

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

Property Address:	1901-05 9½ Street NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	U Street Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	January 28, 2015	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	16-101		New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett	X	Alteration

On behalf of owner Evergreen Urban II LLC, architect Eric Gellman of Bonstra Haresign, seeks concept review to add to the roofs of two alley dwellings and construct a new dwelling between them. The three lots formerly housed identical, narrow, two-story dwellings at 1901, 1903 and 1905, built in 1889. These formed the end of a long row of alley dwellings along the east side of 9½ Street, with a similar row facing them on the west. The latter were demolished in 1929 to make way for the Phelps Trade School, facing onto Vermont Avenue.

It is unknown when 9½ Street was designated as a street, but given its mid-block location, it was initially an alley and the residences lining it were alley dwellings, a distinct building type in the District of Columbia. As fully described in HPO's publication, *The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey*, alley dwellings were ubiquitously two stories with no basement, two bays in width, in the vicinity of 12 x 30 feet, and simple in their form and detailing, as was consistent with their original purpose of providing affordable housing. Of the remaining 108 alley dwellings in the city, none is more than two stories.

Site Description

By 1959, both 1903 and 1907 9½ Street had been demolished. The vacant lot where 1907 stood has been appended to the lot facing 9th Street and is unlikely to be built on; it separates the three subject lots from the others on the alley. Subsequently, the house at 1915 was demolished. It was replaced in 2002 with a 3-story building that maintained the 2-story brick form of the existing row, with a third floor mansard above. The initial proposal to build a two story residence was found not to meet the zoning code and the third floor was added to what the HPRB reviewed to allow for parking on the first floor.

The buildings at 1901 and 1905 were structurally impacted by the demolition of the house between them and have faced other changes over time. Window sizes have been altered and interior framing has been supplemented and partly replaced. The façade of 1901 was rebuilt in part with concrete block and brick veneer. Despite the changes, however, the corbelled cornices were preserved or rebuilt. The height of the buildings has not changed, keeping them contextual with the surrounding alleyscape and with the alley dwelling as a building type.

Regarding the integrity of the buildings, it should be noted that alley dwellings differ considerably from their street-facing counterparts. Because of the substandard quality of their initial construction and lack of investment as they turned increasingly into rental units, the condition of alley dwellings was typically inferior to buildings that faced onto streets. As cited in the *Alley Buildings Survey*, a surge in the desirability of alley residences beginning in the 1940s brought an influx of new owners who made significant changes to the building stock. Many of the alley dwellings remaining in Foggy Bottom, Capitol Hill, Georgetown and other neighborhoods were substantially reconstructed at the

time, and yet are still considered to retain their integrity. For this reason, the HPO finds that the amount of demolition/reconstruction in-kind that is proposed is not incompatible.

Project Description

The project proposes to construct a 3-story mansard-roofed building on the vacant lot at 1903 and add third floors with mansard roofs to 1901 and 1905 to create a unified set. Each would be brick on the first two floors with a third floor and roof deck above and a fully excavated basement below. On their mansards, 1901 and 1905 would feature shed dormers with 3 windows each, while 1903 would have 2 individual gable dormers.

Rear additions approximately 21' in length would be added to 1901 and 1905, which are currently 32' long, and would create a continuous three story edifice along the rear with 1903. This elevation would be composed of hardipanel siding and large, uniformly placed windows. On the front, the plans call for the facades to be "repaired and replaced as required," although the extent of demolition and reconstruction is unclear. Inside, the buildings will be completely reframed.

Evaluation

As with the three story residence at 1915 9½ Street, new construction of this size on the vacant 1903 9½ Street is not incompatible, and like 1915 does so in a manner that introduces a three story building while relating to the two story masonry character of the row. Similarly, the concept of adding to the rears of 1901 and 1905 is generally compatible, although design changes are encouraged. However, the proposal to add on top of 1901 and 1905 is not a compatible alteration to these buildings or within the historic district. Although the applicants point to the alterations to 1901 and 1905 to support further altering the buildings, any changes must still be compatible with the overall context.

At a minimum, roof additions should follow the Board's design guideline *Roof Decks and Roof Additions: Design Considerations and Submission Requirements*. The guidelines discourage roof additions that "alter significant features of a building, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass." If a visible roof addition is deemed appropriate at all, it "requires a substantial setback, the extent of which depends on the height of the addition, the height of the building, the height of adjacent buildings, the topography of the area, the width of the street, the relationship of the subject building to its surroundings, and views from public vantage points surrounding the building."

As currently proposed, the additions to 1901 and 1905 are not set back, are visible from the street, and fundamentally alter the "significant features: identified in the guidelines. Nor is this type of addition consistent with the Board's reviews of other applications to add on top of residential buildings. Most importantly, it is not compatible with or appropriate for the alley dwelling building type in size, form, massing, or scale.

Recommendations

The HPO toured the two buildings and discussed the project with the applicants, indicating that the buildings would need to retain their two story character, but could possibly accommodate additions set back from the façade. This option should be further explored with sufficient setbacks to allow the original massing of the buildings to be fully read and understood. Views from the north and from the west down the two arms of 9½ Street will be important in evaluating the impact of any roof additions.

Further, the HPO encourages that consideration be given to opening the windows back up to their original size on the front and designing them to be more contextual on the rear. Some sort of distinction at the rear is needed so that each house reads as a separate entity rather than as a single three story apartment building.

Finally, visible roof decks are unlikely to be found compatible in this context, and as the plans evolve, a more detailed demolition plan is needed.

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept incompatible with the U Street Historic District and inconsistent with the Act.