HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Greater U Street Historic District**	(**x**) Agenda
Address:	**1909 12th Street, NW**	( ) Consent
		( ) Concept
		(**x**) Alteration
Meeting Date:	**December 16, 2010**	( ) New Construction
Case Number:	**11-075**	( ) Demolition
Staff Reviewer:	**Eldra D. Walker**	( ) Subdivision

Brian Ortiz of Ortiz Development seeks approval for completed work that exceeded the scope of approved plans at 1909 12th Street, NW. 1909 12th Street NW, a two-story brick semi-detached dwelling, was constructed between 1861 and 1873. The property was one of the earliest improvements to its square and, along with the similar properties to south at 1901, 1903 and 1905, has survived the numerous transitions and interventions on the block.

Background
In June 2010, the Board approved a concept proposal for the redevelopment of the property calling for a side and rear addition, both of which were to be "subordinate to the size and form" of the historic house. Third floor living space would be created by replacing the rear portion of the gable with a flat roof, while the street facing portion of the gable would remain in its existing location. The Board granted conceptual approval with the strict understanding that "the joists of the front slope of the roof would be retained and supplemented, rather than demolished and reconstructed." Throughout the permit review process, the HPO worked closely with the applicant to ensure that the height of the building would not change. During subsequent DCRA reviews, the side addition was removed from the scope of work. Despite the multi-layered review process, the height of the building was increased during construction and the street facing portion of the roof was replaced and set in a higher position. In addition to these deviations from the plans, HVAC equipment was placed on the roof of the building, clearly visible from the street, a brick wall was added at the entry to the side court, and the supportive jack arches were removed from the second story windows.

Evaluation and Recommendation
This case raises three preservation considerations – the increased level of demolition, the alterations to the historic roof form, and the height added to the building. Each of these is inconsistent and incompatible with the Board's established guidelines and principles.

In the "Roofs on Historic Buildings" guidelines, the Board informs property owners that "roofs are one of the most important features of historic buildings" as "their shape, elements, details and materials can significantly contribute to the appearance of buildings." The Board advises permit applicants that "altering roof shapes, materials, elements and details will affect their design. Thus, any alterations must be undertaken with extreme care to ensure that the character of the roof is retained." Roof form is so important that the Board finds that "rarely is it appropriate to change the shape of an existing roof. To do so almost always drastically alters the character of a historic building. If, for compelling functional or economic reasons, the shape of the roof must be changed, it should be done in such a manner as to retain the historic character of the building."

The historic gable roof of 1909 12th St NW was an integral historical and contextual element of the building. Just as the roof form modifications detract from the building's character, the additional height changes the façade's composition and severs the relationship with its neighbors at 1901, 1903, and 1905. Surviving examples of the low-pitched gable roof form is rare in this portion of Washington, DC and is characteristic of a distinct form of residential construction before and just after the Civil War. By the 1870s, row-house roofs were uniformly flat. Within this context, neighboring blocks filled with decorative Victorians and grand Queen Annes, these small houses reflect a period of austerity and modesty in traditional building construction.

During conceptual review, the HPO recommended approval with the qualification that the roof joists be "supplemented and retained, rather than demolished and reconstructed." Since the entire roof was removed and replaced in addition to the destruction of the rear wall and ell-wing, the level of demolition exceeded that which was approved by the Board. According to the DC Preservation Regulations, DCMR 10A 302.1 (c), work constitutes demolition of the building with "the removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of the roof along with all or substantially all of one or more exterior walls." The Board must consider the impact of the increased level of demolition on the historic resource.

Prior to the alterations, jack arches supported the window and door openings. The property's second story window sills had been raised at some point, most likely to accommodate the porch, but the placement of the windows high on the façade – pushed nearly to the top- was typical of properties built during this period. The high placement of the second story windows is still evident at 1901, 1903, and 1905. By removing the jack arches, the sense of how the original building was constructed is lost.

The Board, whose guidelines are broad and general, interprets and applies their adopted preservation principles within the context of each case. For this case, the Board granted leniency in concept based on a proposal which assured nominal loss of historic fabric, a deferential rear addition, and conservation of the building height and street-facing roof form. By not adhering to the approved plans, tangible and intangible historic fabric and meaning were needlessly destroyed.

The HPO recommends that the Board deny the permit as inconsistent with the Act and direct the applicant to:

1. **Correct the violation by restoring the historic roof slope, façade height and window lintel condition.**
2. **Remove and relocate the rooftop mechanical equipment to a less conspicuous location on the property.**