

**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:	July 9, 2015	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	15-311	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett	X	Subdivision

The Goldstar Group, represented by Bonstra/Haresign Architects, seeks concept review to subdivide two lots into one and add four floors above and six behind two 2-story row buildings in the U Street Historic District. The additions would rise to a total height of roughly 70 feet plus an 18-foot-tall mechanical penthouse. Zoning relief will be sought for rear yard setback and parking requirements.

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 By 1895, the house at 1355 had been replaced by a contemporary bay-front brick house and 2-story rear brick stable.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. 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 it 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. 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 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 2-story historic commercial building (Hamilton Printers), a 2-story non-contributing commercial building, and a 31-foot wide private alley belonging to the Ellington apartment building. To the west is a 15-foot wide alley and the rear elevations of the 2- and 3-story 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 street views on all sides.

The new construction would be added approximately 32 feet back from the facades of the historic buildings, where it would rise two floors and then would step back another 12 feet for the upper two floors. The top floor would also be pushed in from the east side by about 10 feet with a penthouse enclosure above it. The setback depth was determined by a change in construction visible on the alley wall of 1357 in the use of a different brick and a discontinuous stucco coating at the base of the front portion. It can also be seen on the inside by a shift from brick to concrete block construction. Much of the structure within the portion of 1357 to be retained is new and either replaces or supplements the original joists. Everything behind the 32 foot line would be demolished.

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 – both physically and in terms of their scale – and ensuring that the addition is compatible with the character of the historic district. In terms of physical preservation, consideration must be given to the amount of demolition, which in this case would leave only the front 32 feet of the side wall of 1357, parts of the interior structure and party wall, the façade

of 1355, and the second story façade of 1357,. It is anticipated that removal of a non-historic stone veneer on the storefront of 1357 will cause substantial damage to the bricks underneath and necessitate demolition of much of the first floor.

Secondly, the scale of the addition is out of character for the buildings to which it is being added. Although the applicants have lowered the height first from the original proposal of 100 feet to 90 feet, and then to the current 70 feet (exclusive of the penthouse) with a tiered massing, compatibility with the underlying 28-foot-tall historic buildings and with the historic district remains difficult to demonstrate.

There are certainly examples of high density, large construction projects 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 difficult to approve 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 historic buildings is required by employing an increased 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. Consideration should be given to varying the design and setback for each of the two buildings to allow them to remain distinct.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the addition to 1355-57 U Street as currently designed 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.