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

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

Meeting Date: **September 24, 2020** (x) New construction  
Case Number: **20-316** (x) Revised concept

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The applicant, STE 17 Phase D LLC (Redbrick LMD), agent for and lessee of the Government of the District of Columbia, returns with a revised 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.

At its May 28 hearing, the members of the Commission of Fine Arts,

expressed support for the proposed building, including its curtainwall design, a grid of terracotta panels overlaying metal mullions and vision glass. However, they questioned the use of green as the primary color, noting that this color is seen only on minor trim details on the historic buildings of the St. Elizabeths campus; they instead suggested consideration of a traditional earthen color for the terracotta, which would help relate the new building to the red brick context of the campus. They also suggested extending this terracotta enclosure system up to the sixth floor, as well as onto the curving elevation along Sycamore Drive, in order to unify the building.

Regarding the site design, the Commission members noted the large scale of the proposed project inserted between two differing residential contexts, and they expressed support for the mid-block park that would provide a pedestrian connection between Alabama Avenue and Sycamore Drive. Citing the wide setback along Alabama Avenue, they advised planting a staggered double row of trees along the sidewalk, continuous across the entrance to the mid-block park, to bring additional shade to this public sidewalk with a southern exposure. For the north side, they recommended adding more plantings at the entrance to the park; they suggested repositioning the proposed overhead lighting to the middle of the park instead of at the north end, as well as providing more seating in the middle, to help create an attractive, comfortable space for people to occupy.

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

At its June 4 hearing, the Historic Preservation Review Board approved the concept, with the conditions that:

- the terra cotta cladding be red (instead of green) with variations in shade/tones to be more compatible with the color palette of campus buildings;
- the terra cotta piers have more depth;
- the applicant consider making even the curved Sycamore Street elevation tripartite, with a base, middle and top, possibly projecting the second through fifth floors beyond the column line, the first floor and the terra cotta corners of the building;
- the entrances be more prominent;
- the penthouse canopy be developed to be functional;
- the landscape at the east of the building more clearly direct pedestrians approaching the building from the east;
- the materials in the public space be consistent with the rest of the campus; and
- the garage ramp be appropriately screened.

The applicant has addressed many of the massing and detail issues. The curved north side has been projected beyond the column line, and the main entrance has been emphasized (to be more fully detailed later) beneath the projection. The piers have been given greater depth—slots, really—with columns at the ground floor set in from the wall plane but outside the storefront.

The green terra cotta has become a brownish metal panel. A terra cotta is preferred to metal for its apparent heft and for being in the masonry family of the campus buildings. It should be a true terra cotta red for the same reason. Of course, the ground-floor columns might be wrapped in the brown metal for contrast.

The penthouse canopy, which appears to be approximately twelve feet above the main roof, projects only about eight feet, so it would be largely decorative.

The biggest changes are in the site plan and landscape. The location and footprint of the present building have remained the same, but in order to accommodate loading on the only non-street-facing sides of the anticipated buildings, the future building no. 2 has been shifted to the eastern end of the parcel, foreclosing the possibility of a potential, smaller building no. 3. This change has a couple of positive consequences. First, it internalizes the garage ramp in building no. 2. While it is a challenge to design a building around a two-car garage entrance in one corner, it obviates the need for an open stretch of ramp to be visually screened (and drained). Second, the surrounding paving certainly makes obvious the pedestrian routes through the parcel. Third, it concentrates and expands the potential green space, providing the “mid-block park” that the Commission of Fine Arts favors.

The question remains what character such a park should have. The present design is a lawn with a planting buffer. The idea is that the open central area would be flexible for various uses. But it raises, in turn, a broader planning issue of where should programmed public spaces be located on the East Campus. The 2012 campus master plan calls for locating “more usable spaces, such as retail plazas, civic parks, and recreational parks, with direct access to the street. Office plazas, landscaped medians, and landscaped street setbacks are less desirable. Encourage and expand opportunities for festivals, concerts, farmers markets, and other activating and programmed uses.” The proposed space would further these aims, yet the campus’s Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue “front yard” already has the “Gateway Pavilion,” and the master plan calls for another

plaza between the Congress Heights Metro station and the arena. Would it be more appropriate to have a more complex and planted landscape that would offer “rooms” principally for passive recreation—more like the previous, smaller plan?

**Recommendation**

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