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

Landmark/District: **Sixteenth Street Historic District** (X) Agenda
Address: **1101-1111 16th Street, NW** () Consent Calendar

Meeting Date: **March 3, 2016** (X) Alteration
H.P.A. Number: **16-157** () New Construction
() Subdivision
Staff Reviewers: **Steve Callcott, David Maloney** (X) Conceptual Design

Akridge Development, with plans prepared by SmithGroup JJR architects and Oehme van Sweden landscape architects, seeks conceptual design review for façade replacement and public space alterations for two adjoining buildings at 1101 16th Street (built as the American Soft Drink Association, now the American Beverage Association building) and 1111 16th Street (the American Association of University Women building).

Property History and Description

1101 and 1111 16th Street, NW are Brutalist-style office buildings with concrete grid exterior exoskeletons. Constructed in the 1970 and 1974, respectively, they fall outside of the period of significance (1875-1959) and are non-contributing to the 16th Street Historic District. Each building is 90 feet in height; the first floor of 1101 is at grade, while the first floor of 1111 is raised up on a plinth approximately 4’6” from grade. The treatment of the public space – a paved plaza with raised planters -- is characteristic of the era in which the buildings were constructed, but is very much out of character with the historic district.

Proposal

The project calls for recladding the buildings and combining them into a single structure. The concrete grid exteriors would be removed and replaced with a skin of limestone with punched window openings, metal panels, and a series of projecting glass bays. The public space would be redesigned with a more naturalistic topography, addressing the awkward difference in first floor heights between the two buildings, and providing screening for the existing utility vaults in public space which will remain.

Preservation and Planning Context

The special character of 16th Street is recognized in the city’s Comprehensive Plan and the historic district designation. The Comprehensive Plan states that “lower 16th Street has a unique and historic character that sets it apart from the area around it” and provides the following policy guidance:

Protect and enhance the special character of Lower 16th Street NW between H Street and Scott Circle. The street’s historic, ceremonial role as the approach to the White House and Lafayette Park should be recognized and conserved. Future development shall be compatible with the street’s established architectural character and scale. Uses and activities that are appropriate to

maintain the street's appearance and historic significance, particularly its open space and greenery, should be encouraged. (Policy CW-2.2.6: Lower 16th Street, §1616.12)

The Board's designation decision for the 16th Street Historic District provides the following historic and architectural analysis:

Architecturally, mid-[20th] century buildings on 16th Street represent a conservative, but emerging Modern aesthetic. In general in the United States, Modern design sought to break from the past and embrace new technology in ways that gave buildings entirely new appearances wholly different from their predecessors. In Washington, the Modern movement was embraced more reluctantly as the federal presence and classical traditions of the city exerted a heavy influence. Unlike these nationally noted influential examples, the modern buildings in Washington tended to adhere to traditional forms and building materials, well-illustrated by the 1959 Department of State building, a monumental and trabeated limestone structure with a rigorously symmetrical arrangement of openings.

Along 16th Street, zoning laws further encouraged a traditional approach to modernism. In 1947, an amendment to the city's zoning laws was written that allowed, as special exceptions, office buildings and banks to be built within Residential Use Areas, which 16th Street was. As part of the amendment, these special exceptions had to be reviewed by the Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA). For 16th Street, BZA established an unwritten policy stating that such zoning exceptions would only be granted to national group headquarters rather than multi-purpose offices. Further, the BZA's standards held that "only those office buildings or banks that will be in harmony with, and will not affect adversely, the present character and future development of the neighborhood" should be allowed. More significantly, as part of its review process along "unique" 16th Street, the BZA instituted design standards. For instance, in approving the zoning adjustment for the Hod Carriers' Building, BZA required that among other attributes, the "8-story building must be monumental in character."

Although no longer purely Classical, most of the mid-20th century buildings that were approved by BZA along 16th Street respected the strong traditional influences of the city. Indeed, all of the late 1940s and 1950s buildings feature traditional vertical three-part façade divisions into base, shaft and capital, rather than the undifferentiated hierarchy in purely Modern buildings. In addition, the 16th Street buildings have traditional stone facades rather than steel or glass, and are articulated with punched window openings as opposed to bands of ribbon windows more characteristic of Modern design. Even the sleek and minimalist AFL-CIO building that is clearly reflecting a Modern aesthetic defers to local tradition in its massing and use of materials, resulting in a dignified appearance befitting its site adjacent to St. John's Church and the White House.

After 1958, when the city adopted a new zoning plan that designated 16th Street below Q Street as "Special Purpose," BZA approval was no longer required for the erection of non-residential buildings. Following this change in zoning, there is a noticeable shift in the nature of buildings along 16th Street and a clear departure from tradition.

Evaluation

The project has presented two somewhat interrelated design challenges: uniting the two buildings into a single harmonious composition, and achieving a compatible balance of masonry and glass. At first blush, recladding the buildings with a unified skin would seem relatively easy. However, the different alignments of the first floors and the subtly different column spacing in

each building have complicated the effort. The different alignments of the ground levels has been largely solved by the proposed landscape plan which simultaneously knits the two divergent conditions together and reintroduces a naturalistic planting area that continues the public space greensward that runs in front of the other buildings in the historic district.

The slight variation in column spacing, together with the applicants' desire for a high proportion of glazing, has resulted in the proposed use of four shallow glass projecting bays in the southern portion of the building. Reflecting the change in column spacing, one of the bays would be slightly wider than the other three. These bays would be balanced with a skin of limestone with vertically-oriented punched windows on the remainder of the building. Two alternatives for the L Street elevation have been developed – one with a single projection at the corner and a second with two projections at the east edge of this elevation.

The concept's tripartite composition, differentiated top floor, and use of limestone as the dominant cladding material are strong design moves that are contextual and appropriate for the character of the historic district. However, while the use of projections could be effective in helping to animate the elevations with more glass in a contemporary design motif, further design work is needed to fully integrate the large expanses of glass into a compatible relationship with the masonry backdrop and the surrounding district. At present, the size and concentration of the projections does not achieve a sufficient balance of scale and materials relative to the nearby buildings. Rather than grouping all four of the 16th Street projections at one end of the elevation, redistributing them differently on the limestone facade and lowering their height would break down the large scale and commercial feel that is presented by so much glass. It would also allow the limestone to weave through as a more effective visual backdrop. Lowering the height of the projections by a floor and reducing the cluster of four bays are both recommended as ways to make the building more compatible.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept for a limestone building with glass projections, and the landscape plan as proposed, to be generally compatible with the character of the historic district, but that further design work be done on the size and organization of the projections and that the project return to the Board for further review when appropriate.