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

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|--------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Property Address: | 1250 U Street, NW | X | Agenda |
| Landmark/District: | U Street Historic District | | Consent Calendar |
| Meeting Date: | March 31, 2022 | X | Concept Review |
| H.P.A. Number: | 21-421 | X | Alteration |
| Staff Reviewer: | Steve Callcott | X | New Construction |
| | | | Demolition |
| | | | Subdivision |

Shalom Baranes Associates Architects, representing EastBanc and Jamestown, seeks on-going conceptual design review for construction of a 9-story plus penthouse apartment building at 13th and U streets and a two-story building in the Temperance Court mid-block alley in the U Street Historic District.

The project has been presented twice to the Board. In November, the Board expressed concern about the proposed height and mass of a proposed 10-story building. When the revised proposal was presented in December, the Board found the revisions to the height and massing to be insufficient, that the height of the townhouses along the alley should be reduced from 4 stories to 3, and the skybridge that spanned over the alley connecting the townhouses to the apartment building should be removed.

Revised Proposal

The height of the apartment building has been reduced by the removal of a floor; the building is now nine stories rather than ten. The height of the open plaza above the Metro entrance has been reduced from three stories to two, and the monumental stair and second floor retail eliminated. Bay projections have been added to the formerly flat central glass section of the U Street elevation, and the one-story projecting retail bays on 13th Street raised to two stories. Two options are presented for the corner of the building – one with a solid base for a retail tenant, the other with a diagonal cut opening the Metro plaza to the intersection.

The mid-block row of duplex townhouses lining the central north-south alley has been redesigned as a two-story building with an amenity space on the first floor and apartments above; an outdoor swimming pool and patio space for residents would be located south of the building. Rather than lining the central alley as the townhouses did, the alley would be closed and the new building placed in the center of the block between the secondary north-south alleys. The WMATA chiller, previously proposed to be located underground, would remain.

Evaluation

The elimination of the tenth floor and associated adjustments in the massing makes a noticeable difference in decreasing the height of the U Street building, with more obvious height and setback relationships established with the apartment building to the west. The introduction of projecting bays helps reduce and improve the scale of the U Street elevation, and the two-story height of the Metro plaza is less monumental and more in scale with the relatively fine-grained

quality of the U Street Historic District. Of the two alternatives for the treatment of the corner, the option with the diagonal cut would result in improved views and circulation to and from the Metro station.

While HPO did not share the Board’s concern about the proposed height of the mid-block townhouses, the height has been substantially reduced as was requested. However, the loss of the original alley configuration, no longer providing the organizing principle for new construction, and the retention of the above-grade industrial chiller, are regrettable compromises and a lost opportunity to redevelop the alley in a more intensive, pedestrian-oriented and urbanistic manner. At the initial review of the project in November, testimony was provided on the social and cultural history of Temperance Court, and the applicants responded by stating that they would provide on-site interpretive materials that celebrated that history (below). To now propose eradicating the original alley plan, filling the space with a single large building and retaining the large blank chiller enclosure seems inconsistent with the intent to celebrate the historic alley and not a compatible approach to its redevelopment.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends the Board find the revised proposal for the U Street apartment building to be compatible in height, mass and design with the U Street Historic District but that the proposed redevelopment of the mid-block alley is incompatible, as it results in the elimination of the original Temperance Court alley configuration.

Temperance Avenue

Historic U Street Alley

PROJECTION OF WASHINGTON, D.C.
TEMPERANCE AVENUE

As prominent as U Street was for middle-class African Americans, there was a deep undercurrent of poverty literally just a block away on an alley known as Temperance Avenue, just north of T Street between Twelfth and Thirteenth Streets, Northwest. It was midway between the Twelfth Street YMCA and the True Reformer Building, the neighborhood landmarks.

Cities swelled with new black residents during the Great Migration. New York had the largest number of black people, followed by Washington. These from the countryside found themselves on the bottom rung of society, the poorest of the poor. Alleys became homes for many.

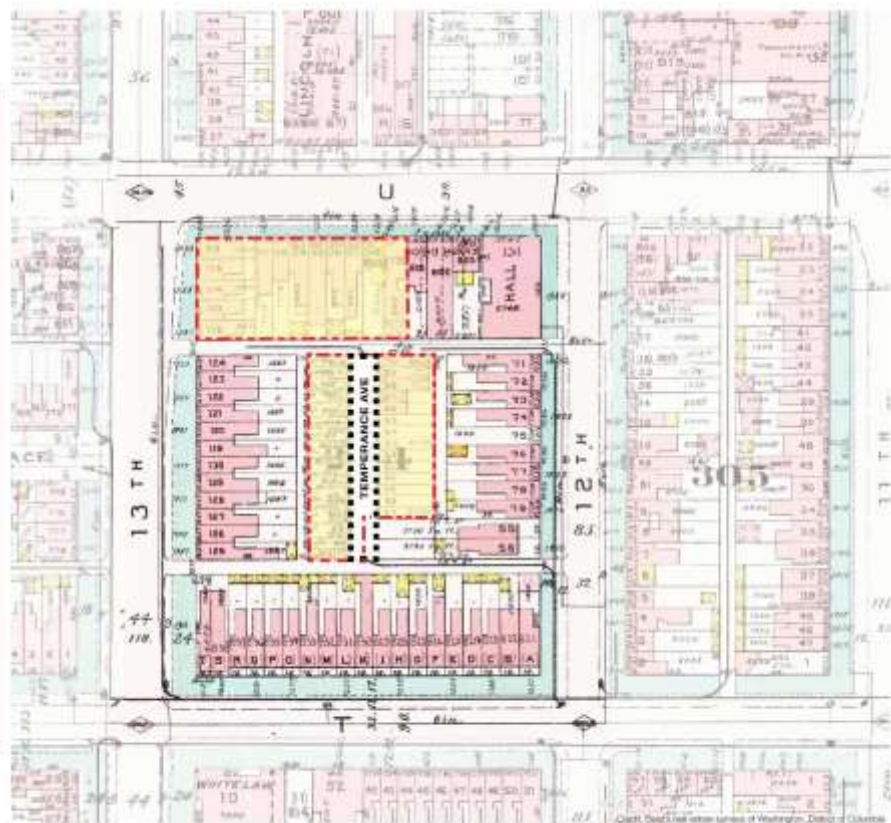
Many Washington row houses had alleys behind them. Residents realized that they could turn this into revenue by converting part of their backyards or stables along the alleys into rental units or by selling the property adjacent to the alley. Thus were born the alley dwellings. They first started developing during the Civil War when occupied soldiers fled to the city and needed a place to live. An 1892 law required that alley dwellings only be built in alleys at least thirty feet wide and looked up to sewage and water. Landlords rented to poor people, often to African Americans but also to working-class whites. In some cases, multiple families crissed a single shack, effectively making three tenements. The alleys became slums, often with no heating, electricity or plumbing.

A 1912 report by the National Civic Federation revealed that there were sixteen thousand people living in alleys in the district. The conditions were abominably unsanitary.



Many poor African Americans lived in alley dwellings, which were often just shacks without plumbing. This photo was taken in 1933 near the Cannon House Office Building, Penn and Ploughville District, Library of Congress

Credit: Ross, G. (2011). Photograph in Washington, D.C.: How Do We Weave?





Temperance Court center alley, looking south. WMATA chiller plant on left.