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

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Landmark/District:	<b>The Harrison Flats</b>	(x) Agenda
Address:	<b>704 3<sup>rd</sup> Street NW</b>	
Meeting Date:	<b>December 21, 2017</b>	(x) Demolition
Case Number:	<b>18-106</b>	(x) Addition (x) Alterations (x) Concept

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The applicant, Ilan Scharfstein, agent for owner Renaissance Centro Third Street LLC (Zuckerman Brothers, Inc.; and with Gensler architects), requests the Board’s conceptual review of a proposal to construct a twelve-story, nearly 130-foot-tall hotel, plus a stepped eighteen-foot penthouse that includes occupiable space on the lower tier. Technically, the new construction is an addition to the landmark Harrison Flats, the oldest apartment building in Washington, because the buildings would be connected and in a single use.

A considerable portion of the Harrison would be demolished, including much of the rear wall and nearly all the floor and roof framing (see pages 6, 7 and 12). The street- and alley-facing (i.e., north, east and south) exterior walls would be retained, as would a lightwell and much of the wall separating the two sections of the building. The west wall at the southernmost section of the building is proposed to be repaired or reconstructed.

**Background**

The Harrison, likely named for incoming president Benjamin Harrison, 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 building 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> Street between E and F, with overflow in the Pension Building. This 3<sup>rd</sup> and G location was the inspiration for the “Census Pharmacy” that opened across the street at the time.

<sup>2</sup> 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 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.

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 the 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.

The Board has reviewed and approved similar concepts three times, in 2006-2007, 2008 and 2011. The ownership has changed three times, the use twice, and the expression of the new construction several times, but its height and its relationship to the landmark have remained largely the same. The acquisition of additional lots to the west have increased the extent of the new construction, however, which takes some pressure off the landmark, as underground parking can be provided beyond its footprint.<sup>3</sup>

### **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, former apartments, they are gone.

The condition of the building has declined dramatically since the staff first toured it about 2004. A structural engineer's report was submitted to the Board in 2011, outlining the major issues. Recent information is added on page 3 of the submission and in the attached narrative. 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.

As previously, it seems that programmatic issues are the more compelling reason for removal of much of the rear wall. One section of this wall contains the most altered openings, and an adjacent section needs repair because of washed-out mortar and some failing window arches. On their face, they do not appear to be beyond salvage. Yet, the present proposal calls for slightly less demolition than the last (which had been slightly more than the two previous concepts).

The steel framing of the north section is corroded but, 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

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<sup>3</sup> Construction of the new building will necessitate the demolition of a 1926 apartment building on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and the raze of three 1910 rowhouses and two apparent 1870s residences attached to them on G Street. These properties are not designated.

building, but there is still a considerable amount of masonry repair to be done.



Upon HPO's last inspection six years ago, the staff concluded that the steel columns surrounding the north stair can be retained and reused (especially as they have decorative 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.

The large, hexagonal light well and the brick stair/elevator core were not a central focus of the 2011 engineer's report, and while there may be some condition issues there, their location in the center of the building has protected them from the degree of weathering and movement to which the roof and outer walls have been subjected. It is recommended that these be retained, as they almost certainly can be repaired. While at first glance, such features may seem insignificant, they are characteristic of apartment construction of this early period and as important as any remaining structural element.

The earliest fire escape, being both original and decorative, will be retained.<sup>4</sup> Other fire escapes will be removed.

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<sup>4</sup> That is, on the east elevation, above the arched entry in the south section of the building. See the cover and page 24.

## **Reconstruction**

The drawings do not propose as much reconstruction of walls as did the 2011 concept; those walls that are to remain are to be repaired. The only wall in question is the southern section of the west (rear) wall that is colored blue in the demolition drawings. The first three stories of this wall appear to require reconstruction, as this portion is the common-brick exterior wall of a rowhouse that predated the apartment building but which was razed some years ago. The interior of the rowhouse wall has therefore been exposed to the elements, and it is already weakened by the presence of many joist pockets which provided another entrance for water and ice. This three-story section requires reconstruction to continue to support the wall above.

## **New construction**

The new construction would overhang the rear of the building's north wing, as in previous proposals, but would not require the wholesale demolition of that portion. Much of the rear wall would remain, and the north wall of the wing would be fully in view along the alley. As before, projecting bays on the upper floors of the new building would also overhang the Harrison.

The Board supported the previous three concepts on the grounds that it would appear to be just a larger building incidentally standing next door to this isolated landmark. Twice as tall as the Harrison, several times the footprint, and having double-height openings and a two-story base and top, this concept is certainly distinct, despite both buildings employing brick masonry. In fact, the new building has a different scale. Its two-story base is at least ameliorated by the fact that it is divided by a continuous canopy.

One issue of relative scale that is less apparent in the drawings than it will be in the finished product is the module of the brick proposed to be used. Although it may have a nice color and texture (we have no samples yet), it is intended to measure four- by sixteen inches, much larger than the historic brick next door. To address this, the applicant has switched the new base material to a larger-module cast stone—to put the new brick farther from the observer—but the contrast will still be obvious where the buildings meet. HPO recommends that the project employ something closer to a standard-size brick unit.

## **Recommendation**

*The staff recommends that the Board approve the project in concept, with a delegation to staff of further review, with the following conditions:*

- 1. 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;*
- 2. the applicant consider retaining more of the landmark's rear wall;*
- 3. the earliest fire escape be retained and restored;*
- 4. a smaller brick module be employed in the new construction;*
- 5. and a high standard be applied to restoring the remaining fabric of the landmark and replacing elements such as windows.*

*HPO Staff Contact: Tim Dennee*