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

Property Address:	1624 Crescent Place, NW	X Agenda
Landmark/District:	White-Meyer House/Meridian Hill Historic District	Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	December 1, 2016	X Concept Review Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	15-205	X New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	Demolition
	Kim Williams	X Subdivision

Meridian International Center, in partnership with Westbrook Partners, seeks on-going conceptual design review for construction of an eight-story plus penthouse apartment building with office and conference facilities on the site of the landmark White-Meyer house, a property that is also located in the Meridian Hill Historic District. The revised plans have been prepared by a new design team consisting of Perkins-Eastman DC Architects and Wolf/Josey landscape architects.

Previous Review

The Board made a number of determinations and findings when it reviewed the project in April 2015. The Board determined that it was appropriate to review the project as one of new construction to the Meridian Hill Historic District, rather than as an addition to the White-Meyer house, and found that the overall site organization and conceptual approach of locating the primary mass of new construction facing 16th Street and the lower mass on Crescent Place, with an open space between the new construction and the White-Meyer house, to be compatible and appropriate. The Board found that visibility of the building from Meridian Hill Park was compatible with the urban park's character, and that the combination of lots was consistent with the preservation act, as it combines two lots that have functioned as a single property since the 1930s. As a new construction project, the Board accepted the general height and massing as compatible for 16th Street but found that further work was needed on improving the relationship of the building to the raised berm and its orientation to the street. The building's entrance, materials and detailing, integration of the penthouse into the building's design, and the design of the Meridian meeting rooms and parking court were among the elements identified as needing modification and further development.

The project was previously conceived as a planned unit development that would have required approval by the Zoning Commission. The revised project is no longer a PUD but will require some special exception relief from the Board of Zoning Adjustment.

Revised Proposal

As before, the project calls for construction of an apartment building and conference center for Meridian International. The new construction would connect to the White-Meyer house by an

underground passage and would include a new lawn area on the east side of the house. The building would be built into and atop the existing berm in order to retain the grade and mature trees within the public space as required by the Urban Forestry Administration. The vehicular and service entrance would be off Belmont Street. The building would have eight floors and a penthouse level above the retained berm on 16th Street, and a four-story (plus below-grade level, and penthouse level) along Crescent Street. Most notably, the revised proposal offers re-organized orientation to 16th Street and a re-design of the massing with reduced height along Crescent Place; and greater design attention to the Belmont Street court entrance.

Evaluation

Height, Mass and Integration of Penthouse

The revised proposal reduces the building from nine-stories plus penthouse to eight stories plus penthouse. The roof height, at approximately 249' 8" is equal to that of the adjacent Envoy, while the penthouse rises 9' 4" above this to 259 feet. As evaluated in the previous HPO report, the height of the building is consistent with the height of other apartment buildings along 16th Street within the Meridian Hill Historic District. At issue in both the previous proposal and this one is the perceived height of the building at its southern end, as the building does not follow or reflect the drop in topography of the street. The reduction in height by one story from the previous proposal helps to ameliorate this condition; however, due to the topography of the site, this condition persists with no clear alternative solution short of further reducing the number of stories. Such an approach would either result in a more horizontal composition or an asymmetrical elevation, each of which would raise new compatibility issues.

Of greater importance to the Board than the height was the manner in which the height and mass were handled architecturally, particularly with regard to the penthouse and ensuring that it was sufficiently integrated into the design. As viewed from the park, the height of the principal block of the building is consistent with the adjacent Envoy Apartments, as well as with other apartment buildings on either side of the park. While the penthouse atop this principal roofline rises above the height of the Envoy and has greater mass than the typical penthouses found atop the historic buildings in the historic district, the revised design's use of precast stone, and brick on the elevator overrun, more fully integrates these elements into the design of the building. As the design continues to be refined, relating the doors on the penthouse level more closely in design with the fenestration elsewhere on the building and flattening out the cornice so that it reads as secondary to the primary cornice should be evaluated.

Relationship of Building to 16th Street

The orientation of the building to 16th Street has been entirely rethought. While the previous proposal located the main entrance at the corner of 16th and Belmont streets due to the raised landscape berm on 16th Street and the challenges it imposed, the revised proposal places the main entrance at the center of the 16th Street façade. This central bay, from entry door to roofline, is recessed from the wall plane to either side giving the façade the visual prominence that is characteristic of the historic buildings facing 16th Street. The central bay is further distinguished by a tighter grouping of windows with spandrels between the floors—a compatible treatment found on other apartment buildings in the historic district. The

elimination of the corner entrance and the exposed basement level grounds the building in a more satisfying manner and provides it with a consistent base condition.

By engaging the berm with a solid foundation, the weight of the building rises naturally above it, no longer giving the impression that it is a heavy mass floating above the berm. The entry, which is well above street level at the height of the berm, is reached by two lead walks which arc to either side of the door to opposite ends of the building on 16th Street. The walkway to the north provides an accessible entrance to the building, while that to the south offers a practical alternative path on the downslope of the street to the main entrance. As the design of the walk continues to be developed, breaking up the continuous hand railings on both sides of the walk and the design of the retaining walls and planter elements at the terminus of the walkways should continue to be evaluated.

Design and Materials

The revised design is divided into a stronger and more traditional three-part horizontal composition of base, shaft and cap. The 16th Street elevation is organized into seven symmetrical bays with a central recessed bay and alternating bays with projecting balconies to either side. The building would be constructed principally of brick and stone having a similar earth-toned beige palette with projecting bays of metal differentiated in a “warm” grey. The variety of materials has been reduced from the previous proposal, and the type, quality and use of materials are consistent with those found throughout the district.

The proposal has also been revised to reduce the proportion of glazing, resulting in a window-to-wall ratio that is more characteristic of that found in the historic district. The greater solidity is contrasted with the lighter glazed projecting bays, but in a manner that is complementary rather than incompatible.

Meridian Conference Center and Parking Court

The Meridian conference space remains built into the hillside forming one side of the vehicular courtyard, however, the topography and areas for plantings around it have been modified to retain a stronger sense of the landscaped plinth on which the White-Meyer house sits. A consistent language for the wall along Belmont has been developed, extending the language and appearance of the existing red brick retaining walls; the wall would provide a privacy screen with plantings within openings for a conference facility terrace as well as differentiated pedestrian entrances for the courtyard which help to shrink the size of this opening. The courtyard would have a unified appearance on its three sides in the same coursed stone as used on the base of the apartment building; the courtyard would also include specialty paving and plantings, as is found on the vehicular court entrances of the Meridian and White-Meyer houses.

Crescent Place

The wing of the building on Crescent Place has been reduced by a floor and pulled back from the sidewalk to create a continuous planted front yard and private yards behind a wall for the first floor apartment units. The design is complementary to but slightly differentiated from the larger 16th Street building with the curving elevation broken into a series of symmetrical,

vertically-oriented townhouse-like elements, each with its own projecting bay; the end pavilion facing the front courtyard of the White Meyer house would have a slightly more formal composition without a bay. The wall and fence separating the planting strip from the private courtyards should continue to be further studied as the height of the fences as illustrated appears somewhat forbidding.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the revised concept to be compatible with the character of the White-Meyer house and the Meridian Hill Historic District, that the design continue to be refined as outlined above, and that final approval be delegated to staff.