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

Property Address:	1624 Crescent Place, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	White-Meyer House/ Meridian Hill Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	March 26/April 2, 2015	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	15-205	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Kim Williams, Steve Callcott	X	New Construction
			Demolition
		X	Subdivision

Meridian International Center, in partnership with Streetscape Partners and Westbrook Partners, seeks conceptual design review for construction of a nine story apartment building that will also include conference and office space for Meridian. The plans have been developed by Shalom Baranes Associates Architects and Oehme Van Sweden landscape architects.

Property History and Description

Meridian International Center, a global leadership organization, occupies a physically dramatic and historically significant site on Meridian Hill within the Meridian Hill Historic District. The property consists of the combined properties of the White-Meyer House and Meridian House, both grand Classical Revival-style mansions built by fellow diplomats and friends, Henry White and Irwin Boyle Laughlin and both designed by renowned architect John Russell Pope. Considered then and now to be a premier architect of the early 20th century, Pope's projects included extravagant country estates, urbane city mansions and important civic projects, namely the National Archives, the Jefferson Memorial and the National Gallery of Art. To have two Pope-designed residences together, occupying much of this remarkable site is extraordinary. Indeed, as a unit, the White-Meyer House and Meridian House are recognized as "the finest and most important of Pope's domestic architecture," and are thus listed in the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance.

The White-Meyer House (so-named for original owner/builder Henry White and later owner Eugene Meyer), the first of the two houses constructed, was designed and built between 1910 and 1912 for diplomat Henry White and his wife, Margaret Rutherford White upon his retirement as Ambassador to France after a successful 30-year diplomatic career. The house is a large and stately, 40-room, red brick and limestone-detailed Georgian Revival-style mansion that sits on the rise of Meridian Hill, west of 16th Street. The house lot is surrounded by a brick enclosure wall which opens on-grade on the north at Crescent Place to a broad carriage court with an elliptical drive and porte-cochere. On the south, the high wall follows the curve of Belmont Street where it becomes a massive retaining wall to the steep hill and elevated site and provides the opportunity for a broad terrace or "belvedere" to the house above. This landscaped terrace offers exceptional views for the house, with its south-facing portico to the monumental city below it. The White-Meyer House property was enlarged in 1930 upon purchase of several lots to its east that extend to 16th Street (see description below).

Meridian House, designed in 1913 by wealthy steel industrialist and diplomat Irwin Boyle Laughlin, but not built until 1924, is executed in an 18th-century French manner with smooth limestone walls with sophisticated, low-relief detailing. Like the White-Meyer House, Meridian House sits high upon its elevated perch on Meridian Hill, held in check by a tall classically detailed limestone retaining wall along Belmont Street. On this site immediately west of the White-Meyer House, Pope strategically oriented Meridian House behind the White-Meyer House, and along a northwest-southeast axis, so the two houses, in close proximity, would enjoy unfettered views to the south.

The lots upon which these houses were constructed resulted from the combining of a series of lots that were historically part of the 1867 *Hall and Elvans' Subdivision of Meridian Hill*. Meridian House was built upon lots 8-16 (combined into Lot 809). The White-Meyer House was built upon recorded Lots 13-20 in Block 5 of the subdivision (Lot 806), occupying the center of the site straddling today's Belmont Street and Crescent Place and spanning present-day 16th and 17th Streets. Before construction of the White-Meyer House, these lots held several modest frame dwellings and the log cabin of Joaquin Miller, "Poet of the Sierras" which was moved in 1912 to its present site within Rock Creek Park.

