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

Property Address:	3900 Wisconsin Avenue, NW	X Agenda
Landmark/District:	Equitable Life Insurance Co.	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	November 16, 2017	X Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	17-495	X Alteration
		X New Construction
		Demolition

NASH-Roadside 3900 Wisconsin LLC, with plans prepared by Shalom Baranes Architects, seeks conceptual design review for building and site alterations and new construction at the former Equitable Life Insurance Company/Fannie Mae Building at 3900 Wisconsin Avenue, NW. An application to nominate the property to the DC Inventory and National Register as a landmark is pending before the Board.

Property Description

As discussed in greater detail in the report on the landmark application, the building was built as the corporate headquarters for the Equitable Life Insurance Company, designed by Washington architect Leon Chatelain, Jr. It was constructed in two phases in 1956-58 and 1963 in an academic Georgian Revival style closely modeled after the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. The building provided a symbol of solidity and heritage for the city's oldest insurance company, and represents the last phase of the 20th-century Colonial Revival movement two decades after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg inspired the style's widespread popularity across the country and particularly in the Washington region.

The site was designed with the building set back on its lot, with a broad front lawn and a low brick wall running along Wisconsin Avenue at the sidewalk. Two openings for vehicular access are flanked by brick piers and lead to a circular Belgian block driveway.

In 1975, the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) purchased the property and in 1978 built a large addition across the rear of the building, a large parking structure at the rear of the property, and added a front courtyard and fountain. These later features are non-contributing to the significance of the property, and the rear portion of the site has been excluded entirely from the landmark.

Project Background

Fannie Mae is in the process of constructing a new headquarters on 15th Street and has sold the Wisconsin Avenue property to Roadside which seeks to redevelop the site for retail, residential, and possible hotel and cultural uses; Wegmans grocery store has been signed as an anchor tenant. Roadside approached the Office of Planning prior to purchasing the property to discuss planning and preservation issues related to the site and has been working collaboratively over the past

year, particularly with the Historic Preservation Office, on the master plan and the specific designs of the buildings and landscapes immediately adjacent to the original building.

The master plan has been developed with the dual goals of retaining the character of the property while also converting it to a mixed-use development. As was presented to the HPRB in an information presentation in July, a central component of the plan is to break the large site down through the introduction of a pedestrian-oriented street network, burying the parking and loading below ground with access through a central entrance/exit at the southern end of the Wisconsin Avenue frontage, and developing a series of smaller, architecturally-distinctive buildings that would allow the landmark building to remain the central element in the development's composition.

Proposal

Referred to as Building 1 on the plans, the project calls for full retention of the 1958 building and complementary 1963 wings, and removal of the non-contributing 1978 addition. The grocery store would be located in the basement level, which would be extruded out to the west with its entrance at grade facing one of the new streets. The above-grade portion of the historic building would be adapted for an anticipated hotel use, with its primary entrance through the existing front doors. The specifics of the building's renovation have not yet been developed, but its most important character-defining features – its Flemish bond brick walls, multi-light windows, and hipped roof and dormers – all appear to be in good condition. The rear courtyards, located at the basement level, would be raised up one floor to allow a continuous floor plate for the grocery store; the courtyards would be recreated at the first floor level for public use.

Three adjacent buildings are proposed. Building 2 would be a six-story wedge-shaped residential building above a one-story retail base located on the north side of the landmark. The elevations of the residential floors would be brick, organized with two-story openings in a formalist vocabulary. Building 3 would be a six-story residential building located at the rear of the existing building. It would be set atop the grocery store and broken into two wings to allow views of the back of the landmark and to form the fourth wall of the rear courtyards. Each wing would be organized as a series of cantilevered stacked trays, with the materials, detailing and coloration still being studied. Building 4 would be a one-story pavilion above grade located at the south-eastern front corner of the site along Wisconsin Avenue, likely to be programmed as a meeting or spa facility associated with the hotel. It has been designed as an extension of the landscape, rising up from the surrounding lawn and having a green roof; the pavilion would also contain the entrance to the below-grade garage.

