
Comments on 1772 Church Street Project: Residential Building

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Prepared for:

ANC 2B Zoning Preservation & Development Committee

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Summary

ANC 2B should not support the proposed project at 1772 Church St. NW, because the residential component of the project fails to meet historic preservation requirements in several critical ways. The key problems with the residential component are:

- 1.) The residential building is Incompatible with the Dupont Circle Historic District as a whole and will have a negative effect on the historical integrity of the Historic District.
- 2.) In order to maintain the historical integrity of a historic district, historic preservation law requires that the new residential building be compatible with the original parish hall as well as its immediate surrounding buildings. As such, it should comply with the DC Historic Preservation Office's *Design Guidelines for Additions to Historic Buildings* as well as the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*. The proposed residential building exceeds these guidelines due to its scale, height, interruption of the street rhythm, and massing.
- 3.) The altar, gable wall, and other ruins of the original church are contributing resources to the Dupont Circle Historic District and are therefore protected under historic preservation law. Therefore, thorough analysis should be undertaken before they are dismantled and moved. Additional time, and full disclosure of relevant information by the principals to *all parties*, is needed to consider their individual historical significance and their appropriate treatment.

1) The residential building is Incompatible with the Dupont Circle Historic District as a Whole.

The *Statement of Significance* in the 1977 National Register nomination for the Dupont Circle Historic includes in its description of the area:

... the immediate area around the Circle itself contains some **high-rise mid-twentieth century intrusions**, the remainder of the Historic District is characterized by a juxtaposition of grand, palatial mansions lining two of the avenues—Massachusetts and New Hampshire—which traverse the historic district-- and **rowhouse development of excellent architectural quality of the grid streets**.

The residential building, as proposed, would prove to be another intruding, multi-unit residential building in the nature and on the scale as those referred to in the Dupont Circle Historic District nomination and further contribute the compromise of the historic integrity of the entire historic district.

2) The Proposed Residential Building Fails to Meet the Guidelines for Additions to Historic Buildings

If most of the original Parish Hall is being retained (as the developers contend), then the proposed new residential building must be considered an addition to the original building - to its side, rear, and rooftop - and therefore should comply with the DC Historic Preservation Office's *Design Guidelines for Additions to Historic Buildings* as well as the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.

In general, the Historic Preservation Office's *Guidelines* state that an addition to an historic building should be designed to be compatible with the existing building: "The historic compatibility of an addition is dependent on the design of the original building, its site and neighborhood." Components of compatibility of any addition as outlined in the *Guidelines* include height, scale, visibility, rhythm, and massing.

The proposed residential building at 1772 Church Street violates these components of compatibility as discussed below.

A. Height

HPO Guidelines: "*While an addition does not necessarily need to be exactly the same height as the existing building, it should be designed to be compatible to the existing height of the building and its neighbors.*"

CAS Riegler Project Height Study

CAS Riegler's height study for the proposed residential building at 1772 Church Street is misleading and cannot be used for justifying both the heights of a new church and a residential building for the same project. The relevant buildings for comparison of a residential building are the immediately adjacent buildings along the interior of the Church Street block, rather than just any of the taller buildings that can be identified throughout the broader neighborhood.

