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

Landmark/District: **Walter Reed Army Medical Center Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **6800¹ Georgia Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **May 4, 2017** (x) New construction
Case Number: **17-304** (x) Alterations

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

The applicant, TPWR Developer LLC, a joint venture of Hines-Urban Atlantic-Triden and the lessee of the District-owned portion of the Walter Reed campus, requests conceptual review of a proposal to construct an apartment-condominium-retail complex at the south corner of the campus, adjacent to contributing buildings 8 and 9 (General Officers Quarters) and 90 (fire station).

Background

In 2012, the Board reviewed the small-area plan for the redevelopment of the portion of the campus to be transferred to the District of Columbia. The Board does not have approval authority for master plans, so it offered some comments about further development of the still-sketchy plans.

The HPO report at the time noted that “[t]he following are points that ought to be emphasized in its final text and its implementation,” going on to say that “[i]llustrated as blocks at this point, the buildings have the potential to make a positive visual statement or to loom over or encroach upon historic Buildings 8, 9, 90 and 11.”² The Board members made some preliminary comments, generally favorable, and generally in keeping with the points raised in the staff report. The Board expressed particular interest in retaining a feeling of the unity of the installation’s character and identity, and continuity and connectedness within the campus, and maintaining views into the property.

In October 2015, the Board reviewed TPWR Developer LLC’s master plan for the campus, which was a refinement of the small-area plan, adding more specifics of the developer’s intent. Among other things, the applicant requested the Board’s support of the proposed heights for new construction. With regard to the present project area, the staff report said at the time:

¹ The application refers to the site as 6900 Georgia, as most of the campus has been identified previously. Yet, the campus has been divided into several assessment and taxation lots and the Board has recently reviewed a conceptual subdivision. Some lots already have their own official addresses according to the city’s GIS databases, and the buildings will eventually bear various street numbers. As this complex would face the portion of Georgia Avenue between Aspen and Butternut Streets, the 6800 block of Georgia, the street number has herein been given as 6800, to differentiate it from other projects on the campus, or from the campus as a whole.

² The small-area plan called for two large buildings here, designated “U” and “V,” and these were more or less combined in the master plan and referred to as U/V or V/U.

Building U/V, southeast corner of the campus (see pages 46-49): Another five-story building, this site would most benefit from having a specific program attached to it, so that the reality of the project, and especially the building's footprint, could be properly evaluated. It is quite close behind the General Officers' Quarters, Buildings 9 and 10. The simulation makes it appear that there is an attempt to step down toward those buildings (see page 47), but the inset site plan seems to put that mass almost immediately behind Building 8. The good thing about the footprint of the building is that it is broken up into north-south pavilions that would face Buildings 8 and 9 end on. Yet, the whole is sprawling and not only close to those historic buildings, but wraps around the contributing fire station, Building 90. Some credit should be given, however, to forgoing an additional building in the heavily treed area west of Building 9...

