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

Property Address:	4820-4874 Massachusetts Avenue and 4301 49th Street, NW	X	Agenda Consent Calendar
Landmark/District:	Square 1500 (part of Spring Valley Shopping Center)		
Meeting Date:	April 23 and 30, 2015	X	Concept Review Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	15-252	X	New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		Demolition Subdivision

The applicant, Washington Real Estate Investment Trust, represented by Bonstra/Haresign Architects, seeks conceptual review for construction of a two-story retail and office building on Square 1500, a landmarked complex of retail buildings.

Property Description

What is commonly referred to as the Spring Valley Shopping Center is composed of two adjacent but separate landmarks: the Massachusetts Avenue Parking Shops (4841-59 Massachusetts Avenue) on the east side of the avenue, and Square 1500 (4820-74 Massachusetts Avenue and 4301 49th Street) on the west. Both collections of buildings were individually determined noteworthy as planned clusters of neighborhood commercial buildings designed to complement the character of the planned neighborhoods nearby.

The complexes represent a reaction to the unplanned commercial development that typified how many automobile commuter corridors were developing across the country in the 1920s and 30s. Washington's initial zoning map (1920) encouraged linear commercial development along many of its transportation corridors, and Massachusetts Avenue was specifically marked for continuous commercial development from Van Ness Street to the District line. The 1928 zoning use map reflects the change in approach, where the commercial strip had been reduced to a single square on each side of Massachusetts Avenue, from Warren to Yuma streets. This condensed zoning of commercial space to a node was influenced by planning ideas advanced by urban planners in the 1920s, such as Clarence Perry of the Russell Page Foundation who wrote extensively on the advantages of the "planned neighborhood unit" in which community and retail facilities were located at the core of a neighborhood and formed village-like complexes. As he stated in *Housing for the Machine Age*, "stores should be bunched rather than strung along a street."¹

The Massachusetts Avenue Parking Shops, the first of the two Spring Valley complexes, is one of the oldest planned neighborhood shopping centers in the metropolitan area to represent this ideal, and it was nationally recognized at the time as a model of the building type. Built as a

¹ The stretch of Connecticut Avenue from the Taft Bridge to the District line is perhaps the District's best manifestation of this planning approach, where zoning resulted in the clustering of commercial uses at Woodley, Cleveland Park, Van Ness, and Chevy Chase, with residential buildings between.

single structure in 1936, it includes an arcade of shops and a gas station organized around a forecourt with off-street parking. The complex was designed by architect E. Burton Corning for developer C.H. Hillegeist.²

Square 1500 was developed beginning in 1939, and is comprised of five buildings constructed between 1939-1950. The buildings were developed by the W.C. and A.N. Miller Company to support their residential developments in Wesley Heights and Spring Valley; these neighborhoods are perhaps the best examples in the District of residential subdivisions that were laid out and developed to be serviced exclusively by the automobile, as opposed to earlier suburbs that were laid out along streetcar or railroad lines. The Miller Company retained ownership of all lots within their subdivisions (and Square 1500) in order to maintain consistent standards and architectural character.

The five buildings in Square 1500 include a one-story building at 4860 Massachusetts Avenue (originally a grocery store; now a bank) and the gas station at 4866, both built in 1939; the largest and most architecturally distinguished building at 4820 (originally the first suburban branch of the prestigious Garfinkel's Department Store, now Crate and Barrel), built in 1942; the two-story corner commercial and office building at 4872-74, built in 1947; and the three-story building at the corner of Fordham Road and 49th Street (4301 49th Street, originally housing branches of a downtown furniture store and bank; now Bank of America), built in 1950. Parking for the complex was provided within the center of block accessed from Fordham Road and 49th Street (there was never an entrance to the lot off Massachusetts); double sided street parking was also provided along the access road along Massachusetts, which was created at the same time as the first buildings, and along Fordham and 49th Street. As is summarized in the nomination, "the buildings are clustered together on a single block and form a commercial village-like environment."

All of the buildings in Square 1500 were designed by an in-house Miller Company architect in a Williamsburg-inspired Colonial Revival style to complement the company's surrounding residential neighborhoods. By the 1930s, the Colonial Revival was embraced as a fashionable image for public buildings, residences, and commercial buildings, particularly those associated with the middle and upper middle classes. The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, starting in 1926 and reaching a state of completion sufficient to attract large numbers of tourists by the 1930s, further solidified the popularity of the style. Upon its completion, the Garfinkel's building was described in a community paper as "a little bit of old Williamsburg in a garden setting, with a backdrop of dark cool forest."

The buildings in both complexes are visually unified by their low-scale height and massing (1-2 stories), palette of materials (red brick walls with stone and wood detailing and trim, slate roofs), and Colonial Revival styling. They also exhibit an attention to the design of their rear elevations particularly where those elevations face residential buildings across the street.

² Corning had worked for architect Arthur Heaton when the firm designed the Park and Shop in Cleveland Park (1930), the first such planned retail and parking complex in the Washington area. Hillegeist was a former employee of the W.C. and A.N. Miller Company.

Proposal

The project calls for constructing a two-story retail and office building on the portion of the parking lot south of and abutting 4860 Massachusetts separated from the Crate and Barrel building by a 32' wide walkway (referred to as a "paseo"). The building would have storefronts and be oriented equally to Massachusetts Avenue and the paseo. The Massachusetts Avenue elevation would have minor setbacks from the building line to allow for leveling of the grade for accessible entrances, out-swinging doors and to accommodate the ATM machines on the side of the bank. The design has been developed with two projecting pavilion elements to transition between these different setbacks.

