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

Property Address:	917 F Street NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	Downtown Historic District	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	2C	<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Permit
Meeting Date:	December 16, 2010	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	11-045	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Brendan Meyer	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

The applicant, Long Chen as agent for building owner Stavins & Axelrod, seeks a building permit for alteration of the historic “Central Liquor” sign at 917 F Street NW in the Downtown Historic District. The Central Liquor business has relocated to the 600 block of E Street NW, but has not taken the sign to the new location. A new business, “Joe’s Souvenir,” now plans on occupying 917 F Street. Plans were prepared by New Color Signs.

Property Description and Context

The sign in question may quickly be recognized as the iconic “Central Liquor” sign. It is a large two-sided blade sign of aluminum and enamel panel construction with large white lettering outlined with red neon. Oriented vertically, akin to an upside-down bulb thermometer, the sign spells out “CENTRAL” with the “C” in a circle at the top of the sign. The base of the sign consists of two angled horizontal neon and enamel panels—each displaying “LIQUOR”—that come to a point underneath the vertical blade.

This is the sign’s third location. The sign likely dates to about 1936 when Central Liquor, an already established business, was bought by David Rothberg, who operated the business until his death in 1974. The business was originally located at 518 9th Street NW. Central Liquor moved to the Victor Building at 724-726 9th Street NW sometime after 1974 and brought the sign to the new location. Central Liquor was still located in the Victor Building in 1991 when it was designated a historic landmark by the HPRB. Afterwards, Central Liquor moved to its current location at 917 F Street NW.¹

The design and materials of the sign, especially its oversized scale and use of neon, evoke the era before World War II when F Street NW and 9th Street NW was a popular shopping and entertainment district featuring a wide spectrum of theaters, restaurants, clubs and stores. Signs for these establishments, competing for attention, tended to be boisterously large and bright. Today, signs of such size are not allowed by the D.C. Building Code.

Proposal

The permit application calls for altering the two-sided blade sign (2 feet wide, 12 feet tall, topped by a 3 foot diameter circle) by removing the neon letters spelling “CENTRAL,” and “LIQUOR.” The vertical lettering would be replaced with an American flag icon in the top circle and letters spelling out “JOES” underneath. The horizontal words “LIQUOR” would each be replaced by the words

¹ It should also be noted that the sign in the building’s pediment “Tho’s E. Waggaman Auctioneer REAL ESTATE BROKER,” is a historic replication of a lost original sign resulting from an HPRB action.

“SOUVENIR.” The new lettering would be white with neon outlining and new Plexiglas panels would replace the enamel panels.

Evaluation and Recommendation

The subject of altering a historic sign has not come to the Board in recent memory. Although large historic signs have been moved from contributing buildings in historic districts (the Comet sign at 1815 Columbia Road NW and the Yenching Palace sign at 3526 Connecticut Avenue NW) those removals were done before the HPRB adopted new sign regulations (DCMR 10A Historic Preservation, Chapter 25 Standards for Signs, Awnings, Canopies, and Marquees). Section 2513 for Vintage and Historic Signs is directly applicable to this permit application.²

The Central Liquor sign, by its design, size and original materials, exhibits distinctive characteristics representative of the vibrant signage once common in Downtown. The applicant’s proposed alterations would replace so much of the sign’s original material, that the final product would fundamentally be a completely new sign, with only the structural supports remaining from the historic sign. The drawings provided do not convincingly assure Staff that the new neon can replicate the original, or that the proposed Plexiglas can replicate the finish and color of the current sign panel. The applicant has not provided evidence of corrosion or structural weakness that would make preservation unfeasible.

Replicating the existing sign with a new sign of the same dimensions is not allowed because it clearly conflicts with the D.C. Building Code (2513.5, below). By code, the allowable size for a new sign is 2 square feet of sign for every linear foot of building width.³ 917 F Street is approximately 25 feet wide, but the existing sign, measuring both faces is more than 80 square feet.

Staff recommends that the Central Liquor sign be preserved in place. Minor alteration, such as by changing the word “LIQUOR” to “SOUVENIRS” would preserve the essence and most of the physical fabric of the sign while allowing it to be reused for the new business. If this course is taken, the alterations should use the materials that sufficiently replicate the historic neon and enamel materials of the existing sign. Alternatively, if this is not feasible, the sign could be relocated and reused elsewhere. However, destroying the sign and producing a pale replica of it that has none of its original material or graphic characteristics is neither consistent with the preservation act or the city’s sign regulations.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board deny the permit application and advise the applicant to submit a new building permit application for replacing the words “LIQUOR” with “SOUVENIR” only.

² From DCMR 10A:

“2513.1 Vintage and historic signs express distinctive characteristics or aesthetics of an earlier period and provide character to historic property. The Board and HPO shall evaluate vintage and historic signage for its significance and for preservation when it may be affected by proposed construction work.

2513.2 A vintage sign should be considered for preservation or reuse where feasible.

2513.3 A historic sign that is integral to the design of historic property, such as a sign that is carved or etched into masonry or included as part of the design of a parapet or cornice, shall be retained.

2513.4 A historic sign that is not integral to the design of historic property, such as the ghost of a painted sign, shall be retained where feasible.

2513.5 Replication or installation of a close copy of a documented historic sign is considered an appropriate preservation treatment unless it clearly conflicts with the D.C. Building Code or the Board’s design standards.”

³ D.C. Building Code, DCMR 12A, Section 3107.10.2