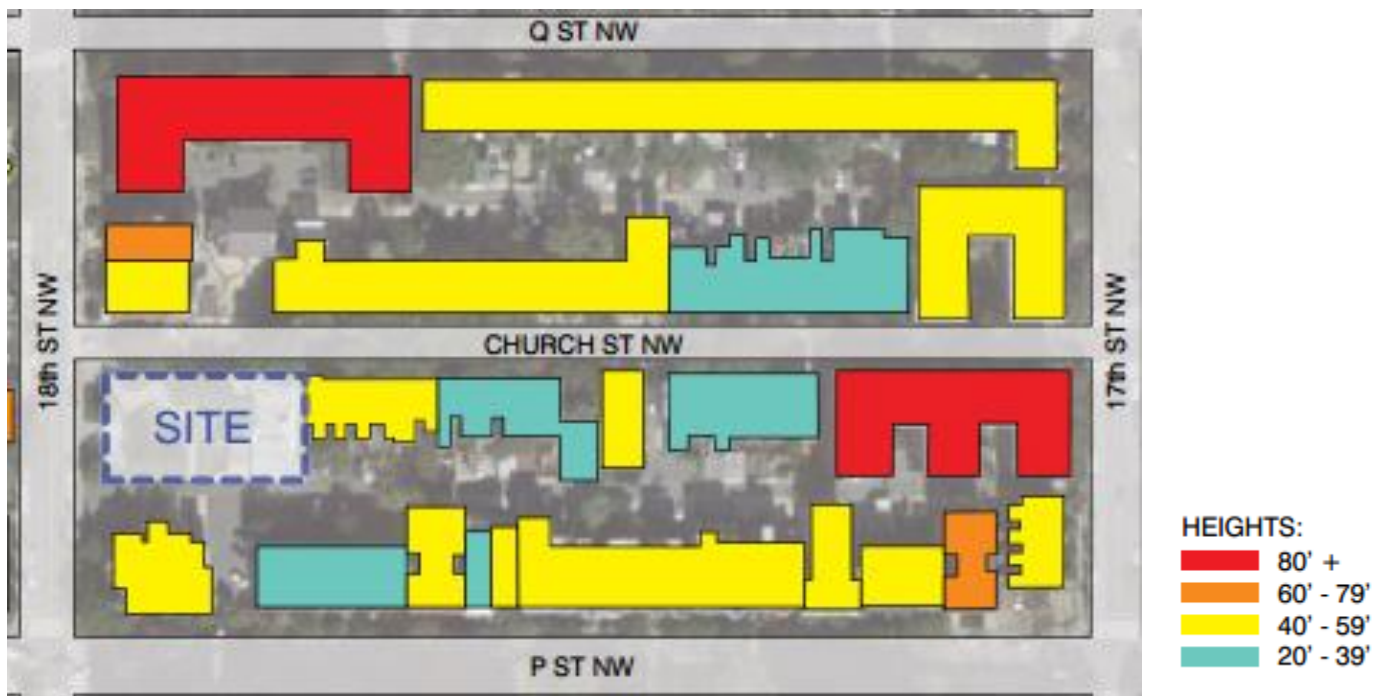
While taller buildings used as comparables in this study may justify the height of the new church, as they are located on the corners of much wider streets, but the buildings cited in the study are inappropriately used as comparables for the residential building located in the interior of the Church Street block between 17th and 18th Street. They exceed the height of the current Parish Hall and the residential buildings on Church Street by as much as 40' and more.

All the 80' + buildings along the north side of the 1700 block of Massachusetts Avenue included in the height study, with the exception of 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, are outside the period of significance for the Dupont Circle Historic District (after 1931). Three of the larger buildings cited on Sheet A-4 (80' +) in the study as context for the large residential building are also outside the period of significance for the Historic District and therefore should not be used as comparables for either the church or the residential building (Numbers 1, 2, and 3 below).

1747 Church Street (#4 below) is depicted out of context with its neighboring buildings and gives the impression of a tall building in the center of the block. It is actually on the same scale as the three-story rowhouses to its immediate west and therefore does not serve as a justification for a taller building.