Two options for the exterior styling the building have been developed – one with flat roofed pavilions and the other with gabled pavilions to more obviously relate to the gabled rooflines found in the complex.

Evaluation

While the two Spring Valley shopping complexes have similarities, they also have notable differences in their organizational qualities and historical development patterns that are relevant to evaluating the proposal. The Massachusetts Avenue Parking Shops was developed and presents itself as a single, self-evidently composed structure. The building is set back from the building line with parking provided in front that is accessed directly from Massachusetts Avenue. The coordinated quality of its design, the clarity of its plan, and the siting of the parking in front of and accessed from the avenue make it obvious why it became a national model for an automobile-oriented commercial complex. That model has become so ubiquitous and universal that it is difficult to fully appreciate that it was once novel and innovative.

Square 1500 is organized and was developed somewhat differently. The complex grew more organically over time, and there is no evidence provided in the landmark application that it was developed according to a central master plan. Rather than having a primary frontal orientation to Massachusetts Avenue, the buildings are sited more loosely around the perimeter of the triangular-shaped block, facing out with primary elevations oriented to the roads on which the buildings front (thus, the building at 49th and Fordham has its primary orientation to Fordham Road rather than to Massachusetts Avenue). As is consistent with the "village-like" description in the landmark application, the complex was intended to be seen and accessed from all sides, with parking around it as well as within the center of the square. The arrangement of parking on the interior of the block has been fluid over time, changing in its extent and configuration, and has always been accessed from Fordham and 49th Street rather than directly from the avenue. As is shown in a 1949 aerial photograph, parking has also always been provided along the access road and along Fordham.

While the inner block parking has been visible from Massachusetts Avenue since the complex's construction, it is arguable as to whether this is an important and intentional characteristic of the site that is worthy of preservation or merely an existing condition. In the absence of documentation, evaluating an existing condition and ascribing to it a specific intent is problematic and open to interpretation. While a new building in this location would indeed restrict views of the inner block parking from Massachusetts Avenue, the essential layout and circulation through the block would remain unchanged. Motorists would continue to see the

readily available parking that was created for the complex along the access road, and would continue to circulate around the block along Fordham Road (which would also continue to have street parking), where they would continue to have access to the parking lot. Unlike the complex across the street, which provided its parking front and center accessed from the avenue, the parking for this complex was designed to be provided on all sides and within the block. While the number of parking spaces would change as a result of the project (a number that has changed over time since the complex was built), the organization of parking and circulation through the site would be unchanged. To the extent that the perception of parking was an amenity of the complex, this would continue to be provided by the parking available on the access road and along Fordham Road, which, if those were full, would continue to direct motorists to the inner block lot.



1949 aerial view of Square 1500 shows parking clustered in the center of the block, along the access road off Massachusetts Avenue, and on Fordham Road.

Similarly, while it may not be possible to definitively determine whether the side walls of the bank were intended to remain exposed or whether this is simply their existing condition, visual analysis reveals that they are unfenestrated, common brick side walls with no architectural

detailing or character (the ATMs and copper roof above were added much later). Based on this visual evidence, it is not unreasonable to conclude that that the side walls were designed to accept a building against them.



North side wall of 4860 Massachusetts Avenue, NW

However, whether a building was ever intended for this location is less relevant than whether a building in this location is compatible with the complex or compromises important characteristic features. A building in this location would not cover or alter character-defining features of the adjacent building, nor would it compromise or be out-of-character with the landmark's "village-like environment." A new building in this location would be compatible with the underlying planning concept of clustering commercial buildings on this square, and would not be incompatible with its organic developmental history.

Rather than compromising the character of the landmark, the project has the potential to enhance and improve the complex. As it has evolved over time, the parking lot is not particularly efficient or attractive, and the proposal provides the opportunity to improve the lot visually, environmentally and in terms of pedestrian safety. Interstitial spaces provide the opportunity for selective asphalt removal in which trees could be provided to enhance its appearance and provide shade, and pervious surfaces could be introduced to manage storm water. The HPO has encouraged that this project, as well as the rehabilitation of the gas station, include new walks and planting around the perimeter of the parking lot and out to Massachusetts Avenue and 49th Street so that pedestrians could circulate around the perimeter of the lot without having to walk through it. A master plan that improves the landscape and pedestrian circulation through site should continue to be developed as an essential component of this project.

While the general concept of a two-story building on this site is compatible with the character of the landmark, further refinements would improve the proposal's relationship to its surrounding context. The HPO recommends further study of the following:

1. With retail and outdoor seating lining it on both sides, the "paseo" has the opportunity to become a significant enhancement to the complex's village-like character. However, in the perspective renderings this space looks tight and could benefit from being widened to provide the opportunity for both passage through it and for seating and planting that would enliven it.
2. Proportionally, the new building's design would be improved if the hyphen element (between the two pavilions) was reduced in size relative to the size of the pavilions; it currently reads as too large and dominant of an element in the composition. The hyphen would also benefit from being three storefront bays wide rather than four, as would be more typical of the use of odd numbers for rhythmic elements on classical and colonial revival buildings.
3. The landmark's buildings and building elements (storefronts, windows, doors) were consciously designed to be domestic in scale in order to relate to the character of the surrounding residential neighborhoods. The size, proportions and detailing of the proposed storefronts, doors and windows should continue to be studied to relate more compatibly with those in the complex.
4. The height of the parapet should be reduced to rise no higher than the base of the gables.
5. The rear elevation should continue to be developed.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the general concept for a two-story building in this location to be compatible with the character of the landmark, and that the master plan for the site and the design of the building continue to be developed as outlined above, and that the project return for final conceptual review when ready.