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

Landmark/District: **Saint Elizabeths Hospital Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **1200 Alabama Avenue SE** (Square 5868S, Lot 809)¹

Meeting Date: **June 4, 2020** (x) New construction
Case Number: **20-316** (x) Concept

The applicant, STE 17 Phase D LLC (Redbrick LMD), agent for and lessee of the Government of the District of Columbia, requests the Board’s review of a concept to construct a six-story 122,778-square-foot office building with potential ground-floor retail over a parking garage. The principal tenant will be Whitman-Walker, which will move from the old Eleventh Precinct station house. As a project on D.C. government property, this is also being reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. It is also subject to review by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, under the terms of the 1987 deed of the property from the Department of Health and Human Services to the District.

The wedge-shaped lot has a sufficient zoning envelope that another large building (Building 2 in the site plan), and perhaps a third, smaller one (the “pad”) will be proposed later. The parking garage would extend beneath the buildings, and its ramp is outside the footprint of the present project. This concept also includes a landscaped area to the east of the building—not a major circulation route, but an amenity and a means of addressing storm water run-off.

The building is to be largely glazed; the biggest gesture is the curved Sycamore Drive elevation. Elsewhere, the glazing is to be relieved by a grid of piers and slab ends clad in green terra cotta.

Evaluation

As the building’s design has developed, its composition has improved and simplified. In fact, it risks going too far in that direction and could be more dynamic. One possibility would be to have floors two through six of the Sycamore Drive elevation project beyond the column line and the corner pier, creating the sense of a glass box with the solid grid superimposed.

The International Style was aptly named, for eschewing many particulars of context. As a building type, office buildings still most closely follow “International” precepts, being mostly glazed and of column and slab construction. They run the risk of looking like they could be anywhere, rather than truly belonging to a specific site. The present building makes a nod toward contextualism with its use of green terra cotta—green drawn from one of the recommended colors in the master plan’s design guidelines, and terra cotta being a primary roofing material on campus and related to brick. But while green is a nice enough color in itself, it is used as a secondary accent trim color

¹ This lot does not yet have a street number. It fronts on the 1200 block of Alabama Avenue, however, at 12th Street. The eventual address may be a 12th Street one.

on the campus, as within the porches of the CT Quad or on the remaining patinated copper elements. A red terra cotta or brick would be more compatible with the campus buildings.

Actually, the cladding of the piers is stated to be terra cotta “or similar.” It would be better to be definitive about the material, because finding an adequate, compatible substitute seems doubtful.

The canopy on the penthouse appears to be a decorative device meant to break up that box visually, as it is too high and shallow to be useful.

The garage ramp will be beyond the footprint of this building, but it must be constructed at the same time, so how it looks as it emerges from the garage is important. The present site plan suggests the entrance to the ramp might be exposed permanently, rather than being incorporated into any building, as would be preferable. Whether the exposed condition is temporary or permanent, more thought has to be put into a screening treatment in the surrounding landscape only sketched in the site plan on page A-17.

As the Board has discussed at the Walter Reed Campus and even downtown, public streetscape elements, such as the pavers shown on page A-38, should be uniform and continuous with the elements on the sidewalks elsewhere in the neighborhood. Each project here should not display its own language of public-space elements and materials, but should respect a campus-wide pattern, with deviations where a space is functionally and visually special, as with the landscaped area east of the building.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept and delegate further review to staff, with the condition that the above comments are adequately addressed.