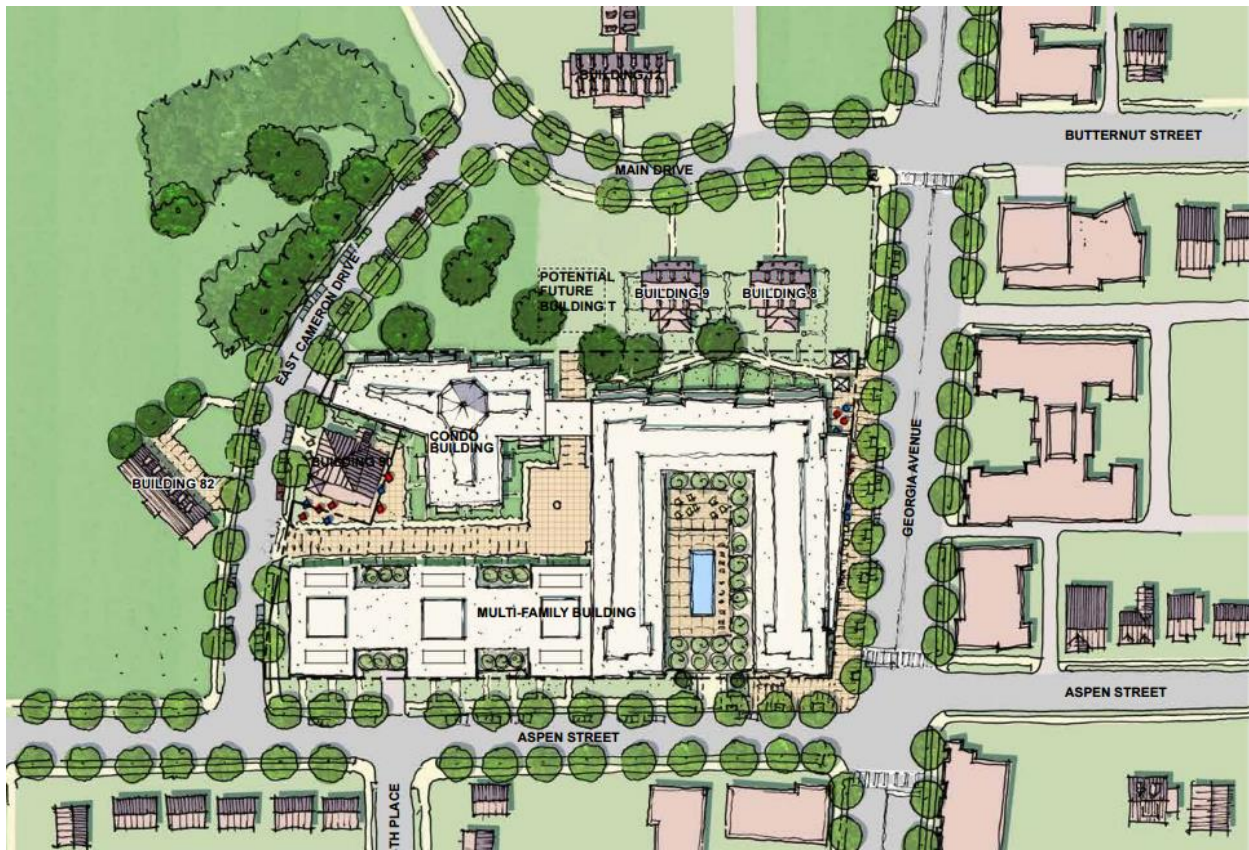


A detail of the 2015 master plan.

The Board's action generally supported the heights proposed for new buildings, with the caveat that more information on massing, views, the treatment of spaces between and the landscape in general is necessary to be definitive on each. The Board expressed some concern about possible crowding of Buildings 8 and 9 by the buildings in this area.

The proposal

The project is a complex of three masses: Building A, a five-story-plus penthouse building containing apartments and retail at Georgia Avenue and Aspen Street; Building B, a four-story-and-penthouse apartment building facing Aspen; and Building C, a five-story-and-penthouse condominium building wrapping around the historic firehouse (Building 90). The three parts would stand atop a parking garage that would serve the buildings and the adjacent historic Buildings 8 and 9.



The current site plan.

The small-area plan and master plan were partly predicated on the idea that substantial new construction at the periphery of the historic core would be necessary to defray the cost of preservation of the historic buildings. Most of the new construction will take place in the northern tier of the campus, where there are few historic buildings, and the new ones would take the place of the enormous Building 2, which is to be razed. The Board previously did not offer objections to large buildings at this site and elsewhere, but took a wait-and-see attitude regarding the relationship of new buildings to adjacent historic ones, in this case, expressing interest mainly in the relationship to the three-story officers' quarters, Buildings 8 and 9.

Building A

Tall buildings pose a challenge in relating to the lower campus buildings, not simply as a matter of height alone, but also to the horizontal emphasis of the Georgian Revival buildings that max out at four stories. Buildings 8 and 9 are imposing at three stories on a base, yet the adjacent Building A is considerably taller, reaching six stories and a penthouse on the north side. One thing that improves the relationship between the old and new buildings is the elimination of much of the paving between them, to create a park-like space. One revision that would improve this relationship—and the experience within that space—would be to recess the two-story pieces between the five-story repeating 'pavilions' on Building A. Because an observer on the ground would experience mostly the lower floors, providing more space there—and emphasizing the pleasant vertical proportions of those pavilions—would improve the project.

The new buildings pick up the campus's most characteristic material, brick. They are designed with distinct bases, middles and tops. The setbacks of the penthouses are important, and the

expression of an “attic” story helps break up the whole and lower the apparent mass. Principally for reasons of cost, the upper stories of the buildings are clad in fiber-cement panels, distinct from the brick below. The dark color of the material on Building A is unfortunate; a different, lighter color, perhaps the greens or beiges of the campus, would be more compatible. The height/heaviness of the top floors would be ameliorated by the parapet atop the fifth floor being differentiated from the walls below it.

The spandrels on Building A are presumably also fiber-cement, and they too are inordinately dark. Patterned *brick* spandrels would be more compatible, as they could add some texture and interest while creating more a sense of a wall with punched openings, in contrast to the present giant-order piers that emphasize height and verticality.

Similar to the attic, the pergola proposed for the pool court on the Aspen Street side is heavy and dark. It would be more compatible to eliminate such a feature on the street, but at the very least, it should be of light color and framing and not project forward of the flanking wings.

Because Aspen Street drops from east to west, the ground floor of the west “wing” of Building A will be even taller than the already high commercial space on Georgia. West of the residential entrance pavilion, the space should probably be carved into two floors, ground and mezzanine. The residential entrance is already trying hard to divide its very tall opening with horizontals, but when one compares the height of that entire opening to the height of the actual door, one perceives the problem of scale and of the disproportionate extent of glazing above.

There should probably be more consistency in the height of the cast stone bases on each side; they appear to be very low at the retail spaces, very high at the corners, and perhaps nonexistent elsewhere. This is a challenge because of the sloping site, but each elevation needs more study in this regard.