The front lawn would be retained as open space, but redesigned to allow for a variety of uses. The north leg of the circular drive would be removed, with vehicular access provided to the front of the building through a new spur off the primary north drive. Informal curvilinear walks would be provided to encourage pedestrian circulation, low curvilinear retaining walls constructed for storm water management and to provide informal seating, and large heritage trees from the rear of the site relocated to provide a shaded area. An outdoor terrace seating area, screened with a continuous line of trees, would be located outside the new pavilion, and an accessible entrance ramp provided with plantings in front to access the front doors of the landmark building.

Evaluation

The challenges of converting this property to a mixed-use community, particularly within the context of a project that seeks to retain the existing building, are not inconsiderable. The existing building dominates the site's frontage, making it potentially difficult to telegraph that there is a new neighborhood and grocery store behind. Opportunities to access the site are restricted by adjoining properties and Glover Archibald Park. And while the existing building is dignified and handsomely detailed, its suburban character and retardataire architectural imagery are somewhat out of fashion with current desires for smart-growth urbanism and contemporary design. Despite these challenges, the proposal is successful in rising to address them and in achieving the dual goals of sensitively adapting the existing building and site to new uses and in developing a vibrant community around it.

The treatment of the existing building is extremely respectful, resulting in minimal alterations that would retain its distinctive characteristics. The insertion of the grocery store – not the most intuitive natural fit for this building – is handled in a way that minimizes changes to the building's character and provides the retailer with the street presence it requires. The new raised terrace on the north and reconstruction of the courtyard gardens on the west will provide compatible and attractive transitional landscape spaces between the landmark and the new buildings around it on these secondary elevations.

Each of the three new buildings has been uniquely designed to respond to the specific character of its location. Building 2 illustrates a sense of classical repose and ordered rhythm that is complementary to the landmark; it also will result in an architecturally superior and more compatible backdrop than is provided by the adjacent office building. Building 3 is far looser and most contrasting in its relationship with the historic building, but in a location at the rear that will have minimal impact on the public perception of the landmark as seen from Wisconsin Avenue. The contrast of forms between the existing and proposed buildings has the potential to result in an architecturally dynamic interplay that will unfold as one enters the site. Building 4 has been developed to relate to its setting in the landscape, located and sculpted to maintain open views of the landmark and to visually contain the parking and loading entrance.

Traditionally, the front lawn has been an attractively landscaped but publicly restricted zone, and the new plan admirably seeks to reprogram it as a more welcoming community space. Some reimaging of this space – including the insertion of the pavilion – is important in helping signal that the building and site are no longer just a mid-20th century office building, but an inclusive, usable public space.

As the plans continue to be refined, the following is recommended for further study and development:

Building 2

- Strengthening the expression of the balconies in Building 2 could enhance the building's residential character and provide a secondary scale that would relate this building more closely to the scale of windows on the landmark. An example in the submission (page

1.23, upper row, second from left) illustrates a building that has a two-story organization of openings but with each floor within also expressed.

Building 3

- The relationship of the backs of the 1963 wings and the new construction should be rendered to provide an understanding of how these elements will face each other and how this space will be treated.
- Using a palette of material colors that references the existing building could help tie the otherwise contrasting forms of the new building to its site. The use of integrated landscape on the terraces, as is shown in some of the precedent examples (1.14 and 1.15), could also be a way to relate to the landmark's courtyards and site.
- The view of the back of the landmark as seen from South Lane (1.16) remains tight, and would benefit from being broader.

Building 4

- If the roof of the building is to be occupied, the railings should be pulled well away from the outside edges to maintain the illusion that the building's roof is an extension of the ground plane.
- The use of curvilinear wall or roof shapes, rather than severe rectilinear edges, might enhance the pavilion's organic, rising-from-the-earth character.

Front Landscape

- As proposed, the informal, curvilinear north side of the front landscape and the more formal, rectilinear south side feel somewhat disjointed and at odds with each other. The use of curvilinear lines for the pavilion and retaining the curved shape of the existing driveway could help balance the two sides of the landscape.
- The existing circular driveway is the central organizing feature of the front lawn, and should be more substantively retained. The southern portion of the drive could simply be retained, while the north portion that is no longer proposed for vehicular use could be reinterpreted as walk or other type of garden element.
- The formal line of trees around the terrace outside the pavilion should be studied and evaluated for how it would impact sight lines to the building from Wisconsin Avenue.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept to be compatible with the character of the landmark, that the project continue to be refined as outlined above, and the project return for final review when appropriate.