
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Property Address:	2400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW	X Agenda
Landmark/District:	Massachusetts Avenue/ Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	July 22, 2021	X Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	21-433	X Subdivision
		X New Construction
		X Demolition

The government of the United Arab Emirates (“UAE”) seeks concept review for demolition of a four-story rowhouse at 2400 Massachusetts Avenue NW and construction of a three-story addition on property adjacent to its existing chancery annex at 2406 Massachusetts Avenue. The UAE is represented by Carolyn Brown (Brown Law), architectural historian Andi Adams, and Addison Nottingham of ACG Architects.



2400 Massachusetts on left, 2406 Massachusetts on right

Property History and Description

The Massachusetts Avenue Historic District represents one of the finest realizations of L’Enfant’s Baroque vision of grand vistas and diagonal avenues. It was developed largely between 1880-1940 as an urban boulevard of grand mansions, row houses and embassies set in a linear, tree-lined landscape. It includes some of the city’s most elegant and lavish turn-of-the-century

residences by locally and nationally prominent architects in the Queen Anne, Richardsonian Romanesque, Beaux-Arts, Chateausque and Classical Revival styles.

2400 Massachusetts Avenue is a four-story brick row house constructed by the W.C. and A.N. Miller Company in 1921 as a single-family residence. In the context of the Massachusetts Avenue Historic District, the architectural character of the building is quite modest, with extremely simple detailing. While permit research and in-person examination of the building are somewhat inconclusive, the first floor – with an awkwardly composed garage door and a very small front door – is most certainly not original.¹ The building has been in chancery use since 1970 and was purchased by the UAE in 2017. Based on on-site inspection and the photographs submitted by the applicant, the building is clearly deteriorated.

2406 Massachusetts Avenue is a high-style Federal Revival mansion designed by Washington architect Nathan Wyeth that was constructed in 1911. The UAE undertook an extensive renovation of the building and constructed a contemporary rear addition with a below-grade garage in 2015.

In addition to being subject to historic preservation review, the properties are subject to review by the Commission of Fine Arts under the Shipstead Luce Act.

Proposal

The plans call for demolishing 2400 and constructing a three-story addition in its place that would be connected to 2406. The design and materials of the addition would mimic the Federal Revival style of 2406 with a glass connector between them set 20 feet back from the building facades. The lots of the two properties would be combined into a single lot. The addition would house office and meeting spaces with a level of parking below grade accessed from the existing automobile lift located in the gap between the buildings under the glass connector link.

Evaluation

Construction projects involving chanceries are subject to the Foreign Missions Act, which obligates the Secretary of State to require foreign missions to “substantially comply” with District of Columbia building and related codes. In instances where properties are subject to historic preservation and/or the Commission of Fine Arts review, HPRB and CFA provide their recommendations to the Board of Zoning Adjustment, which has the ultimate authority to determine whether substantial compliance has been met.

Based on its 1921 date of construction within the period of significance for the Massachusetts Avenue and Sheridan Kalorama historic districts, and despite its alterations and deterioration, 2400 retains sufficient integrity of form and materials to qualify as a contributing building to those districts. Demolition is not substantially compliant with the stated purpose in the DC Landmark and Historic District Protection Act “to retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use.” Nevertheless, HPO does not disagree with the applicants’ assessments that 2400 is not

¹ The original building permit states that the building was to be three stories, although it is unclear whether the current four stories is a result of the top floor being added later or, more likely, that the grade was dropped and the basement level exposed.

of the same quality as the majority of other buildings in these historic districts and is architecturally and structurally compromised.

The proposed addition is compatible in height, massing, orientation, materials and pattern of fenestration with the historic districts in which it would be located. However, precise replication of an historic building is not consistent with contemporary preservation practice and is specifically called out as a treatment in the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation that is *not* recommended.² An important characteristic of the Massachusetts Avenue Historic District is that it is made up of individual, distinguishable buildings that collectively form a unified but diverse collection of architectural expressions, and precisely mimicking the design of an adjacent building is not consistent with that character. In addition to diminishing the unique design of 2406, the precise replication of its façade doesn't work well with the proposed plan, where one of the three full-height windows on the *piano nobile* opens to an enclosed stair and the fourth floor is merely a false pent roof serving no purpose. Finally, the precisely replicative approach is technically difficult to pull off well, raising the prospect that the copy won't hold up by comparison to the historic stone, brick, metal and wood materials and detailing of the immediately adjacent original. While unifying the properties to provide a clear public expression that they represent a single entity is understandable and achievable, the applicants should be encouraged to provide some distinction, even if subtle, between the two structures.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board make the following findings:

- 1) While modest and compromised in its design, 2400 Massachusetts Avenue is a contributing building to the Massachusetts Avenue and Sheridan Kalorama historic districts, and demolition is not a treatment that is substantially compliant with the city's preservation act;*
- 2) The proposed addition is compatible in its general form and materials with the historic districts, but in its precise replication of the features and detailing of 2406 Massachusetts, it is not substantially compliant with federal or local guidelines for additions to historic buildings, and should be modified to be differentiated and distinguishable.*

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² "Not recommended: Duplicating the exact form, material, style, and detailing of the historic building in a new addition so that the new work appears to be part of the historic building." *The Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring and Reconstructing Historic Buildings; New Additions to Historic Buildings* (1995).