

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Property Address:	1481 Florida Avenue NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	U Street Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	March 26, 2015	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	15-244	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett		New Construction

On behalf of owner Madeleine Essalat, architect Norman Smith seeks conceptual review to add a four-story side addition to an end rowhouse in the U Street Historic District. The house is the last on the north side of the block and was built as one of six in 1888 as speculative housing. It differs from the others in the row due to its shallow, triangular lot and features a wider façade and a front bay of different proportions that projects off the corner (rather than front) of the house.

Florida Avenue Context

This row of six represents the longest string of rowhouses on the block, the others being built singly (1469) in groups of two (1459-61), three (1463-67), or four (1443-49) in a range of styles including Second Empire, Colonial Revival, and Arts and Crafts. The row also contains some infill construction from the 1970s as well as buildings that have been refaced or newly constructed within the past 10 years (i.e. the non-contributing building at 1441 was reclad in a contemporary skin of metal and glass panels, new apartments were constructed in a traditional character at 1455, and in a modern aesthetic at 1421). Additionally, the large, modern building at 1456 Belmont looms over this row from the north, adding to the wide range (real and perceived) in building heights. Finally, when Florida Avenue was lowered for paving or other utility work, the front yards of the houses in this block were severely impacted, resulting in a variety of retaining walls and replacement stair configurations.

The lack of uniformity in period of construction, styles, and heights is especially evident due to the curve of Florida Avenue, making all buildings on the north side visible at one time. A 2004 staff report summarizes the context: “Due to its narrow, curving alignment, with the edge of the escarpment rising sharply on the north side, the street has a distinctly different character from any other in the historic district.” The 2010 staff report for the 6-story apartment building at 1421 goes on to say that, although a “structure of this height may at first glance seem out of scale with the rowhouse context to the south and west, the building will fit comfortably within the context of large- and mid-rise apartment buildings to the east along Fourteenth Street and to the north on Belmont Road.” Similarly, the proposed addition at 1481 will sit directly against the backdrop of a mid-sized apartment building facing 15th Street.

Project Description

The project would add a sizeable addition on the west side of 1481 that springs off the rear of the bay and is separated from the historic house by a hyphen. To the north, the addition directly abuts the wall of the apartment building at 2201 15th Street. The existing door into the bay will continue to provide access to a unit in the historic building, while two new doors in the addition will provide access into the addition near grade level. About two-thirds of the first three floors, including the hyphen, would be clad in hardipanel with reveal joints, while the western third would be brick with no fenestration. A horizontal element carries across the entire façade, jutting out at the easternmost point, where the façade is slightly inset with faceted glazing.

The fourth floor is set back from the floors below and sits at the far western end of the building. Also clad in hardipanel, the top floor features a slightly projecting center bay, a pitched, standing seam metal roof, and a front and side roof deck with glass or cable railing.

Evaluation

The intent is for the addition to read as a small apartment building, distinct from the rowhouses to which it is attached. However, its shape and placement have been determined by the unusual lot configuration, required zoning rear yard setbacks, and the lack of public space on this part of the block, which normally establishes a consistent front yard setback. The result is proposed construction that is wider than and projects approximately considerably forward of the front wall of the adjoining row of houses.

The proposal must be evaluated according to the Board's guidelines for additions, which discuss design aspects such as setback, orientation, massing, scale, proportion, rhythm, height, materials and roof shape. In particular, the proposal needs further study in its setback. While the very shallow public space may allow construction much closer to the street, the prominence of the historic edifices and their relationship to the street should be respected and retained. The building's location is about 16 feet forward of the abutting rowhouse facades at its maximum and although the canted façade turns in slightly towards the historic house, this leaves an abrupt 3-story wall projecting 7 feet out from the historic bay. Given the context of this particular street – with its curve, the angle at which it meets W and 15th Streets, the angle of the abutting apartment building – some flexibility to requiring the building to align with the rest of the row is warranted. However, a more substantial setback and greater angle or arc to the canted front wall would help temper the interface between old and new.

The applicants should be encouraged to explore the possibility of obtaining zoning relief to the rear yard setback in order to push the mass of the building back to the rear of the site. Such relief would also allow the hyphen to attach to the body of the house, rather than the rear of the bay. In addition to setting the hyphen back, its height – which does not seem to serve an interior function on the upper floors – should be lowered to allow the new construction to read more as its own building than an addition to the rowhouse.

With a greater setback and lowered hyphen, other suggestions for improving the compatibility of the proposal include more closely relating the footprint of the fourth floor to those below; lowering the fourth floor roof as much as possible; eliminating the projecting horizontal fins on the façade; eliminating the roof deck from the front and west side; selecting a small unit size for the cladding material to relate to the size of masonry units throughout the historic district; and adding windows to the western third of the building to reflect the surrounding residential context.

As designs progress, consideration should be given to placement of the meters in a manner that conforms to the Board's Guidelines and a single leadwalk and reduction in the amount of paving at the front yard should be included.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board request the applicant to refine the proposal as outlined above and return to the Board for further review.