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

Landmark/District: **Walter Reed Army Medical Center Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **6900 Georgia Avenue NW**

Meeting Date: **May 27, 2021** (x) New construction
Case Numbers: **21-220** (x) Revised concept

The applicant, Vicki Davis, agent for the ground-lessee and developer TPWR Developer LLC (a joint venture of Hines-Urban Atlantic-Triden), requests the Board's review of a concept to construct 50 townhouses at the southern end of the Walter Reed campus, between Aspen Street, Main Drive, Building 17 (contributing) and Building 14 (non-contributing).

In July 2018, the Board approved a townhouse project in concept, with conditions, but as the two-year approval period expired, the applicant submitted substantial revisions. The reduction of the number of units since 2018 has improved the site plan, allowing for more landscaping and a better orientation of the homes.

When the Board reviewed the project in March, it requested the following revisions:

- (1) the penthouses should be pushed back farther on at least the northernmost and southernmost rows or, better still, the terraces should be on the rear of those rows and, if visible from public spaces, the penthouses should have their elevations more designed and perhaps some kind of loggia added;
- (2) any rooftop privacy screens should be concealed;
- (3) the pattern of the units should be revised slightly to have a less random and more traditional rowhouse rhythm;
- (4) the triple-ganged windows should be eliminated from the two-story facades;
- (5) the brick should wrap around at least the rear of the east-end unit exposed on the second row from Main Drive, if not all the end units;
- (6) the mechanical units should be positioned so as not to be visible from public space;
- (7) any vents should be through the roof and/or rear walls;
- (8) the end elevations should be restudied to improve upon the unconvincing cornice termination; and
- (9) areaways, fences and railings should be further developed, and fences and railings be kept to a minimum number and height, made of solid steel or iron.

Many of these items have been addressed or will be addressed at permit time. This report notes these conditions and focuses on the significant revisions.

Sections and aerial perspectives provide the best understanding to date of the front window wells on the north-facing houses. The notes state that railings shall be tubular steel. Consistent with

the Board's previous recommendation (and perhaps with the exception of heavy-gauge posts), fences or railings in front should not be tubular; they should be solid steel (welded). Although literally lighter, tubular-metal rails and fences have a wider profile, they are assembled with brackets, the rails tend to be U channels, and posts and pickets are topped with applied caps. Such a product is acceptable for the rear railings, but as a consequence of tubular and thinner-gauge metal, such products are also less durable, with pickets or balusters being able to be easily kicked out of plumb and out of shape.

The Board may also weigh in on the proposed use of cluster mailboxes. There's no compelling reason why each house could not have its own mailbox or slot in front, but a few cluster mailboxes are less problematic in this campus setting than on a typical street.

The window products are better.

The buildings now have a more unified and generally symmetrical composition and a rhythm of openings and bays. A uniform brick wraps around the ends of each building and to the rear of the units on either end, as the Board requested.

The ends of the building need not be so elaborate and could use simplification. The degree of detail seems unnecessary where there are few functional openings. The array of panels at center, which is presumably meant to echo the window-and-panel configuration on the front of the end units, is unsuccessful and should be eliminated. The proper organization of the end elevation is really determined by the termination of the cornice; returning the cornice to the rear corners of each building demands a more formal elevation, such as that offered. Terminating the cornice at the penthouse, as on page 28, relieves the side elevation of that formality. HPO believes that this latter cornice treatment is acceptable, but the choice is the Board's. The most useful revision is the stepped roofline of the elevation, which better integrates the penthouse and divides the elevation into front, middle and rear zones, helping organize the window openings and allowing for more options for the cornice return.

The biggest revision relates to the penthouses and decks. The penthouses have not been pushed rearward, nor have the terraces been shifted to the rear of the northernmost and southernmost rows. The penthouses are still to be sided with fiber-cement lap siding, but the openings have been better organized to align with those of the floors below.

Loggias have been added to the front terraces. This is characterized as concealment of the penthouses behind, but the effect is really one of an implied floor, beginning to fill in the terrace and nearly creating symmetry in the side elevations. In that sense, it is positive, and theoretically a solution to the squatness of the two-story units. But it raises some new issues. First, the double piers read too heavy. Second, it is a weakness that the portico design varies considerably from building to building, caused by different numbers of units and different locations of projections. Third, the spacing of the columns also sometimes varies within a single building; if classical elements are adopted, they should follow classical principles. Fourth, the porticoes are more successful where the building is read as three- or five-part, as opposed to four; a successful portico would likely stretch across an entire building and have the central portion emphasized. Fifth, the porticoes atop the end units with bay projections are awkward, and within the logic of those buildings, the entire fronts of those end units should probably project. Sixth, the porticoes set up future problems.

Once the units are sold, they become subject to the preferences of many individual owners, unless there is a very strong maintenance regime or covenants in place. Some owners naturally may wish to make the porticoes functional, by roofing them or at least turning them into pergolas or awning frames to shade the terraces. Those owners who have no porticoes may wish to build something similar or, worse, something different. It is likely that many owners will want to enclose the spaces entirely. Structures that have no function are more susceptible to neglect over time. The experience with rear porches in historic districts is that many have been demolished or reconstructed, and most have been filled in, in all manner of forms even within a single row. Without preservation review, the city would today have many more *front* porches enclosed, otherwise unfortunately altered or demolished. When alteration of new construction is proposed here, the *historic preservation* claim will be less clear. Except for the potential cacophony, why not redesign new buildings? It might be better to anticipate the problem and build consistent, shallower canopies attached to the penthouses. Like the furnishings on the terrace, this will all be visible, but it may obviate the need for umbrellas and awnings.

The drawings depict low walls dividing the units' individual portions of the roof terrace. As the potential for visible, taller privacy screens appearing only at the permit-application stage was raised in the last staff report, this must be interpreted as the applicant's commitment not to build such higher screens or fences. But this is another area potentially subject to modification by the owners and something to be avoided. Overall, the massing of the buildings has improved, and the roofline at the ends has better integrated the penthouse. It would still be better to conceal the outward-facing terraces and to turn the two-story units into three-story.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept with the conditions that:

- 1. the penthouses be pushed back farther on at least the northernmost and southernmost rows, or the terraces be returned to the back of those houses, or the revised scheme be further revised to the satisfaction of the Board;*
- 2. there be no rooftop privacy screens or fences in addition to or taller than the walls now depicted dividing the terrace between units;*
- 3. the side/end elevations of the buildings be simplified, including the elimination of the central panels, which would be accompanied by a shorter return of the cornices;*
- 4. any vents be through the roof and/or rear walls;*
- 5. mechanical equipment be concealed from frontal views of the buildings, and*
- 6. fences and front railings not exceed the number and height shown, to be fashioned of solid steel.*