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

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|--------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Property Address: | 501 H Street, NW | X | Agenda |
| Landmark/District: | Downtown Historic District | | Consent Denial |
| Meeting Date: | March 3, 2016 | X | Concept Review |
| H.P.A. Number: | 16-006 | X | Alteration |
| Staff Reviewer: | Steve Callcott | | New Construction |
| | | | Demolition |
| | | | Subdivision |

Owner Mohammed Estahani (501 H Street LLC), with plans prepared by architect Arif Hodzic, seeks conceptual design review for alterations and additions to a three-story corner commercial building and an associated one-story garage at the corner of H and 5th Streets, NW in the Chinatown section of the Downtown Historic District.

Building History and Description

510 H Street, NW is a three-story brick row building constructed in 1881. It has distinctive corbelled brickwork in its cornice, expressed chimneys, door and window surrounds and at the corners in the form of quoins. The building has two-over-two windows, some of which are original and others that are modern replacements. While the form of the projecting storefront on H Street probably dates from the late 19th century, it is finished in a variety of more recent materials.

A one-story brick building is located at the rear of the property abutting the alley to the north. Based on map research, this structure was built between 1909 and 1911; it is unclear whether it was built as a stable or an automobile garage. The modest building features a shallow stepped parapet and a metal cornice over the original vehicular opening (since bricked in) facing 5th Street. A one-story brick addition (since removed) connected the two structures and filled in the small portion yard that once existed between the two.

Proposal

The proposal calls for renovating the corner commercial building, constructing a new storefront (the design of which will be finalized once the existing storefront is demolished to determine column and beam locations), and lowering the sills of two short first floor windows to the same height as other windows on the side elevation; the two-over-two windows would be retained.

Two additional floors would be constructed atop the garage, to be clad in brick set just behind the existing face brick on the first floor; it would have ganged double hung windows. The former garage door opening on the first floor would be opened up and converted to a flush storefront window. The connection between the main building and garage would be replaced with a three-story glass-enclosed stair to provide access to the upper floors of the existing building and the new floors atop the garage.

Evaluation

The conversion of the two small side windows to full height units would be compatible if it is done without damaging the surrounding masonry, reuses the existing stone sills and replicates the

corbelled brackets beneath them, and if the new units replicate the profiles of the existing windows. The removal of the existing storefront should be done with care to determine whether there are original transom windows or other features that could be reused or replicated in developing the replacement storefront. The assessment of underlying conditions and design of the storefront should be developed in consultation with HPO.

The three-story glass addition at the rear of the property has been designed to be distinguishable from the original building and the garage, taking the compositional role of the glass hyphen that is often used to separate masonry massing elements. The location of the stair in a new rear addition has the benefit of limiting the extent of interior demolition that would otherwise be needed to provide a new stair within the existing structure. Ideally, the hyphen would be set back somewhat further from the street plane of the flanking masonry buildings, but a deeper setback complicates the layout of the new stair and passage behind to provide passage to the garage.

The two-story addition atop the one-story garage has been the primary focus of the applicants' design efforts. As a general principle, the Board has discouraged additional floors directly atop and set flush with the walls of an underlying building as such an approach changes the proportions, roofline, massing and overall character of the structure. A further complicating issue here is the design challenge of incorporating the building into a satisfactory and compatible new composition, particularly if the stepped parapet is retained.

However, the extremely modest architectural character and historical value of the building could argue for some flexibility to having additional new construction atop the garage, and additional floors would certainly be compatible with the established heights on this block. The Board has approved several similar proposals for additional floors set flush with the face of non-descript automobile related structures where the context supported it. These projects include: 1234 9th Street, NW (Shaw HD), where a two-story addition was approved on a one-story auto showroom building based on the nominal architectural character of the building and surrounding context of three-story buildings (2004; never constructed); 1515 11th Street, NW (Shaw HD), where a three-story addition was approved added flush with the façade of a one-story automobile parts building (2006), and at 1321 Naylor Court (Blagden Alley/Naylor Court HD), where two additional stories were approved atop an undistinguished but contributing brick garage (2011). More recently, in Chinatown, the Board allowed additional new construction atop two alley buildings as part of the redevelopment proposed in the 600 block of Eye Street, although in that instance it was for many more additional floors and was only approved with substantial setbacks from the alley-facing elevations.

Complicating the compatibility and design issues is the proposed retention of the garage's parapet and how to satisfyingly incorporate that into a new design where new construction is placed immediately behind it. Based on poor quality photographs, this feature was initially identified by HPO and CFA staff as one of the few notable design features that the building had, and therefore one that should be evaluated for retention. However, more recent onsite evaluation of the building calls this initial advice into question. As is illustrated in the photos below, the parapet has been entirely and quite poorly constructed. Its brick, mortar joint work and mortar composition don't match the underlying building, it is asymmetrically placed on the structure, and its stepping is not handled evenly on its two sides. While it is unknown whether the garage originally had a parapet, the current parapet is clearly not original, is of inferior design and construction, and if it is determined that additional floors are appropriate for this building, should not be a feature that drives the design of that addition. Eliminating the parapet would allow the

design of the addition to be more seamlessly and compatibly incorporated into the underlying building.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board:

- Find the lowering of the two windows on the side of 501 H Street, NW to be compatible on the condition that the existing sills, corbelling and scroll-cut lintels are retained, and that the new windows match the other two-over-two sash found on the building;
- Delegate the review and approval of the new storefront design to staff on the condition that the applicants work with HPO during the course of demolition to evaluate the existing conditions and develop the new design to respond to any found conditions;
- Find the three-story glass addition at the rear of 501 H Street, NW to be compatible in concept on the condition that the applicants continue to evaluate whether the skin of the addition can be further pulled back from the street plane of the surrounding masonry;
- Based on the altered condition and modest architectural and historical character of the garage building, find that a two-story addition atop the structure is acceptably compatible with the underlying building and the Downtown Historic District on the condition that the parapet be removed and the addition is seamlessly incorporated into the underlying building;
- Delegate final design approval of the additions to HPO.



501 H Street, NW and garage: 5th Street elevation

Photos of garage parapet – 501 (rear) H Street, NW

