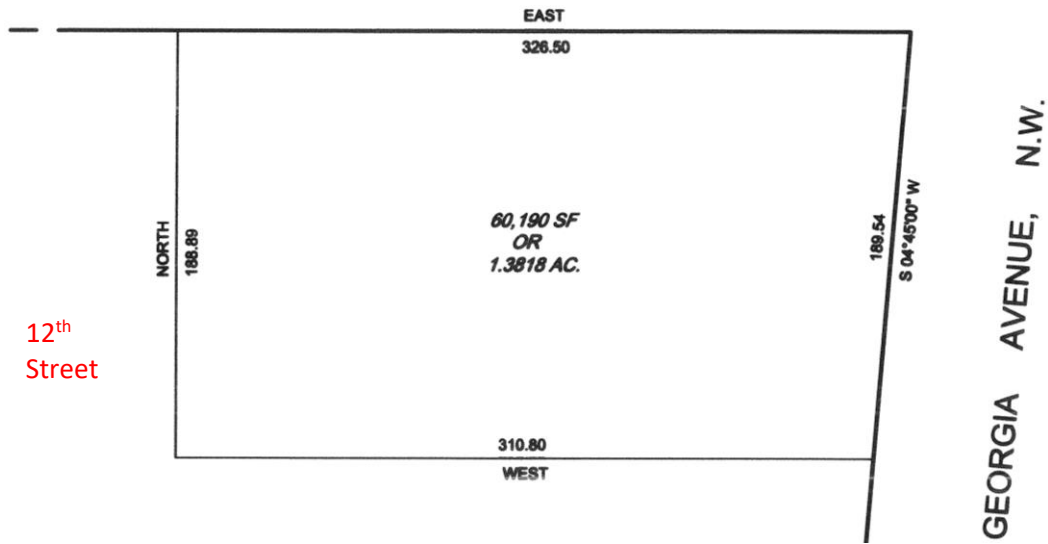


FERN STREET, N.W.



New construction

In 2018 and this year, the Board approved concepts for a townhouse project at the south end of the campus, abutting Aspen Street. It is a new building type for the campus, but unlike that project, the present townhouse project was anticipated in the 2012 small-area plan for the campus (<https://dcmov.app.box.com/v/WRAMCSmallAreaPlan>) and the 2015 master plan for redevelopment, both of which were commented upon by the Board, as was the 2018 preservation master plan and design guidelines (<https://theparksdc.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/WalterReed-SubmissionFinal-lowResV3.pdf>). The schematic site plans from each of these plans appear on the next page.

A first observation on the application is that the site plan feels congested, numbering nearly 30 more buildings than the previous plans for “Fern Park”—characterized as a low-density neighborhood in master plan—which is more than could have been accommodated simply by replacing the formerly anticipated commercial building with townhouses. Although these earlier plans were illustrative, they did create some expectations about what would be built, because there were more than schematic drawings.

The small-area plan proposed H-plan alleys of 20 feet wide and 20-foot rear yards, with the houses fronting the streets and mostly backing up to the longer east-west alleys, each stick of townhouses largely screening the rear of another, similar to the approach of the recent townhouse project at the south end of campus. The plan’s text provided the following guidance:

All proposed new buildings and major entrances should be oriented towards the street or near corners wherever possible. Proposed townhomes in this sub-area should be designed to front along 12th, 13th, Fern and Elder Streets, thereby encouraging visual interest for pedestrians and further establishing the residential nature of the area....

Alleyways proposed throughout the sub-area help further establish a “center of the block” feeling throughout rather than the having the backs of buildings facing

sidewalks, and thus should be designed to provide a pleasant, safe environment for pedestrians to walk through and for residents to look at....



2012 small-area plan (70 townhomes/duplex buildings and one commercial building)



**2015 master plan and 2018 preservation plan/design guidelines
(70 townhomes/duplex buildings and one commercial building)**

The small-area plan notwithstanding, the master plan illustration had effectively done away with rear yards except as approaches to garages (the zoning regulations require no rear yards). But the front yards had been retained.

There are at least two ways to look at the proposed density. The Board could look at the pattern of development on the campus, including the demolished arrays of interwar barrack-type hospital wards, and find that this is more congested than any present or previous pattern. The alternate is to dismiss these blocks as lacking historic character, demanding a lower standard of compatibility.

The additional density of the present site plan harms the site plan in two respects. First, the depths of the front yards are reduced on Fern Street and within the development. The small-area plan called for "Explor[ing] minimum 20 feet pedestrian zones distance from building face to curb for landscaped front yards, pedestrian circulation and curbside rain gardens and trees...."

and illustrated that full 20 feet in front of porches. In this application, the distance is 14.7 feet from curb to the Fern Street porches, leaving a 5.3-foot planting strip inside the public sidewalk. (The porches themselves are said to project six feet, but look shallower in some of the sections. A proper porch depth is an important detail, both for its function and its proportionality to the house behind.)

