

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

Property Address:	1355-57 U Street NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	U Street Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	June 4, 2015	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	15-311	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett		New Construction

On behalf of owner The Goldstar Group, the architecture firm of Bonstra Haresign seeks the Board's concept review to subdivide two lots into one and add six floors to two 2-story rowhouses in the U Street Historic District - to a total height of 90 feet plus a mechanical penthouse. Zoning relief will be sought for rear yard setback and parking relief.

The two historic buildings contribute to the historic district and reveal an interesting history of neighborhood development. Both lots were initially occupied by freestanding frame dwellings pushed back considerably from the street. By 1895, the house at 1355 had been replaced by a contemporary bay-front brick house and 2-story rear brick stable. The buildings remained in residential use through the mid-20th century and by the 1950s had become a restaurant with a two story addition joining the former house and stable together. Similarly, the brick building at 1357 replaced the earlier frame residence before the turn of the 20th century. In 1925, an 18 x 60' service garage was built behind the building on the named alley, Park Place. Around the same time, the building was being used as a store and Park Place was being developed as a community of auto repair shops with four of them within a half block of each other. By 1958, a restaurant occupied the front of 1357 U Street with an auto repair and welding shop behind.

Project Description

The two buildings stand at about 28 feet in height and are surrounded by similarly scaled residential and commercial buildings on this half of the square. To the east are a two-story commercial building (Hamilton Printers), a non-contributing commercial building, and a 31-foot wide private alley belonging to the Ellington apartment building. To the west are a 15-foot wide alley and the rears of buildings that face 14th Street. At the rear is a wide alley (formerly Park Place), the recently constructed Langston Lofts, and Hamilton Playground. The proposed addition would be visible from all sides.

The new construction would be added 34 feet back from the historic facades, rising 5 floors with a projecting bay and then stepping back 10 feet on both the front and rear for the top (8th) floor. A penthouse enclosure would occupy much of the roof. The setback depth was determined by the apparent original rear walls, not including ells or additions. The rear walls, party wall between buildings, and all interior structure would be removed to align floor heights.

Evaluation

The proposal to add any substantial addition above and behind two diminutive rowhouses should be approached with restraint, with a goal of preserving the historic buildings and the character of the historic district. As a primary concern, the HPO takes issue with the amount of demolition proposed, which would leave only the side wall of 1357 and the façades, although removing the applied rock veneer and replacing the storefront may mean that much of 1357's façade may also need to be substantially rebuilt.

Secondly, the scale of the addition is not appropriate for the buildings to which it is being added. Although the applicants have lowered the height by 10 feet, the proposal is not compatible with these historic buildings or with the historic district.

There are certainly examples of high density, large construction in the U Street Historic District, but there are distinctions that allowed these to achieve a level of compatibility which the Board felt comfortable supporting. The “precedents” sited in the submission, as well as many other large projects in the district, have in common large underlying sites which allowed tall additions to spread out over a much greater area. Where they have been approved, these large additions have created a proportional balance between horizontal and vertical that is missing from this proposal. Not insignificantly, many of these projects were also been built on vacant land or took advantage of vacant lots or non-contributing buildings which were demolished and combined with occupied lots. Such projects understandably had less impact to historic resources.

Projects of significant size are also almost exclusively located on corners, where vertical expression is more easily accommodated due to the opening up of the streetscape to the surrounding blocks. Mid-block additions of the proportions proposed are not appropriate on a street of small-scale brick rowhouses. Another common element for large projects is the presence of street frontage, which serves to firmly ground the new construction. All of the cases cited by the applicants contain a certain percentage of new construction at the street face, providing access without altering historic elevations and allowing new construction to read as a separate building rather than as an addition.

If compatibility is to be achieved here, the new construction would need to follow the principles that worked for other large projects in the area. To read as a separate building, a greater distinction from the fronting historic buildings is required by employing a much greater setback. Alternately, to read as an addition, something more akin to the addition approved at 1353 U Street, which is an appropriately scaled addition for size of the lots in question, could work at 1355-57.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the proposal for an addition to 1355-57 U Street incompatible with the historic district and inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation act and that the applicants return to the Board with a more compatibly scaled design. The HPRB's decisions should not be considered endorsement for any zoning relief.