To the east of White-Meyer, facing 16th Street, were a group of lots subdivided in 1900 into rowhouse-sized lots but which stood unimproved until 1930 when Henry White's son purchased them, extending the property to 16th Street. In 1934, Eugene Meyer who had been renting and occupying the house for several years, purchased both the house lot (Lot 806) and the unimproved lots to the east, which were combined into Lot 808 and referred to by the Meyers' as the "east garden." This area is approximately ten feet below the grade of the house and, like the house lot, is enclosed by a brick retaining wall. This brick wall, built in 1961, abuts the house wall on Belmont Street and Crescent Place and extends in a stepped manner around the parcel, including along 16th Street where it is set back from the street at the top of the berm. A tennis court, constructed in 1939 before the wall and later enclosed by it, was reached by a set of brick steps from the house, and was served by a wrought iron gazebo. The tennis court is now a parking lot, but the steps and gazebo remain. Aerial views reveal that by the early 1950s, this area was heavily wooded except on the tennis court proper and the stairs leading to it. As shown by later aerial photographs, the tree canopy has been significantly reduced since the 1960s.

The parking lot, with the stairs, gazebo and wall on Lot 808 are not part of the Pope-designed house lot and its features were not constructed within the period of significance of the landmark (which is the property's initial date of construction of 1910). Lot 808 is also located in the Meridian Hill Historic District but its site features are also not contributing elements in that recent district designation.

Proposal

The project calls for combining lot 806 (the landmark lot occupied by the White-Meyer House) and lot 808 (the parking lot), and constructing a nine story apartment building that would contain approximately 130 residential units and 8,650 square feet of meeting space for

Meridian. The building would be built into and atop the existing berm in order to retain the grade and mature trees within the 16th Street public space, with the primary residential entrance at the corner of 16th and Belmont. The vehicular and service entrance would be off Belmont, accessing two levels of below-grade parking. The building would have nine floors above the retained berm on 16th Street, and step down to six floors on Crescent. The materials of the new building would include stone for the retaining wall, two gradations of buff brick and metal cladding for the walls surfaces, metal detailing and glass rail balconies.

The new construction would connect to White-Meyer through an underground passage, and would include a conference facility below a new lawn area on the east side of the house.

As is outlined in the applicants' submission, the project is a partnership between Meridian and the development entities and is intended to provide Meridian not only with improved meeting facilities but funds to allow it to continue its on-going restoration of the landmarks in accordance with a preservation plan prepared in 2005 by Archetype, and to establish an endowment for the properties' long-term maintenance. Over the past ten years, Meridian has completed a number of substantial restoration and rehabilitation projects, and was presented with a District of Columbia historic preservation award for Excellence in Stewardship in 2013.

Planning and Zoning Review

The project is proposed as a Planned Unit Development (PUD), which will require review and approval by the Zoning Commission. Lot 806 (the White-Meyer House) is zoned R-5-B; lot 808 is zoned R-5-D. The PUD process, which has not yet been initiated or set down for hearing, is being used to transfer density from lot 806 to lot 808.

Design Guidelines

In addition to its city-wide guidelines for additions, new construction and alterations, the Board adopted specific guidelines for the Meridian Hill Historic District at the time of designation in 2014. Those guidelines recognize that the district is composed of three building types – grand, Beaux-Arts styled mansions, large-scale apartment buildings, and houses of worship. The guideline outlines four over-arching principles:

1. The buildings of Meridian Hill survive largely intact and exhibit a high quality and integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and place. The district's buildings should be preserved, and alterations and new construction designed with extreme sensitivity.
2. The Meridian Hill Historic District consists of distinct building types, which may warrant different levels of treatment based on their relative significance and architectural characteristics. The mansions and churches of Meridian Hill represent the most significant aspect of the neighborhood's built environment and should be treated with the highest standards of sensitivity and care.
3. The apartment buildings of Meridian Hill are significant primarily for the architectural composition of their street-facing facades. While some level of alteration on secondary elevations may be appropriate, substantial alterations that adversely affect their character and the appearance of the neighborhood should be avoided.

4. Meridian Hill Park is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Its physical and visual centrality necessitates that alterations to surrounding buildings take into consideration views to and from this nationally significant urban garden.

