

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.

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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 PROHIBITED SIGN TYPES

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.



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