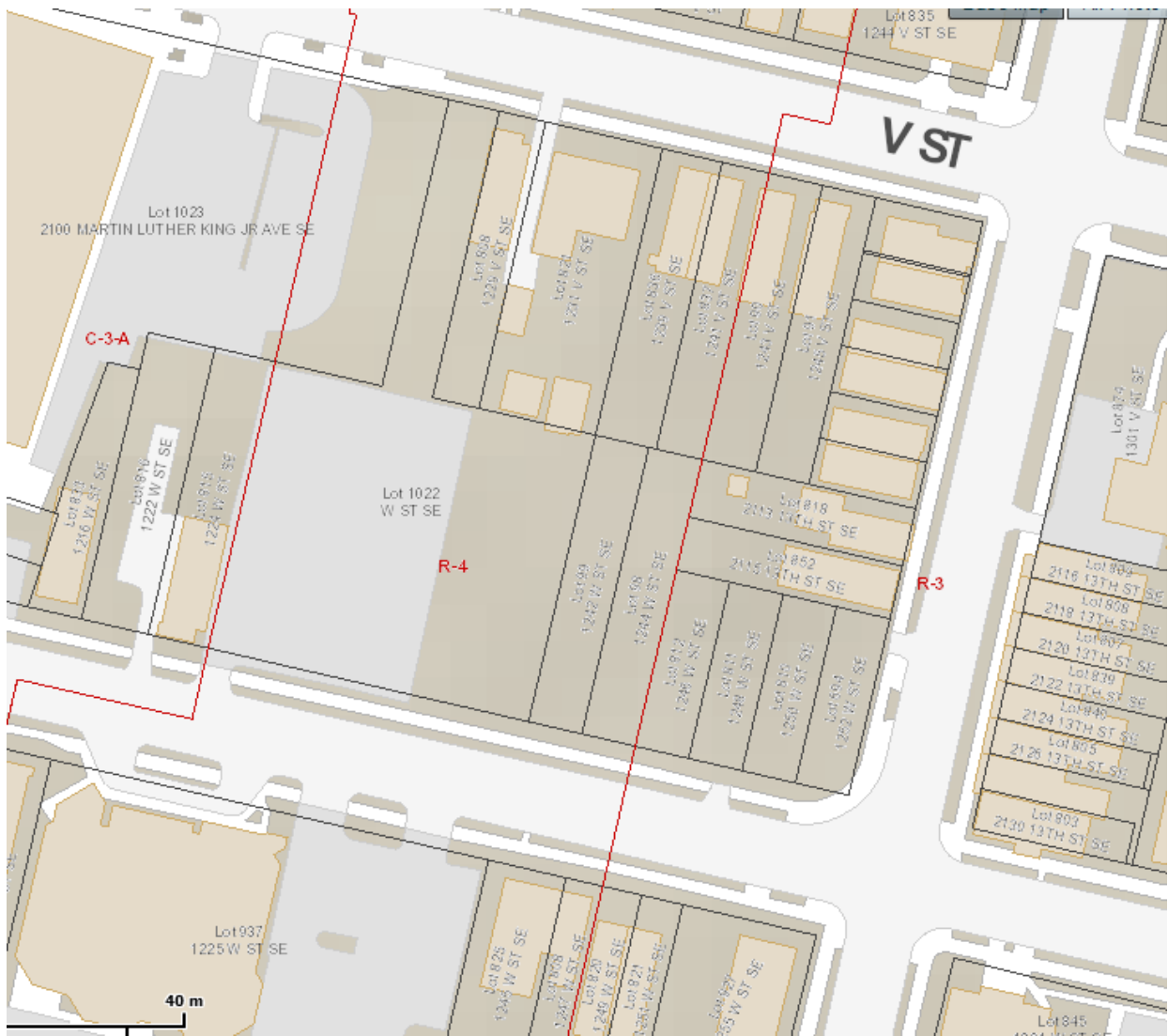
The office building at 2100 Martin Luther King may still be somewhat controversial today, despite being more than two decades old. It is the tallest building in the historic district and by far the largest in volume. During the hearings on the “Big K” project, 2100 was discussed as something of a datum for the maximum height that might be considered compatible on the main commercial corridor. Despite its proximity—separated by three narrow lots and two small frame houses—to the subject parcel, its presence does not justify carrying that kind of height or long building frontages into the finely scaled residential neighborhood. This project’s overall impression is that of a large office building. Office-like appurtenances, such as rooftop screening and penthouses, add to the effective height and are elements that the historic district’s design guidelines discourage in the residential section. As suggested above, such a building might be more successful if set in the center of a larger parcel, but if placed on such a parcel, it is doubtful that it would be massed the same way.

The building steps down to 13<sup>th</sup> Street, but in order to relieve its long frontage, its roofline pops up in places with gestures in the fenestration that are of a large scale, each overall frame about the size of the façade of one of the opposing houses. One of the options offered refines these a bit to reduce the scale of the constituent elements. But this makes the building little friendlier to 13<sup>th</sup> Street, for instance, as there is no entrance on that side. Large, single-light windows also may make sense within the design logic of the building itself, but they do nothing to add scale to relate to its context.

A building of this size and purpose reasonably must economize with its exterior materials. And while the design may make the most of what it has to use, the Board has typically considered large expanses of EIFS and fiber-cement panels, especially when prominently visible from a street, to be incompatible materials. Even a traditional material like true stucco, which EIFS imitates, is less successful when applied over such a large expanse of a rectilinear mass.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board not approve the concept, with a finding that the concept is incompatible with the character of the historic district and, therefore, inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law.*



*The northwest corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and W Streets.*