With regard to additions and new construction, the guidelines state:

While additions are a common and accepted means of adapting historic buildings for modern uses, they should be designed to be compatible with the character of the original building and its context in terms of siting, massing, size, scale, and materials.

An addition to the rear of a building is generally the best way to add extra space without negatively affecting the architectural character of the building or character of the surrounding streetscape. A rear addition should be subordinate to the historic building – generally lower in height and smaller in footprint than the building to which it is being added – and should not alter the primary form of the original roof.

Additions to the mansions of Meridian Hill should respect the three-dimensional quality of the buildings and not alter their scale, height, or an understanding of these buildings as private mansions or embassies. Connections should be minimal and preferably reversible, enabling the mansions to retain their freestanding character.

While there are few opportunities for new construction on Meridian Hill, new buildings should be designed to respect the character of the district and be sensitive to immediate surroundings. Particular attention should be paid to siting, massing, size, scale and materials. Ground disturbing activities related to new construction may require consideration of archaeological resources.

Standards for Review

The purposes of the preservation act with respect to properties in historic districts and landmarks are:

- (1) With respect to properties in historic districts:
 - (A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
 - (B) To assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district; and
 - (C) To assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district;
- (2) With respect to historic landmarks:
 - (A) To retain and enhance historic landmarks in the District of Columbia and to encourage their adaptation for current use; and
 - (B) To encourage the restoration of historic landmarks.

Additions/New Construction

As a basic principle of compatibility, the Board has generally required that additions to historic property be subordinate to the buildings to which they are being attached. In its review of projects, the Board applies the design principles outlined in its guideline *Additions to Historic*

Buildings to ensure a compatible and subordinate relationship. Of the twelve discussed, the most commonly cited are height, massing, scale, orientation, materials and detailing.

However, in an acknowledgement that Washington's historic properties exist in and adjacent to a variety of often disparate contexts, exceptions to this approach have been made where the addition can be designed convincingly to appear as a separate adjacent building. In these cases, the Board has reviewed these additions as if they were new construction, requiring that the addition appear truly separate, that the new building be compatible with its context, and that it not result in an incompatible relationship with the historic building to which it is adjacent.¹

If the proposed new construction is evaluated according to the principles for an addition outlined in the Board's guidelines, it would be difficult to find it -- or any project that is not substantially smaller than the White-Meyer House -- to be compatible. However, it is not inconsistent with the Board's practice to review this type of proposal according to the standards for new construction. As is encouraged by the Meridian Hill guidelines, the project has been designed to retain the free-standing, three-dimensional character of the landmark and is connected only underground so that the landmark house and the apartment building would appear as separate structures. The site plan and massing have similarly been developed to separate the two. The significance of the White-Meyer House, its free-standing form, its site conditions and context justify and require that the new construction be designed as a separate, visually detached structure. As such, it is reasonable and consistent with the Board's practice to evaluate the project as a stand-alone building for compatibility with the adjacent landmark and the Meridian Hill Historic District.

Evaluation

Subdivision

Subdivisions involving the combination or segmentation of landmark lots are subject to review and approval by the Mayor's Agent, following a recommendation by the Board.² Subdivisions involving consolidation of a landmark lot with additional lots outside the landmark, such as is proposed by this application, have typically been found to be compatible and consistent with the Act by the Board and the Mayor's Agent, as they do not sever property away from but add to the size of the landmark lot.³ Carving out a portion of an existing landmark lot has more rarely

¹ Examples in the past year where the Board has accepted additions that were larger than the historic buildings they were attached to and which were designed to appear as separate stand-alone buildings include: 1921-23 14th Street, NW (a nine-story residential building addition to two two-story commercial structures); 3146 16th Street, NW (a nine-story residential addition to the three-story Meridian Hill Baptist Church); 901 L Street, NW (a ten-story hotel addition to nine two- and three-story commercial buildings); and 15 Dupont Circle (a six-story residential addition to the four-story landmark McKim, Mead & White Patterson House).