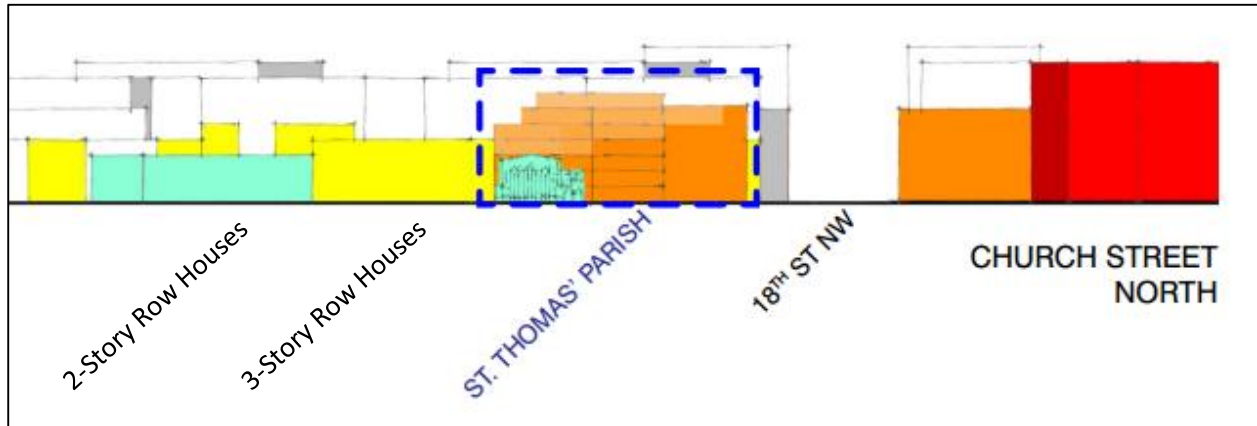


CAS Riegler Project Height Study. Sheet A-4.



CAS Riegler Project Height Study Sheet A-5.

From the example given in CAS Riegler’s own height study, the adverse effects of applying these heights to development on Church Street are clear. The proposed residential building towers over the adjacent 3-story row houses (in yellow below) and in particular over the 2-story row houses (in turquoise below).



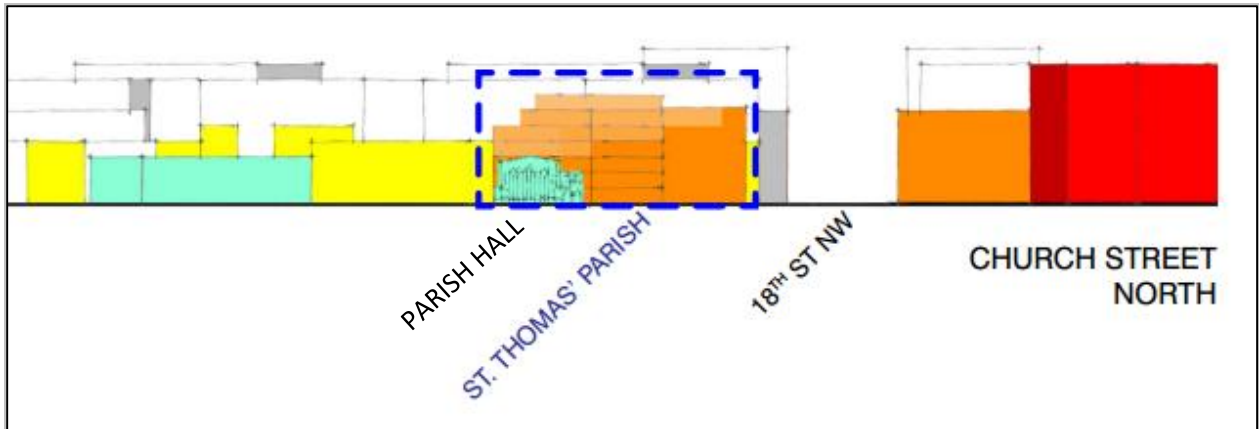
CAS Riegler Project Height Study. Sheet A-6.

B. Scale (proportions)

*HPO Guidelines: “Scale is the relative or apparent size of a building in relationship to its neighbors.”
“The scale of the new addition should usually correspond to the scale of the existing building.”*

While the church on the corner of 18th and Church Streets was built on a monumental scale, the Parish Hall has always retained a human scale. This is true of both the first Parish Hall of 1892, and its 1922 replacement, which still stands.

As can be seen in the image below, the proposed residential building does not retain the human scale that characterizes the Parish Hall. Rather, the proposed residential building virtually engulfs the Parish Hall, rendering it a relatively miniscule component of the massive whole. See the Parish Hall in turquoise below, versus the residential building in various shades of orange behind it and next to it.



Incompatibility of proposed addition's scale with the existing buildings on the south side of the 1700 block of Church Street.



Incompatibility of proposed addition's scale to the existing 1922 Parish Hall (in red).

