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

Property Address:	5 Thomas Circle, NW	X Agenda
Landmark/District:	National City Christian Church/ 14th Street Historic District	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	April 27, 2017	X Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	17-293	X Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	New Construction
		Demolition
		Subdivision

Rock Creek Property Group, with plans prepared by Jane Nelson (Nelson Architects) and historical research conducted by EHT Tracerics, seeks conceptual design review for alterations and a two-story plus penthouse roof addition on a wing of the National City Christian Church on Thomas Circle.

Property History and Description

The National City Christian Church is an imposing Neoclassical styled church designed by John Russell Pope and constructed in 1930. Pope was a nationally prominent architect in the first half of the 20th century, adept at working in a variety of historically inspired architectural styles. He is best known in Washington for his many projects that brought to fruition the City Beautiful vision established by the McMillan Commission, including designs for the National Archives, the National Gallery of Art, the Jefferson Memorial, the American Pharmacists Association, Constitution Hall and the Masonic House of the Temple on 16th Street.

Pope's design for the church was inspired by James Gibb's early 18th century St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, which served as a model for scores of Protestant churches throughout the United States in the late 18th century and again in the early 20th. Pope's original design contemplated a wing on the west side (facing Massachusetts Avenue) and a chapel on the north (facing 14th Street) however neither was realized due to the onset of the Depression. The congregation revived plans for a west wing in the 1950s, with plans prepared by architect Leon Chatelain. Known as the Campbell Building, it is three stories tall and clad in limestone with traditional classical detailing. A free-standing, six-sided chapel/baptistry and a five-story limestone building, known as the Beasley Building, were constructed on the north side in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively.

The church is listed on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and National Register of Historic Places, and is also located in and contributing to the 14th Street Historic District. The wings were constructed after the period of significance for the church and historic district but are valuable in documenting the congregation's expansion over time and in providing a compatible context for the church. While not precisely symmetrical or of the same architectural caliber as the church building, they provide a balanced and deferential composition framing Pope's design.

Proposal

The project calls for the congregation to sell the surplus Campbell Building, which would be expanded and converted to office use. The building envelope would be retained and two additional floors and a mechanical penthouse added. The first new floor would be designed as a classically-inspired attic story, clad in limestone and set flush to the outside walls of the underlying wing. It would have a large central window on its south and west elevations, composed to reference the wing's existing punched windows but to allow for larger openings. The second floor would be set back substantially from the attic story in the manner of a traditional penthouse; it would feature butt-joint glass walls with references to vertically-oriented punched windows within. The secondary walls of these first two floors would be brick. The penthouse would be clad in a mechanical screen with horizontal metal louvers. The existing first floor courtyard elevation and plaza would be modified to provide a more welcoming and accessible entrance.

Evaluation

Most importantly, the massing and height of the proposed addition will maintain the subordinate, deferential relationship of the wing to the landmark church and the compositional balance between the two wings and the church. The use of limestone with traditional detailing on the first additional floor is compatible with the church and appropriate for the architectural approach of composing the floor as a classical attic story to the wing.

As the design has been developed, three concerns have been raised during discussions with the architect:

- 1) While attempting to respect the punched openings of the underlying building, the composition of the central windows in the fourth floor would result in a horizontal opening that is out of character with the fenestration and classical proportions of the complex, and with the otherwise traditional approach to this floor. In response, two alternatives are proposed. Option A includes a greater number of vertically-oriented windows in an alternating pattern of smaller and larger openings. Option B has a series of three large openings. While it is difficult to fully evaluate these options without seeing them in the context of the larger complex, option A is the more compatible of the two in that it uses vertically-oriented openings; the horizontal openings and proportions of openings in option B are not compatible. A third (and probably the most compatible) solution would be to simply align the openings in the fourth floor with the openings in the underlying building without combining the central windows into a larger horizontal opening.
- 2) While recessed from the edges of the roof, the use of an entirely glass wall system for the setback fifth floor raises concerns about the reflectivity of this south-facing elevation during the day and the potential for it to be a glowing light box at night, both of which could detract from the landmark. HPO seeks the Board's direction on whether this should be addressed by using some type of finish or treatment to the glass or whether an alternative material should be explored.
- 3) The mechanical penthouse was initially proposed as clad in horizontal louvers which, based on the renderings, had a graphic quality that would potentially draw undue attention to itself. While the precise detailing, finish and color remains to be worked out, the enclosure has been revised to be clad in flat metal panels that would provide an appropriately neutral background.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the proposal to be generally compatible with the character of the historic landmark and the 14th Street Historic District, and consistent with the purposes of the preservation act, with the following conditions:

- 1) Resolution of the fenestration on the fourth floor to include vertically-oriented openings and a balance of window-to-wall that is compatible with the underlying wing;*
- 2) A material treatment of the fifth floor that ensures that the surface will not be reflective in sunlight or result in light levels at night that would be incompatible with the character of the complex.*
- 3) Delegation of final approval to staff.*