Crucial is the positioning of any rooftop mechanical, so that it and its screening largely disappears to the viewer on the ground and does not become yet another layer atop this tall and multi-stepped building. To the extent possible, the mechanical should be wrapped by the occupiable penthouse spaces, and mechanical should be depicted in future submissions.

A building as large as Building A does not need the addition of 25-foot-tall signage to identify it or the campus as a whole. Major apartment buildings have traditionally prospered with much more restrained signage, and this one will carry not only substantial signage at the residential entrance, but also over each retail space. Neither the campus nor this section of Georgia Avenue is characterized by such signage. The canopies carrying some of the retail signage are mounted too high, at the storefront-cornice level. Relating better to human scale would be more functional and better visually break up the very tall ground floor.

As the building is orthogonal and parallel to Aspen Street, the east front is mostly at an oblique angle to Georgia. Yet, the storefronts have been pushed out parallel to Georgia, because the zoning regulations for the campus require the building to meet the property line. This is not so much a fault in the building’s design, but it does reduce the amount of sidewalk café space in front of it, including an opportunity to introduce more green, in order to extend the idea of the campus’s green margin. As it is, the sidewalk café space gets pushed around the north corner, which might otherwise be green.

Building B

Building B is technically a wing of Building A, but because of its lower height and the long total frontage, it has been expressed as a distinct building, with different massing and details. Because the campus and these portions of Georgia and Aspen are characterized by detached buildings, Building B should be further distinguished from Building A by means of a reveal on the Aspen Street side that would better separate them visually.

Building B has similar struggles with the slope, uncertain where the bottom of bays should land relative to the base of the building or the grade. They should probably just come to the ground, as they nearly do at the east end.

It is too early to tell whether the proposed retaining walls around the building are preferable or not. They appear to be a device to heighten the grade, so that the building's base, constrained by the roof level of the garage below, does not look too high. It may be better to berm the yards, or a combination of berms and walls.

The attic story looks a bit tall proportionally, although the use of a cornice does serve to differentiate the main parapet from the walls below, unlike at Building A.

Although the principal consideration is the compatibility of the new buildings with the campus, in terms of creating a strong design and composition, the recessed terraces on the proper front of Building B, facing Aspen Street, are a weak point. One could more easily get away with that on the rear, facing the loading lane. For more on balconies, see the below discussion of Building C.

The entrance to the subterranean garage is at the west end of Building B. While making it possible for residents to find it, it should be screened as much as feasible from view from Aspen Street. As the garage will presumably be used for retail customers as well, the nature and extent of any future directional signage is an important question.

Building C

The third piece is a condominium building connected below grade to Building A. Building C is the most classical of the three, but it has an irregular footprint, wrapping around the north and east sides of the contributing fire station (Building 90). The firehouse will presumably serve as arts or amenity space.

At five stories and a penthouse, Building C does loom over the two-story firehouse, in a way that seems problematic at first glance. At second glance, however, the proximity to the utilitarian and altered firehouse—placing it in a more urban context, not isolated in a parking lot—may improve its context. But toward this end, the site work surrounding the historic building should be further revised, to introduce more green space to soften the extensive paving for the loading access lane to the south. One of the unique benefits of the firehouse is its vehicle bays in front, a reason to retain its driveway apron, and an opportunity to program that paved space, while the proposed paving on the immediate south and west of the firehouse can and should be reduced.

The porches or galleries on the north side of the building help modulate it, and they relate to other porches on the historic hospital campus. The nature and use of the cantilevered balconies is unclear at this time. They appear not to be functional, but if that is the case, they should be light and have minimal projection, like most such metal balconies on traditional buildings. Then, they would also help decorate and modulate the building.

Potential Building T

There is no proposal for an additional building in the present application, yet the site plans (see, for instance, pages 14 and 15) depict a rectangular footprint for another building north of this site and west of Building 9. A similar placeholder appeared in the small-area plan of 2012, as such plans often include all contingencies and tend to fill in everything that looks like a buildable space. But no such building appears in the developers' master plan of 2015, as mentioned above, for which the Board and staff complimented it, because the effects of the presently proposed construction upon Buildings 8 and 9 are already bound to be significant.

The draft design guidelines cite the importance of retaining the "cohesive visual space" around Buildings 8 and 9, as well as some other significant landscape areas. When the Board reviewed a conceptual parcelization/subdivision of the campus in December, it approved in concept most of the proposed parcels, but with several exceptions, this spot among them: "the master plan and design guidelines have shifted away the notion of a possible new building west of the GOQs (Buildings 8 and 9) in Land Bay K.3. Therefore, the east line of the K.4 open space should be moved further east."

The present site plan drawings do not account sufficiently for the quality or number of trees west of Building 9, nor entirely for the effects of the widening of the adjacent (on the west) right of way into the treed area. We would recommend that the potential building be removed from consideration, in part, to minimize or mitigate the effects of the present proposal on the General Officers' Quarters.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board support the project in concept, with the applicant to address the above comments and any additional Board comments.