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

Landmark/District: **Meridian Hill Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **2627 Mozart Place NW** (x) Concept

Meeting Date: **April 28, 2016** (x) Addition
Case Number: **16-309** () Alteration
() Subdivision

Staff Reviewers: **Kim Williams, Steve Callcott**

The applicants, EastBanc and Grimshaw + CORE Architects, request concept review to construct an eight-story apartment building at the rear of the Scottish Rite Temple property at 2800 16th Street. The site is located within the Meridian Hill Historic District and is situated between two landmark buildings—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Unification Church) at 1610 Columbia Road, and the Italian Embassy at 2700 16th Street, both also in the Meridian Hill Historic District. While composed as its own structure, the new building would technically be an addition to the temple, connected by a narrow, one-story hyphen at grade level. Despite this light connection, the building is essentially a new building and is thus being reviewed and evaluated as new construction within the Meridian Hill Historic District.

Evaluation

As noted in the Meridian Hill Historic District guidelines, buildings in the district survive largely intact and exhibit a high quality and integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and place. The guidelines note that any new construction should be designed with extreme sensitivity, and advise that particular attention should be paid to siting, size, massing, scale and materials.

Siting: The proposed new building is U-shaped in plan and located at the rear of and on-axis with the Scottish Rite Temple on the site of a walled parking area at the rear of the temple. The new building is set well back from the temple and adjacent buildings, and is visually distinct and separate from them, despite the at-grade connection to the temple. The siting of the new building, with its courtyard opening to the rear of the temple and wings to either side, is primarily oriented to Columbia Road and Mozart Place. The relationship of the new building—well recessed from 16th Street—respects the critical importance of the 16th Street streetscape in the historic district and allows the historic buildings on 16th Street to remain fully exposed on all of their elevations and thus remain dominant features of the streetscape.

Size and Massing: As proposed, the building rises eight floors and includes a double-story penthouse with penthouse apartments on the lower level and a pool and communal roof deck above. Although shown in the drawings with sea-level heights, a conversion to curb-to-roof heights indicates that the proposed height of the building is 90 feet to the roofline and 106 feet to the top of the penthouse. While the average roof heights of apartment buildings in the district

fall somewhat lower, there are a number of contributing apartment buildings that rise to 85 and 90 feet, including the Argonne Apartments, the Dorchester Apartments, the Envoy Apartments, the Roosevelt Apartments, and Meridian Hill Hall.

However, the perceived heights of these apartment buildings are capped at the rooflines. While one penthouse, the Argonne across Columbia Road, rises over 106-feet in height, it is a minor projection set at the rear of the center block of the roof; it is not a substantial element that contributes to the building's perceived height or mass. In general, the roofs of Meridian Hill have strong horizontal rooflines with roof elements consisting only of spires, chimney stacks, dormers, and other notable roof features; penthouses are not dominant. In contrast, the penthouse level of the proposed project occupies an extensive portion of the rooftop, resulting in a relationship of penthouse-to-roof that is uncharacteristic of the historic district. Although the penthouse has been reduced in scale from earlier plans and is shown as not being visible from Columbia Road and other perspectives, the reality is that the penthouse will be highly visible from 16th Street looking southwest, and from Columbia Road looking both directions.

Materials and Color: Buildings in the historic district are characterized by their rich variety of materials, and together they offer a rich palette of stone, brick, concrete, iron, copper, wood, slate and more. The proposed introduction of a porcelain/artificial stone could contribute to this material variety. However, unlike the blocks of stone and bricks that are divided with mortar joints, the porcelain/artificial stone slabs are rendered in much larger unit sizes and thus may appear to be out of material scale with other buildings. The detailing of the artificial stone will be important to understand before it can be properly evaluated. In terms of color, the duo-toned, buff-colored wall surface along Columbia Road with its window reveals in a brighter color is consistent with the variety of materials and their colors found within the historic district.

In addition to the above design principles cited in the Meridian Hill Historic District guidelines, the building's orientation to the street and its ratio of wall-to-window are also important to consider in evaluating the proposal.

Orientation: The building has its longest elevation along Columbia Road and its primary entrance on Mozart Place. Typically, the buildings along Columbia Road (though not in the historic district), have their principal and visually notable entrances on Columbia Road. The lack of a visually prominent entrance to break up the Columbia Road elevation has presented a challenge for the applicants in how to relate this long elevation to the street and sidewalk, which has resulted in several different potential solutions. The most recent drawings show this Columbia Road elevation shielded by trees, making it difficult to evaluate how well this elevation addresses Columbia Road, especially from a pedestrian perspective. Further information is needed on the articulation and material treatment of the ground floor along Columbia Road.

Window-to-wall: The Beaux Arts mansions of Meridian Hill are solid masonry buildings with regular arrangements of windows cut into the heavy stone and brick walls, and with robust ornamentation, including carved stonework, projecting bays, dormers, etc. Similarly, the district's apartment buildings, which run the gamut from traditional to more modern, have a wall-to-window ratio that compares to the solidity of the Beaux Arts mansions. While expressed in a contemporary vocabulary, the proposed new building's canted and projecting window boxes along Columbia Road are predominantly solid and have a robustness and sculptural quality that is compatible with buildings in the historic district.

Similarly, the glazed entranceway along Mozart Place is recessed into a solid base presenting a monumentality and sculptural quality that appropriately alludes to the Scottish Rite Temple and the Beaux Arts mansions of Meridian Hill. In addition, this glazed entranceway offers views through the building lobby to the landscaped courtyard, and with the comings and goings of pedestrians, will help to activate and give character to Mozart Place.

On the other hand, the windows and stepping linear balconies (Façade System C) at the end walls of the building facing 16th Street have a much higher ratio of window-to-wall than is characteristic of the historic district. While limited to the end walls, the banks of windows together with the glass balconies will be quite visible from 16th Street and would introduce a level of reflectivity not found elsewhere in the district. Introducing a different and perhaps solid material for the balcony railings may mitigate this effect.

HPO recommends that the Board make the following findings:

- 1. The siting is compatible with the character of the Scottish Rite Temple to which it is being attached, and to the Meridian Hill Historic District;*
- 2. The size and massing are generally compatible, with the exception of the penthouse, which needs to be significantly reduced in size and further evaluated for its visual impacts;*
- 3. The materials (and proposed color of materials) is generally compatible, with further development needed to evaluate the unit size and detailing;*
- 4. The orientation of the building needs to continue to be evaluated with regard to the ground level treatment of the Columbia Road elevation and entrance;*
- 5. The window-to-wall relationship of the building is generally compatible with the district, with the exception of the 16th Street end walls (Façade System C) that need further study.*