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

Landmark/District: **Emory United Methodist Church** (nomination pending) (x) Agenda
Address: **6100 (and 6104 and 6120) Georgia Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **April 23, 2015** (x) Raze
Case Number: **15-319** (x) New construction

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

The applicant, property owner Emory United Methodist Church (with Beacon Center Housing LLC and Torti Gallas Urban), requests the Board's review of a concept to demolish all but the portico and front twelve feet of the church (see Sheet AD101) in order to widen the sanctuary and construct around it a residential building for seniors, church office space and, at street level, commercial spaces. In addition to the retention of the church façade, the steps from Georgia Avenue and the portion of the slope immediately around it would be retained.

The construction would occupy nearly the entire lot and be essentially five stories, with the ground floor of a typical commercial height and coming to the street. The C-shaped residential building would wrap around the church, with the central portion behind, the north wing coming to the street, and the residential south wing back somewhat in order for the church façade to be more visible from the south.

Project Background

In 2009, when it became aware of the church's plans to demolish the building, HPO advised the owner that the property was eligible for historic designation and that application for a raze permit might result in an outside party seeking landmark designation for the site. The church and its architects consulted with HPO, and revised the proposal to try to retain the building and incorporate it into the redevelopment; the revised project was approved by the Board of Zoning Adjustment for, among other things, a rear yard variance that was necessary to retain the church and push the new construction to the rear of the property. While HPO provided design advice on how to improve the project from a design and preservation perspective, it advised the church that substantial demolition of the building and the extent of new construction proposed would not likely be found consistent with the preservation law.

Evaluation

The most obvious issue is the proposed raze of the church building, the most important above-ground feature of the site. If the property is designated a historic landmark, then this edifice is the central contributing element. Its demolition as a whole or in significant part would be contrary to the purposes of the preservation law, as the landmark would neither be retained nor enhanced.¹ The retention of the façade would at least keep the most important elements of the

¹ D.C. Official Code § 6-1101(b)(2).

historic building, but the church would be substantially gone, lacking historic integrity. Even if it is necessary for new construction to run behind the church, one could easily imagine a design that incorporates the sanctuary, the front two thirds of the church, and demolishes only the Sunday-school addition. Alternatively, the sanctuary could be expanded in that rearward direction, into the center of the new construction.

To the extent that construction of a new church behind the façade carries off the illusion of an intact church, there is still the matter of its relationship to the new construction. C-shaped and four stories tall, the residential portion would be a good plan for an apartment building if there were no church. But in size and placement relative to the church, it looms as a background and wraps the old building. While the masonry materials of the new sanctuary are generally compatible with the character of the property, those of the residential building are not. A building of this size and purpose reasonably must economize with its exterior materials. But while the design might make the most of what it has to use, the Board has consistently considered large expanses of fiber-cement panels and vinyl windows, when prominently visible from a street, to be incompatible with the character of landmarks.

The commercial storefronts and a church entrance project forward of the church façade and occupy the level beneath it, undermining the base on which the classical temple is perched. The hill itself is a remnant of the rural Brightwood neighborhood and the site of a church since 1856. The construction would also destroy the retaining wall that bounds the lot on two sides, constructed when the widening of Georgia Avenue and the laying of Quackenbos Street cut into the edges of the hill. This site feature contributes to the character of the property and is continuous with the stairway.

The necessary excavation would take with it earth that contains historic features and artifacts not only from the religious use of the site, but from its military occupation during the Civil War and its use by Elizabeth “Betty” Thomas, a free woman of color. Emory is an immediate neighbor of Fort Stevens Park, a National Register-listed Park Service property and the site of one of Washington’s Civil War defense installations. In fact, the church property was part of the fort, as one can see from comparing an aerial photograph to a period map (below); the 1856 chapel was incorporated within the original earthwork, Fort Massachusetts.

As is discussed in the landmark application and HPO evaluation, the property would appear to meet the eligibility requirements for archaeology. The archaeological site 51NW256 is likely to yield information important to our understanding of history, in this case the Civil War, Washington’s rural development, the evolution of Emory, and the transformation of Brightwood from a rural landscape to an urban environment. As the site of the first-built section of Fort Stevens, the focus of the Battle of Fort Stevens in July 1864, the church property likely contains physical evidence of this critical moment in the history of the city and the country, and of the lives of troops and freed people. A draft archaeological assessment was conducted in 2009 by consultants hired by Emory Church.² The limited investigations revealed buried features related to the post-Civil War church, possibly intersected by one of the fort’s ditches. The consultants recommended that archaeological data recovery investigations be conducted prior to any construction activities on the church property. HPO concurred at the time and still believes that

² Sperling, Christopher I., *Draft Archaeological Assessment of 6100 Georgia Avenue NW; Lots 801, 802, 808, and 813 in Square 2940, Washington, District of Columbia* (Olney, Maryland.: The Ottery Group, for Emory Beacon of Light, Inc., 2009). DC SHPO Archaeological Report No. 401.

such an investigation must be carried out, in consultation with HPO, or invaluable information may be lost.

Recommendation

If the subject property is designated a historic landmark, the HPO recommends that the Board advise the Mayor's Agent that the proposed demolition and new construction is inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law, because it does not retain a historic landmark property and is incompatible with the character of the church. The property contains eligible archaeological resources that should be investigated before significant ground-disturbing activity, including demolition, grading, and new construction.

If the Board does not designate the property, no further action will be taken on this case by the HPO or Board for lack of jurisdiction, and any archaeological remains will be destroyed by the proposed construction.





Top, a detail of Ft. Stevens from an 1863 Hodasevitch map (Library of Congress) and bottom, a 2015 Google Earth aerial photo.