Second, many of the units have been turned perpendicular to Elder Street, addressing that right-of-way with a narrow green strip and, beyond, exposing to view the internal paving and the rears of the buildings, with their garages, siding, and penthouses. There are some screen walls or fences suggested (see pages 34 and 35), but in those locations on the planting strips in the right-of-way, they would have to be no taller than 42 inches and mostly open. The informal sides of the four-story townhouses would face Elder; the southern porticoes of the stacked units are right at the Elder Street sidewalk. Front and back, the windows are said to be Andersen 100 Series single-hungs of Fibrex composite (i.e., plastic and wood fiber), a product that is typically not approved on the fronts of buildings in historic districts because of its joinery and the fact that it may, but not necessarily will, have external muntins or “grilles.” (The doors are to be fiberglass, which is acceptable if smooth and painted.)

The heights are generally consistent with what the Board has reviewed at the master plan level. Plans have always called for three- and four-story buildings here, with the houses facing Fern Street to be lower, relating to the single-family houses across the street and outside the campus. This idea was incorporated into the zoning regulations, with the Fern Street buildings not to exceed 45 feet tall, and the rest no taller than 55, both heights a bit taller than those specified in the master plan. Within that greater height, this application calls for walk-out roof access on the stacked units, which means higher parapets to bound roof terraces—when the master plan seemed to indicate rear decks.

Fern Street

The houses on Fern have improved, but they require more attention to detail. It would be better to move the windows on the side elevation farther from the front corner and to have a greater front roof overhang. The dormer should sit a bit higher on the roof, which would also reduce the heights of the windows somewhat, a proper hierarchy relative to those below. The porch roof is too high relative to the first-floor openings, and the columns are too wide. The side elevation of the attic would be better with a single window. The lintels or flat arches will have to be developed; they need not project, but they look too thin.

13th Street

The three-story townhouses are the most successful for being simple and avoiding the issues attendant upon adding an additional floor. The rows are pretty successful as shown, although there is strict repetition of windows.

12th Street

These four-story townhouses suffer from the same regimentation of the fenestration as the three-story ones, but exacerbated by continuation into a fourth floor. Separate punched openings should be explored across the top floor, distinguishing the openings from those in the projecting bay below, and avoiding such regimentation of windows.

In its earlier reviews of the campus plans, the Board adopted the staff recommendation that “any proposals for four-story townhouses render the top floor as a well-proportioned attic story.” So, the 2018 preservation plan stated that:

Four-story townhouses should include massing and articulation that brings the scale of the buildings down. To achieve this, the fourth story of such buildings could be expressed as a distinct attic, have a variation in color or material, have a setback, or utilize architectural elements such as cornices to break down the mass of the building.

The applicant has opted for only a change of material at the fourth floors, but these call for more of an effort than horizontal lapped fiber-cement siding. Canting the wall rearward and at least cladding it with a traditional roofing-like material would improve it.

Stacked units

The four-story stacked units are the most problematic. Generally, they share the same issues of proportion and materials at the attics. The top stories have been visually reduced by bringing the masonry to the windowsills, but they are then heightened with the addition of a parapet bounding the roof terrace. Most of the attics are again clad with just lap siding.

The design explicitly references the 1930s hospital wards. But there probably should be no literal references to a building type so different, especially as the spacing of the bays, the stepping of the buildings, and sometimes the color selection makes these still more distinct from those historic buildings.

The Georgia Avenue-facing buildings might be the most successful, because they emulate an apartment building and begin to articulate the top story. If it is to read as a single building, however, it has to reorganize its bay and pier widths. It also should probably explore other colors, maybe darker earth tones, for trim.

Those buildings depicted on pages 19 through 24 step more with the grade. Two buildings on the same grade may be seen as a successful unified composition, but the odd number of buildings on each row and their stepping isolate the central building without it functioning as a central pavilion or focal point, somewhat spoiling the arrangement. Therefore, an alternative of emphasizing the distinction between each building should be explored.

An effort has been made to give the Elder-Street-facing buildings a southern façade, but the blind openings are not very successful. The porticoes would be at the Elder Street sidewalk.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board recommend clearance of the subdivision and request revisions to the concept for new construction along the lines suggested above, including refining the fourth stories, the fenestration, the details, the window products, and the spacing of bays and piers, especially at the Georgia Avenue buildings. It is further recommended that the applicant consider a site plan that is somewhat less congested, with more buildings fronting Elder Street and deeper front yards.