HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District: Address:	Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church 901 K Street, NW	(x) Agenda() Consent Calendar
Meeting Date: H.P.A. Number:	October 28, 2021 21-563	(x) Alteration/Demolition() New Construction() Subdivision() Conceptual Design

Carr Properties, with designs prepared by Kimberly Conley of Gable Signs, seeks permit review for installing two signs on an office building at 901 K Street NW.

Property History and Description

Mount Vernon Place Church was built in 1917-19 as the national home of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The Washington congregation was established in 1850, but it was not until the early 20th century that the church implemented plans for a national presence in Washington. The church building, designed by the prominent Texas firm of Sanguinet & Staats, was funded largely by contributions from across the South. It is a superb example of academic Classical Revival design, executed in white marble with a commanding portico facing Mount Vernon Square at the prow of its triangular block. The church was one of many institutions that made Washington a monumental city with the full flowering of the McMillan Plan transformation.

The portico of Mount Vernon Place Church signals the beginning of Massachusetts Avenue as a largely residential historic boulevard progressing west toward Dupont Circle. Although the church is not located within a historic district, there are several contemporaneous historic landmarks of particular note in its immediate vicinity. Across Massachusetts Avenue to the north is the original headquarters of the American Federation of Labor (1915-16), a National Historic Landmark; immediately to the west is Tudor Hall, now the Henley Park Hotel (1918); and across 10th Street at the rear of the site on K is the Carpenters' Building (1926), the local headquarters of the powerful labor union.

The office building addition to the church went through the HPRB review process in 2005 and was redesigned and refined several times in response to the Board's review. The Board approved the final design for the much taller addition in part because it would provide a clean and neutral backdrop whose overall simplicity responded well to the repose of the classical church.

Proposal

The application calls for the installation of two identical signs, one at the top of the fourth floor of the office building addition facing K Street, the other at the top of the 11th floor of the office building facing west towards Mount Vernon Square. The signs would be internally illuminated, featuring the logo and name of a tenant of the building, and would measure roughly 3' tall by 14' long (34-7/8" x 165").

Evaluation

The Board's sign regulations (DCMR 10-C, Chapter 25) promote signage that is primarily oriented to and experienced at the pedestrian level, discourage signs intended to be seen from far distant views, and prohibit signs at the rooflines of buildings.1 The rationale for the prohibition is that signs at the tops of buildings, while not entirely unprecedented, have not traditionally been a feature of Washington's skyline. Rather, in a city that is organized by and developed according to the L'Enfant Plan, and restricted in height, the buildings have developed to form continuous street walls that focus visual attention on the most important civic buildings and the Plan's circles, squares and reservations. While occasional punctuation of the skyline is provided by architectural embellishments such as turrets, towers and steeples, advertising and commercial signage has not generally been a component of the city's horizontal rooflines.

While unnecessary for a tenant occupying the upper floors of a commercial office building, the K Street sign is sufficiently low on the building and removed from important viewsheds of Massachusetts Avenue, Mount Vernon Square and the landmark church as to not have negative visual impacts on historic resources. However, the west-facing sign would be seen directly behind and hovering over the solemn classical edifice of the landmark church and introduce prominent signage facing one of the most important civic spaces in the L'Enfant Plan. The sign is inconsistent with the design intent the Board approved for the office building addition to be a neutral backdrop to the church and is incompatible with the landmark church and the setting of Mount Vernon Square.

In 2015, the Board denied an application for a similar sign at the top of a building nearby at 600 Massachusetts Avenue, just off Mount Vernon Square, as inconsistent with its sign regulations, incompatible with the character of the Downtown Historic District, and for its adverse visual impact on Mount Vernon Square (HPA 15-432).

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the proposed K Street-facing sign to be acceptable as it does not impact important views of the church and Mount Vernon Square and is located reasonably low on the building's façade but find the west-facing sign to be incompatible with the landmark church and inconsistent with its regulations and the purposes of the preservation act.

HPO Contact: Steve Callcott

2506 PROHIBITED SIGN TYPES

¹ Historic Preservation Regulations, DCMR 10-C, Chapter 25 "Standards for Signage, Awnings, Canopies and Marquees"

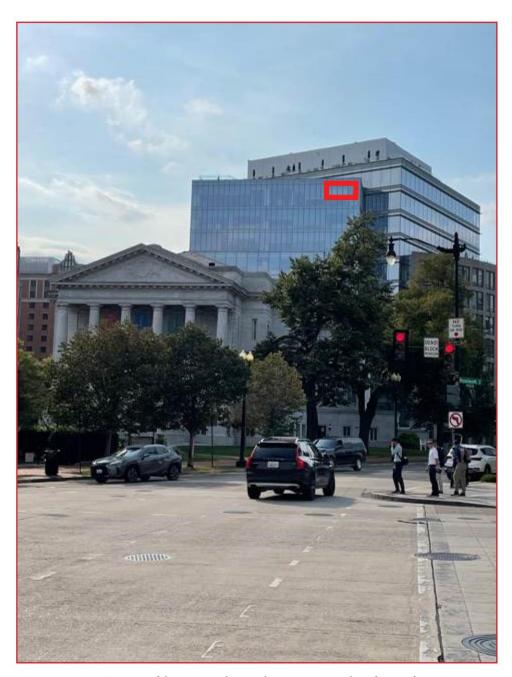
^{2504.3} Signs on historic property shall be primarily oriented toward and promote the pedestrian environment.

^{2503.7} Sign types developed for suburban highway-oriented environments are not compatible with urban historic districts. Billboards, rooftop signs, pole-mounted gas station signs, and other overscaled advertising designed to be viewed at high speed or from a great distance are generally not appropriate on historic properties or in historic streetscapes.

^{2506.1} Billboards and special signs as defined in § 2599 are not permitted on historic property.

^{2506.2} Roof signs and revolving signs are not permitted on historic property, except for vintage, historic, or replica signs as provided in § 2513.

^{2506.3} Televisions and video monitors are not permitted as signage on historic property.



Proposed location of west-facing sign outlined in red.



Proposed location of west-facing sign outlined in red.