C. Visibility

HPO Guidelines: "When deciding where to locate an addition, its visibility from a public right-of-way, the importance of the elevation to which it is attached and the affect it will have on the overall form and character of a historic building should be carefully considered."

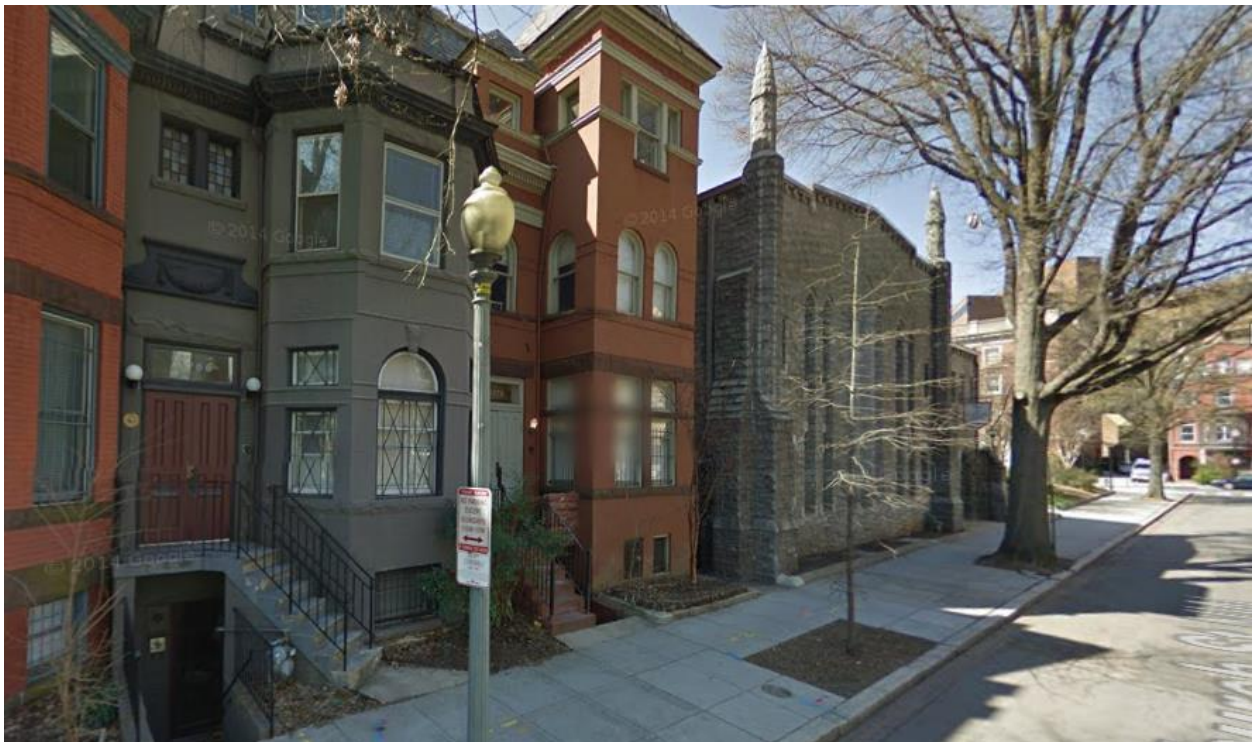
Due to the proposed total height of just under 80 feet (not including any additional necessary mechanical equipment above the penthouse), the residential building will be extremely visible from any perspective,

not only from within the historical context of Church Street itself but from all other view sheds as well. It will loom above any of the other buildings in sight, including the proposed new church itself.

D. Rhythm, or the spacing of repetitive façade elements.

HPO Guidelines: “An addition should respect the established rhythm of a building, its neighbors, and that of the street.”

The historical rhythm on the south side of the 1700 block of Church Street consists of a series of two-story and three-story, brick row houses with two- and three-story projecting bays. That rhythm is maintained by the parish hall at 1755 Church Street.



Historical rhythm of the south side of the 1700 block of Church Street with the parish hall.



Broken rhythm of the block created by the proposed project.

The 1922 cloister entrance between the parish hall and former church was designed to be a visible transition between the smaller scale and lower heights of the rowhouses and parish hall to the taller church. That distinction is completely lost with the fill in behind the two structures.