² Upon receipt of a recommendation of approval from the HPRB, the Mayor's Agent may approve a subdivision without holding a public hearing if the Mayor's Agent finds the proposal consistent with the purposes of the Act. In the event the HPRB does not recommend approval, the Mayor's Agent would be required to hold a hearing on the subdivision. DCMR 10-C, Section 402

³ Among the many lot combination subdivisions found compatible by the HPRB and approved by the Mayor's Agent are the Luzon Apartments (91-261), Brickyard Hill House/Georgetown Incinerator (98-355-361), United

been found to be a compatible treatment by the Board and the Mayor's Agent, as it results in the removal of property historically associated with the landmark.

The proposed subdivision seeks to join two Assessment and Tax lots ("A&T" lots) into a single record lot. As lot 806 and 808 have functioned as a single property since the 1930s and are both part already included in the boundary of the landmark, formally combining them into a single record lot would be consistent with their history and use.

Views and Compatibility with Meridian Hill Park

As outlined in the Meridian Hill Historic District and design guidelines, the park is the centerpiece of the historic district, and views to and from it should be carefully considered. As proposed, the project would be seen from the west side of the park, most prominently from the upper terrace. The nomination for the Meridian Hill Park National Historic Landmark (NHL) states:

"The principle features of his [initial landscape designer George Burnap's] design are centered around a single longitudinal axis extending roughly north-south through the site.....The great terrace, above the cascade, was the main cross axis in the plan and offered views of the lower park below and of Washington in the distance."

As is shown in an historic photograph, the White-Meyer House was once quite visible from the upper terrace. This view has largely (but not entirely) been obscured by trees so that even in the winter only the chimneys of the house can be seen. The most prominent view today of the White-Meyer House is from the west stairs that descend from the terrace to the upper level of the cascade, a view that is recorded in an image of the park's documentation by the Historic American Building Survey (HABS).

While the proposal would be seen from the park, there is no discussion in the NHL nomination that suggests that views of the White-Meyer House or any other views outside the park (other than those to the south) were intended to be maintained as open view corridors beyond the boundaries of the park. Meridian Hill was designed as an urban park, and its character is defined by having its edges lined by sizable mansions and larger-scaled apartment buildings. This is particularly evident in the flat upper terrace where the buildings provide the park with an extraordinary architectural backdrop. All of the overlooks on the east and west side of the park, including that on the 15th Street side of the upper terrace, terminate in views of buildings on the opposite side of the street. While the current proposal does not yet rise to the appropriate level of architectural distinction and compatibility for this important site, locating a substantial building in this location that is visible from Meridian Hill Park is compatible with the character of the park and the historic district.

In order to improve the compatibility of the proposal, the following should be further evaluated:

Mine Workers Building (99-324), Yale Laundry (00-026 and 05-042), Rhode Island Avenue Residential Buildings (00-149), Germailler Row (01-144), American Pharmacists (03-286), Tivoli Theater (04-092), and First African New Church (04-484). Because this type of compatible expansive subdivision has become commonplace, the preservation law was amended in 2006 to eliminate the requirement for a public hearing in these cases.

Height and mass

Recently developed renderings showing the building in context (pages 27-29 of the applicants' submission) illustrate that the general height and mass of the structure could coexist compatibly with the historic apartment buildings on 16th Street. When seen in perspective from both the north and south, the building continues the established height of the apartment buildings lining the upper part of the street. However, in both perspective and elevation, the height appears more compatible at the north end of the property where the topography begins to level off and the height closely correlates with the adjacent Envoy. Where the site drops off to the south, it is somewhat less successful, as the building doesn't follow or reflect the descent in the topography. This is exacerbated by the berm being cut away at the southern end for the entrance, which exposes the building's full height. While the design has already been modified to address this by pulling the southern elevation back from the perimeter wall and recessing the top floor, greater modulation of the mass and/or a more substantial setback for the upper floor(s) should be evaluated.

