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

Property Address:	509-517 H Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Downtown Historic District		Consent
Meeting Date:	February 23, 2023	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	23-176	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		New Construction
			Demolition

Rift Valley Partners, with plans prepared by Cunningham Quill Architects, seeks conceptual design review for alterations and construction of a 9-story addition behind five three-story row houses in the Chinatown section of the Downtown Historic District. The project would be for lodging and accessory uses.

Property Histories and Descriptions

The site includes five 19th century brick row buildings, all originally constructed as dwellings and later converted to commercial uses. 509 H Street is a three-story flat-front house constructed before 1869 and later altered with the addition of a ground-level storefront. The coordinated row of four bay-fronted Queen Anne houses at 511-517 were built in 1885. The ensemble is reflective of the eclectic residential development in this portion of downtown the mid-19th century and its later conversion to a commercial district. All of the buildings are contributing to the Downtown Historic District.

The Downtown Historic District contains a rich variety of residential, commercial and institutional building types, sizes, and architectural styles from a period of significance that spans more than a century (1830-1940). Square 485, in which the buildings are located (bounded by 5th, 6th, H and I Streets), is unusual for being one of the district's most historically intact blocks and for its relatively consistent building heights. 22 of the 23 buildings in the block are contributing, with 19 being three stories tall (with 1 two-story, 1 four-story and 1 five-story building). The tallest building is the only non-contributing structure, a six-story apartment building at 809 6th Street approved by the Board in 2005 as an infill project on a vacant lot. The block contains several noteworthy structures, including the Thomas U. Walter designed church at 500 I Street (1852, restored in 2009), the unusual Romanesque-styled apartment building at 510 I Street (1894), and the Mission-revival Gospel Mission at 810 5th Street (1932).

Proposal

The plans call for retaining the main front blocks of the historic buildings, with their rear ell wings removed. A nine-story tower would be constructed behind and partially above the historic buildings; the tower would rise to eight stories (86 feet), with the ninth floor (97 feet) set back on the south and west sides. The tower would be broken into two interlocking masses; the front/south block would be clad in brick with precast stone trim and contain a variety of setbacks and projections while the rear/north block would be less modulated and clad in metal panels.

The facades of the rowhouses would be repainted and rehabilitated with historically appropriate windows and doors; the party walls and floor assemblies would be retained but the roofs of 511-

517 would be removed for construction of a green roof. The entrance to the new building would be provided through 509, with a metal and glass lobby entrance replacing the non-original commercial storefront.

Evaluation

When reviewing additions, the Board has most frequently cited the principle that an addition should be subordinate to the historic building to which it is being added to ensure that the historic structure remains dominant and not overwhelmed by the new construction. This principle is of greater importance when the building and addition are seen simultaneously from public street view. However, in instances where the context supported it, the Board has found additions that are larger than the buildings to which they are attached to be compatible if the addition can convincingly appear as a separate building to the rear or side of the historic building and when the size of the addition was found to be appropriate for its context. This approach has often been used in the Downtown Historic District which illustrates a wider variety of building heights than is typical in other districts.

The proposed addition is clearly not subordinate to the building in height, rising six stories taller. While the block does have a six-story apartment building behind it on 6th Street, the remainder is comprised primarily of three-story historic buildings, and the addition would establish a new height for the block. The Board has tended to be conservative in considering proposals for taller new construction in this block, finding concepts for three additional floors atop the five story Mission building at 810 5th Street (HPA 13-567) and a seven-story addition at the rear of the three-story house at 819 6th Street (HPA 12-492) to be incompatible.

When the Board reviewed a proposal by a different development team for an 11-story rear addition to this row in January 2020, it found the project incompatible both because it resulted in substantial demolition of the historic buildings and for the height of the new construction. The Board acknowledged that the broader context of the Downtown Historic District – which has many taller buildings – might support a taller structure behind these buildings and suggested that that the new construction be lowered by at least 4 floors.

While the current applicant's reduction is less than what the Board suggested of the previous project, the materials, colors, pattern of fenestration and articulated massing are all more compatible than that previous proposal. Also made clear in this proposal is that the new tower will retain the full main blocks of the historic buildings. While the new construction will be built partially over top the historic buildings, this will be done through a structural cantilever that will not result in substantial demolition. As the front elevations, floor assemblies, party walls and portions of the rear wall retained, the proposal can be found consistent with the Board's regulations in not constituting substantial demolition. With the demolition issue resolved, the primary consideration for the Board is whether the proposed height of the tower is supportable as a compatible.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept for alterations and demolition – the removal of the rear wings and general plans for rehabilitation – to be consistent with the preservation act and seeks the Board's direction on the compatibility of the new construction with this block and the Downtown Historic District.