Cloisters served as a transition in scales from the parish hall to the larger church at the end.

E. Massing or the articulation of building facades through the use of towers, bays, porches, steps and other projections.

HPO Guidelines: Massing should be respected in any addition.

In order to try to compensate for the building's height and its effects on Church Street, the architects are proposing a number of layered step backs with different materials for various floors, resulting in the wedding cake effect. This creates a visibly complex and contrasting series of facades facing Church Street, obscuring the historic façade of the parish hall.

3) The Ruins of the Original Church are Protected Contributing Resources and More Analysis is Warranted Before They are Irreversibly Dismantled and Moved

The altar, gable wall, and other ruins of the original church are contributing resources to the Dupont Circle Historic District and are therefore protected under historic preservation law. Thorough analysis should be undertaken before they are irretrievably dismantled and moved. To date, relevant information has not been made available and is in the possession only of St. Thomas, and as a result interested parties such as

members of the neighborhood community and supporters of preservation have not had the opportunity to assess the proper treatment. Additional time, and full disclosure of relevant information to *all parties*, is needed for a fulsome and public assessment of the individual historical significance of each element of the ruins and their appropriate treatment.

The current ambiguity is in part a function of history. When the Historic District nomination for Dupont Circle was written in 1977, it did not include a full inventory of the resources within its boundaries, only a list of Category II landmarks that were already listed in the National Register at that time. Without a complete inventory of contributing resources considered with the HD nomination, which is now standard for nominations, what are contributing resources in the Dupont Circle Historic District remain subject to interpretation. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the inclusion of Henderson Castle's retaining wall along 16th Street in the recent Meridian Hill Historic District establishes *a new precedent* for including architectural ruins on privately-owned property as a contributing resource. If the Dupont Circle HD nomination were written today, the ruins would undoubtedly be included with the inventory in the same manner.

Additionally, the developer's plans contend that the gable wall is structurally unstable. Various parties from the Church and the developer's team have suggested that this is due at least in part to the 2011 DC earthquake. However, this contention is undermined by writings by Matthew Jarvis, St. Thomas' architect at that time, in a blog that chronicled the effort to rebuild St. Thomas between 2010 and 2012. He writes, on September 7, 2011 (emphasis added):

"We have some sad news. The cross at the top of the ruins was destroyed last week during the hurricane, most likely having been weakened by last month's earthquake.

We made a visual observation of the ruins and found additional damage to the masonry chimney, the granite spires, and to the roof membrane where the cross fell and hit.

*The Parish is in the process of having the damage professionally assessed. **The good news is that St. Thomas' remains structurally sound and the mortar joints in the granite block on visual observation seems to be intact.**"¹*

We do not know the results of the professional assessment referenced above. However, we do know that the church continued with the 2010-2012 project for over a year after the earthquake, including continuing to pursue permits. If the structure were indeed unstable following the earthquake, it is difficult to imagine the church proceeding with a design which centered upon, and emphasized the ruins, including the gable wall. If the structure has become unstable since that time, one is left to wonder about the source of such instability and whether there has been demolition by neglect. Absent full disclosure and appropriate time for measured analysis, it is impossible to know the exact circumstances.

¹ Available at: <http://nostosnest.blogspot.com/2011/09/september-7-2011-day-445-earthquake.html>

Conclusion

ANC 2B should not support the proposed project at 1772 Church St. NW. First, the residential component of the project is incompatible with the character of the Dupont Circle Historic District as outlined in the 1977 National Register District nomination for Dupont Circle. Second, the residential building violates many of the criteria for compatibility in the Historic Preservation Office's *Design Guidelines for Additions to Historic Buildings*. Violations of these guidelines for both the church and the residential building will create a virtual canyon effect on a narrow, residential street that has maintained a modest human scale throughout its existence, even when the original St. Thomas' Parish building still stood at the end of the block. Finally, the residential building requires dismantling and moving the remains of the original church which are contributing resources and are therefore worthy of additional recognition as such and deserving of further analysis as to their proper treatment with full disclosure of relevant information to all parties.