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

Landmark/District:	The Harrison Apartments	(x) Agenda
Address:	704 3rd Street NW	
Meeting Date:	January 30, 2020	(x) Addition
Case Number:	20-113	(x) New construction
		(x) Concept

The applicant, property owner Quadrum DC LLC (with architects Architecture, Inc.), requests the Board’s review of a concept to construct a hotel addition to the landmark Harrison Apartments, consisting of twelve stories (130-foot-tall) and a penthouse (18’6”) and roof deck. As discussed below, the landmark building itself would be demolished in significant part, including the floors, likely the roof, and substantial portions of the rear wall, because of its structural condition and the programmatic need to incorporate it into the project. Portions of the façade would be rebuilt because of movement in the masonry.

The Board has previously approved similar concepts, and this project is being reviewed simultaneously by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, as it is within the jurisdiction of the Shipstead-Luce Act.

Background

The Harrison, the oldest purpose-built apartment building in Washington, is likely named for incoming president Benjamin Harrison, and was constructed in two sections in 1888 to 1890. The southern section, with the corner tower at G Street, was erected as apartments or flats from the end of 1888. Like other examples of the earliest purpose-built apartments, the Harrison took the form of scaled-up rowhouses with projecting bays. When essentially complete in the summer of 1889, the federal government leased the building on the condition that owner Harvey Spalding would erect a large north addition to be finished by the end of the year. The government was to use the property as the executive offices for a portion of the Department of the Interior as that agency staffed up to conduct the eleventh decennial census in 1890.¹ As a consequence, the north addition was structured for office loading and to be “fire proof,” with a system of steel columns and beams supporting brick-and-concrete floor arches.² The original, south section had been conventionally framed with wood. Described as six stories, the building has only five above grade, plus a full basement that had become a café by the turn of the century.

¹ There was no permanent “Census Bureau” until 1902. The census office occupied the property from the beginning of 1890, but there was finish work still occurring in the building well into the year. Most of the rest of the 1,200 census clerks were housed in the new Inter-Ocean Building on 9th Street between E and F, with overflow in the Pension Building. This 3rd and G location was the inspiration for the “Census Pharmacy” that opened across the street at the time.

² Ironically, most of the 1890 census schedules were lost or damaged in a 1921 fire in the basement of the Commerce Department, with the damaged records intentionally destroyed later.

The Census Office may have remained only until 1892, when the administrative offices moved to the Inter-Ocean Building. From then on, the building was principally residential, although it retained ground-floor and basement retail spaces. The property changed hands several times, and the two sections were briefly under separate ownership, before the building was renamed the Astoria in 1899 and thoroughly renovated by 1902. Another renovation of 1941 coincided with a second renaming, with the building since known as the Canterbury. It has been vacant since 2004.

Demolition

The interior of the building is not designated, so under a previous owner, the non-loadbearing walls were demolished. Now that a use is proposed that might be compatible with the tiny flats, they are gone.

The condition of the building has declined dramatically since the staff first toured it in 2004. Having gone through a succession of owners, it is difficult to apportion responsibility for neglect of the property, but not maintaining a sufficiently sound roof and secured window openings for some years caused a cascade of effects. Water entering the building has rotted much of the wood framing of the southern portion of the building and the roof. Especially with repeated freezing, the water has also caused movement in the masonry walls; the west, “rear” wall, made of common brick, is in the worst shape. The steel framing of the north section is corroded and, perhaps more important, the brick and concrete arches it supports have pushed outward and flattened to a degree that probably makes them unsalvageable. This outward force has harmed the façade brick, too. The exterior walls have undergone some repairs during the past couple of years, especially at the north end of the building, but there is still a considerable amount of masonry repair to be done.

In recent years, a new roof has been installed, some masonry repairs have occurred, and the walls have been shored. Programmatic issues, as much as condition, call for the removal of much of the rear wall(s), as the buildings must be connected, but there is more preservation here than, say, in the Board-approved second and third concepts, because there will no longer be parking beneath the landmark. The façade’s earliest fire escape, being both original and decorative, will be retained.³ Other fire escapes will be removed.

Based on a 2011 tour of the property, the staff and the Board concluded that the steel columns surrounding the north stair can be retained and reused (especially as they have decorative iron Corinthian capitals), possibly in a decorative manner only, and the area of floors from the stairwell out to the four surrounding columns could probably be retained and supported to keep that core intact. An engineer’s report at that time did not focus on the light well in the north wing, but its location in the center of the building had protected it from the degree of weathering and movement to which the roof and outer walls have been subjected. So, in its 2011 and 2017 reviews, the Board approved the concepts with conditions regarding demolition:

(1) that the applicant retain, repair and incorporate the brick stairwell/elevator core and the floors extending out from it to, and including, the four surrounding steel columns, as well as the large, hexagonal lightwell;

³ That is, on the east elevation, above the arched entry in the south section of the building. See the cover and page 24.

- (2) that the applicant consider retaining more of the landmark's rear wall; and
- (3) that the earliest fire escape be retained and restored.

The present application commits to doing these things.

New construction

This is the fifth concept application for a large project incorporating the Harrison since 2006, each from a different owner. In October, the Board extended the most recent concept approval. The proposed uses and the architecture have changed, but the height, the general relationship to the landmark, and the base material (brick) have remained essentially the same. The footprint has increased as owners have aggregated all the lots stretching to 4th Street. The building is consequently much larger than the Harrison, but the staff and Board have always approached these projects as distinct new construction incidentally abutting the landmark.

The design of the base of the building has progressed. The storefront does not seem calculated for the placement of signage—if there is to be exterior or window signage in addition to that on the canopies.

The principal exterior material, brick, is generally compatible with the landmark. However, the very dark color proposed for most of the building is an unfortunate contrast with that of the landmark building, especially where the former hangs over the latter on the alley at the north of the site (the contrast of the vertical expanse of the lighter brick there does not seem the right gesture either). The dark brick also seems out of character with the immediate neighborhood of Judiciary Square, which is characterized by lighter bricks and limestone. The contrast between the upper and lower brick is also too stark in the first alternative, but less so in the second.

The uppermost stories could use more of the scale-giving detail of the lower fenestration and the panels on the bays.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept and delegate further review to staff, with the understanding that continuing Commission of Fine Arts review may entail some minor revisions, and with the conditions that:

- (1) the applicant conform to the proposed demolition drawings, retaining the earliest fire escape; retaining the extent of the rear wall(s) depicted; and retaining, repairing and incorporating the brick stairwell/elevator core and the floors extending out from it to, and including, the four surrounding steel columns; and retaining the large, hexagonal lightwell;*
- (2) there be less color contrast between the two brick colors, with the bricks to be more in keeping with the principal masonry colors at the Harrison or around Judiciary Square; and*
- (3) the upper stories continue to be developed as suggested above.*