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

Property Address: **1801 4th Street NW**
Landmark/District: **LeDroit Park Historic District**

Meeting Date: **September 26, 2012**
H.P.A. Number: **13-570**
Staff Reviewer: **Brendan Meyer**

☐ Agenda
☒ Consent Calendar
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☒ Concept Review
☐ Alteration
☒ New Construction
☐ Demolition
☐ Subdivision

The applicant, Michael Vallen, on behalf of owner Thomas Swarm, seeks concept review for a new two-story on raised basement, two-flat rowhouse at 1801 4th Street NW in the LeDroit Park Historic District. Plans were prepared by Vallen Design Studio, LLC.



Property Description and Context

The existing lot is vacant and most recently has been used as vehicle storage and delivery space for the former Frazier Funeral Home at 391 Rhode Island Ave NW which abuts the south property line of 1801 4th Street NW. 1801 4th Street was originally constructed as part of the group of buildings that included three rowhouses at 391 Rhode Island Ave (which later were combined to form the Frazier Funeral Home), as well as 1803 and 1805 4th Street NW. The architect for the group of six rowhouses was Charles Burden, whose work is recognizable for its esoteric flourishes which can also be found in Capitol Hill and Foggy Bottom. The surviving buildings display richly Gothic ornament including accolades, crockets and bouquet finials in the gables, finely detailed stringcourses, label moldings around windows, and loop holes in parapets. The owner/architect team for this application is the same team that recently thoroughly restored 391 Rhode Island Avenue by removing the mid-20th century formstone and reconstructed much of the brick ornament that had been shaved off to accommodate the formstone installation.

Proposal

A two-story brick rowhouse on a raised basement, that would essentially reconstruct the original 1801 4th Street building, is proposed for the vacant site. The proposed design borrows its height, floor levels, fenestration pattern and ornament directly from the two rowhouses to the north that it would join. A projecting bay would be capped as a flat roofed crenellated tower and a short hipped mansard slate roof would turn the corner to the exposed south elevation. The south elevation, separated from 391 Rhode Island by a narrow side court, would be an unornamented brick wall with an assortment of historically sized windows arranged in response to the layout of interior rooms. Other details replicated from the neighbors are a primary entrance raised above and facing 4th Street accessed by a cast iron stoop, and a variety of custom brick shapes.

Evaluation

Although no photographic record exists of 1801 4th Street, considering the known work of Charles Burden, it is certain that the proposed design is a replication of what was the original building on this site. The most speculative aspect of the design is the arrangement of windows on the south elevation, but what is shown is consistent with what is typically found on exposed side elevations of rowhouses (groups of formally arranged windows towards the front; smaller and randomly arranged windows towards the center and rear). The applicant has submitted a thorough and convincing design analysis of the work of Charles Burden which shows that Burden reliably used a palette of detail and pattern of symmetry consistent within his rowhouse groups.¹

The Board does not have a standard which requires replication of old buildings in new construction and often discourages such ambitions. This is because the commitment, materials and building skills necessary to successfully replicate 19th century construction are rare to find today. However, the applicant is the same owner/design team that recently restored 391 Rhode Island Avenue with a great amount of skill, patience and sensitivity. Staff is confident the same resources can be put to 1801 4th Street and result in a constructed product that matches the quality and detail shown in their application renderings.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the concept for a new 2-story brick rowhouse on raised basement at 1801 4th Street NW, to replicate the original 1889 building, to be compatible with the character of the historic district, consistent with the purpose of the preservation act, and to delegate final approval to staff.

¹ The design analysis is so exemplary that it has been deposited in the office's permanent file section of architects' biographies.