As the penthouse will add to the perceived height and mass, its size and design should also be more fully developed. Incorporating penthouse elements into the top floor should be evaluated in an effort to reduce its height and size.

Relationship of Building to 16th Street

One of the most unusual aspects of the proposal is its retention of the raised landscaped berm facing 16th Street. This feature is a vestige of the escarpment on which White-Meyer and Meridian House were constructed, and which still exhibits the cut that was made through the area's natural topography for the northward extension of 16th Street. Accommodation of this feature has the preservation benefit of retaining an unusual topographical feature of the historic district, and has been necessitated by preliminary direction from the DC Department of Transportation which has directed the applicants to retain the mature trees within the public space on this hillside.

However, the retention of this feature creates a substantial challenge of how to compatibly site and relate the building to 16th Street. The Beaux-Arts mansions and apartment buildings in the district uniformly address the street with a strong frontal orientation, have prominent front entrances that are a primary focal point of the facade, and front yard landscapes that serve as a forecourt for the building. By contrast, with the exception of the projecting entrance canopy, the proposed design makes the remainder of the building feel remote and detached from 16th Street. Possible solutions could include a more finely-scaled treatment to the base wall (for instance, using a smaller scaled brick rather than large units of stone) and modulating the wall by selectively pushing it out into the landscape to provide a more architecturalized series of terraces, such as that to the south of the White-Meyer. Eliminating the recessed floor immediately above the wall (which appears to make the main body of the building float even higher above street level), and pulling the expression of the bays down to engage the base wall may also be worthy of study. If these (or other solutions) are not successful in better relating the building to 16th Street, it may be necessary to rethink the building's relationship to the street in a more fundamental way, such as seeking the necessary permissions to remove the trees and berm.

Design and Materials

The compatibility of the proposal could be improved by editing the design and materials. The organization of the 16th Street elevation into bay projections provides an appropriate rhythm, verticality and modulation of massing, but the idea is diluted by the balconies that connect the bays together, leaving no sense of spatial void between them. As shown on the detail images of the building's skin (page 15 and 16), the façade appears fractured, with a thin brick skin hung on to metal bays, and which is disconnected from the side elevation. Together with the high proportion of glazing to masonry, the result lacks the solidity and repose of buildings in the historic district. A judicious editing of the palette of materials and simplification of the design is recommended. As a part of this exercise, developing façade studies that uses single story punched windows (rather than double story ganged windows) should be considered.

Meridian Conference Facility/Parking Court

The placement of the Meridian conference facility below grade provides an opportunity to create a generous landscape area around the house to enhance its free-standing character. Internalizing and removing the exterior fire stair on the east side of the White-Meyer house should be established as a condition of the project, and a landscape plan and perimeter wall design (that which surrounds the new lawn) should be developed in a manner that is more compatible with the landmark. Relating the character of the below-grade conference space and the perimeter wall along Belmont (west of the parking court entrance) more closely to the character, materials and coloration of White-Meyer would provide greater distinction and visual separation between the new apartment building from the landmark house.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Review the proposal as a project of new construction, and find that the conceptual approach of pulling the mass of the new building away from the White-Meyer House, connecting the two only underground so that they appear separate, and developing the new construction with its own architectural vocabulary distinct from the White-Meyer House is consistent with the Board's guidelines and is a compatible approach for new development on this site;*
- *Find the lot combination subdivision of lots 806 and 808 into a single lot to be consistent with the preservation act, as it combines two properties that have functioned as a single property since the 1930s;*
- *Determine that a building on this site that is visible from Meridian Hill Park is compatible with the park's character; and*
- *Find that the height and mass, the relationship of the building to 16th Street, the design and materials, and the architectural and landscape treatment of the area between the house and the apartment building should continue to be evaluated and revised to improve the compatibility of these elements as suggested above.*