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

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| Landmark/District: | <b>Metropolitan Club</b> | (x) Agenda   |
| Address:           | <b>1700 H Street NW</b>  |              |
| Meeting Date:      | <b>July 27, 2017</b>     | (x) Addition |
| Case Number:       | <b>17-487</b>            |              |
| Staff Reviewer:    | <b>Tim Dennée</b>        | (x) Concept  |

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The applicant, the Metropolitan Club of the City of Washington, requests concept review for a one-story addition to the top of its landmark building to accommodate a large “function” space for the club. The addition would stand eighteen feet tall and cover 4,375 square feet. It would wrap the rooftop mechanical equipment, and a roof deck would wrap the addition.

This concept is also being reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, because the property is located within the Shipstead-Luce area.

The club building was erected in 1908 and designated a landmark by the Joint Committee on Landmarks in 1964. In 1995, the property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as both a fine example of Renaissance Revival architecture produced by the New York firm of Heins and LaFarge, and as an old and important social and literary club to which many prominent local and national figures have belonged. It is a visual landmark downtown, in an area that has otherwise been redeveloped with boxy office buildings built to their zoning envelopes.

The historic preservation law expressly balances the preservation and adaptability interests of historic properties. It indicates a stricter standard of review for historic landmarks than for properties that contribute to the character of a historic district. Landmarks are encouraged to be adapted for current use, while being retained and enhanced, but they are simultaneously encouraged to be restored. This sets up a tension which suggests that the adaptation ought to occur mainly in those portions of a property that are not considered character-defining, including the interior, which is only rarely protected (beyond limitations on structural demolition).

The Board has typically entertained visible additions on flat-roofed industrial buildings, and to a lesser extent on flat-roofed commercial buildings, but has generally discouraged them on residential and institutional buildings. The Board’s guidance on roof additions, published in their present form more than four years ago, includes the following direction:

Adding vertically to a historic building is generally discouraged as such additions typically alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass. Additions on top of a building can sometimes be achieved when they are not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are

compatible with their context. If conditions allow, this approach typically requires a substantial setback, the extent of which depends on the height of the addition, the height of the building, the height of adjacent buildings, the topography of the area, the width of the street, the relationship of the subject building to its surroundings, and views from public vantage points surrounding the building.

Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate, as they would alter an historic building's height, mass, design composition, cornice line, roof, and its relationship to surrounding buildings and streetscape – all of which are important character-defining features that are protected for historic property. In rare cases, a visible roof addition may be found acceptable if it does not fundamentally alter the character of the building and is sufficiently designed to be compatible with the building.

As this is a landmark and is abutted by undesignated buildings, the appropriate context for viewing the proposed alteration is solely in relation to the building itself. The landmark cannot be seen entirely in the round, yet it is a corner building, and gaps in the street wall allow views over its rear and its west side. A roof addition here cannot be screened by the taller abutting buildings, and there are long views to the building.

In addition to observing the general rule of “invisibility,” we must also consider that the rooftop balustrade was intended as a strong architectural termination of the Metropolitan Club. The proposed addition rising behind it would defeat it, pulling the eye upward to the new object behind. There are Renaissance precedents for low attics hidden behind rooftop balustrades that suggest that an addition along such lines is conceivable, but the height of such an enclosure would not be proportioned for the space/use proposed here.

In fact, the proposed addition has a height greater than that of each of the lower floors, making it disproportionate to the whole and rendering it too conspicuous. Its prominence makes its materials and expression more of an issue. The proposal is incongruous in relation to the underlying building. It adopts the presently popular all-glazed elevation, perhaps drawing from the surrounding office buildings, which is a very different expression in terms of scale, detail and solid-to-void proportions. It would be more appropriate as a light and distinctive addition to an industrial building, a building type that typically lacks much detail but possesses larger expanses of glass and a columned structure that one might imagine being extended upward. For all their translucence, glass boxes do not disappear, and they may be more conspicuous when lit at night, as such a function space is likely to be.

The wrapping of mechanical equipment with an addition is, of course, preferable to stacking the mechanical atop an addition and making the whole more conspicuous. But there is no argument to be made in favor of constructing an addition for its secondary service as a screen. The present mechanical equipment has a relatively small impact on the appearance of the building, as it is largely screened by the balustrade. Typical mechanical screening can often have a greater impact than the items screened, because it encloses a greater volume than the equipment occupies. But an occupiable space would enclose considerably more volume still, making the prominence of the addition, and not the mechanical equipment, a major problem.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board deny the concept as incompatible with the character of the historic landmark.*