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

Property Address:	507-517 H Street, NW	X Agenda
Landmark/District:	Downtown Historic District	Consent
Meeting Date:	January 30, 2020	X Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	20-116	X Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	New Construction
		Demolition

FZ Development LLC, with plans prepared by Fillat + Architecture Inc., seeks conceptual design review for alterations and construction of an 11-story addition behind a row of six three-story row houses in the Chinatown section of the Downtown Historic District.

Property Histories and Descriptions

The site includes six 19th century brick row buildings, all originally constructed as dwellings and later converted to commercial uses. 507 H Street is a three-story Italianate-styled house that dates from 1870. 509 H Street is a three-story house constructed sometime before 1869 and later altered with the addition of a ground-level storefront. The coordinated row of bay-fronted Queen Anne houses at 511-517 were built in 1885. The ensemble is reflective of the eclectic residential development of this portion of downtown just prior and after the Civil War and its later conversion to a commercial district. All of the buildings are contributing to the Downtown Historic District.

The Downtown Historic District contains a rich variety of residential, commercial and institutional building types, sizes, and architectural styles from a period of significance that spans more than a century (1830-1940); it also contains a slightly higher percentage of new and non-contributing buildings than many of the city's other historic districts. Square 485, in which the buildings are located (bounded by 5th, 6th, H and I Streets), is unusual for being one of the district's most historically intact blocks and for its relatively consistent building heights. 22 of the 23 buildings in the block are contributing, with 19 of those being three stories tall (with 1 two-story, 1 four-story and 1 five-story building). The tallest building is the only non-contributing structure, a six-story apartment building at 809 6th Street approved by the Board in 2005 as an infill project on a vacant lot. The block contains several noteworthy structures, including the Thomas U. Walter designed church at 500 I Street (1852, restored in 2009 as a component of a special merit project approved by the Mayor's Agent), the unusual Romanesque-styled apartment building at 510 I Street (1894, designed by Nicholas T. Haller), and the Mission-revival Gospel Mission at 810 5th Street (1932).

Proposal

The plans call for retaining the main front blocks of the historic buildings, with their rear ell wings, rear walls, and portions of roofs, floor assemblies, and party walls removed. An eleven-story tower would be constructed behind and partially above the historic buildings; the fourth floor and above would cantilever approximately ten feet over the back portions of the buildings.

The south face of the tower would be set back approximately 30 feet from the facades of the historic buildings. The tower would rise to 110' feet, capped by a 15' tall penthouse. The first three floors, behind the rowhouses, would be clad in black brick and the upper floors would be clad with a red metal frame and large glass windows. The facades of the rowhouses would be restored, with paint removed and historically appropriate windows and doors installed. The entrance to the new building would be provided through 509, with a new metal and glass lobby entrance replacing the commercial storefront.

The project would be for a hotel use and would require zoning relief by the Board of Zoning Adjustment for height, rear yard setback and loading.

Evaluation

The project raises two preservation issues for the Board's review: the extent of demolition to the historic buildings, and the compatibility of the addition.

Demolition

The Historic Preservation Regulations (DCMR 10-C, Section 305) establish what constitutes demolition under the preservation law.¹ In applying these regulations, the Board has discretion to consider the various circumstances of a case, including a property's specific character-defining features, integrity, and the extent to which the removal will affect the ability for the property to convey its historic significance. While removal of rear ell wings is typically found acceptable by the Board, and removal of portions of roofs are often approved as part of a project to build small roof non-visible roof additions, the cumulative extent of removal proposed – all of the ell wings, rear walls, portions of roofs, floor assemblies on two floors, and substantial portions of interior party walls – is greater than the Board has found to be consistent with the preservation law.

Compatibility

When reviewing additions, the Board has most frequently cited the principle that an addition should be subordinate to the historic building to which it is being added to ensure that the historic structure remains dominant and not overwhelmed by the new construction. This principle is of greater importance when the building and addition are seen simultaneously from public street

¹ Work considered demolition under the Act shall include, but is not limited to, any of the following, as determined by the Mayor's Agent:

- (a) The removal or destruction of any façade;
- (b) The removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of the structural components of the building, such as structural walls, floor assemblies, and roofs;
- (c) The removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of the roof along with all or substantially all of one or more exterior walls;
- (d) The removal or destruction of all or substantially all of an entire wing or appendage of the building, such as a rear ell, unless the wing lacks physical or historic integrity, or is not a character-defining feature;
- (e) The removal or destruction of a substantial portion that includes character defining features of the building or structure;
- (f) The removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of a designated interior landmark, unless the elements to be removed lack physical or historic integrity, or are not character-defining features; or
- (g) Any removal or destruction requiring a partial demolition or raze permit under the D.C. Construction Code, including any demolition of non-bearing walls, interior finishes, or other interior non-bearing elements within a building where an interior space has been designated as a historic landmark.

view. In some limited instances where the context supported it, the Board has found additions that are larger than the buildings to which they are attached to be compatible if the addition can convincingly appear as a separate building to the rear or side of the historic building and when the size of the addition was found to be appropriate for its context where buildings of different sizes and types allowed for the compatible insertion of a larger structure. The Board's guideline for additions states: "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 proposed addition is clearly not subordinate to the building in height, rising eight stories taller. While the block does have a six-story apartment building behind it on 6th Street, the remainder of the block is comprised primarily of three-story historic buildings, and the addition would establish a dramatically new height for the block. While the design attempts to provide a relatively neutral and quiet backdrop, the height and placement of the new tower immediately behind (and partially atop) the historic buildings results in an incongruous and uncomfortable juxtapositions of forms that is not compatible.

This determination is consistent with the positions taken by the Board on two previous projects on this block. In 2013, at the Mission at 810 5th Street (HPA 13-567), the Board found the addition of three extra floors behind this five-story building to be incompatible with the building and block and directed that at least two floors be removed. The project was subsequently revised to remove all additional floors and the building renovated in its existing volume. Similarly, in 2012 the Board found a seven-story addition at the rear of a three-story house at 819 6th Street (HPA 12-492) to be incompatibly tall for the building and block. Upon redesign, the Board approved a lower five-story addition which was not noticeably taller than the block's established heights and which had limited visibility from street view (since constructed).

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept to be inconsistent with the preservation act as it results in substantial demolition of contributing buildings and is incompatible in height for the character of the historic buildings and this block in the Downtown Historic District.