

---

---

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

---

---

Landmark/District:	Southwest Washington, Potential Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1000 and 1100 6 <sup>th</sup> Street, SW (Marina View Towers; Town Center West)	( ) Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	October 5, 2006	(x) Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	n/a	(x) New Construction
Date Received:	5/24/06	( ) Subdivision
Staff Reviewer:	David Maloney	(x) Conceptual Design

---

---

Marina View Partners, LLC and Fairfield Residential, LLC seek conceptual review of a proposed development project at Marina View Towers, a pair of apartment buildings designed by the noted modern architect I.M. Pei. Built in 1960-62, the two towers were part of a 14-acre superblock known as Town Center, bounded by 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, I, and M Streets. This was to be the commercial and community center of the Southwest Urban Renewal Area. The Marina View buildings were the second identical pair of residential towers built at the town center, following the original pair built on the east side of the site in 1960-61. They were originally known as the Town Center Plaza West Apartments or simply Town Center West.

Fairfield Residential initiated consultation with the Historic Preservation Office and Office of Planning on this project more than a year ago, in the knowledge that historic preservation might become an issue in the redevelopment, given the association with Pei and the modernist environment of Southwest. Town Center West is not a designated historic property, but the project is expected to proceed as a Planned Unit Development (PUD) requiring approval by the Zoning Commission, and it faces an extended approval process with the possibility that an application for historic designation might be filed before construction permits can be issued. The developer's initial concept was to demolish the buildings and redevelop on a cleared site, but upon further consideration the company returned with a revised concept plan that preserves the Pei towers and adds a second pair of buildings on M and K Streets.

The staff has encouraged this preservation design approach and believes that the developer is pursuing the most prudent course of action in a tricky development situation. The existing Pei buildings would clearly contribute to a possible Southwest Historic District, but their eligibility for separate historic landmark designation is uncertain. They are but one pair of a group of four identical buildings, and the group of four is part of an even larger architectural composition that is the Town Center complex. Town Center is in turn inextricable from its neighborhood. The two Pei towers can be appreciated and perhaps designated as a single work of architecture, but ultimately the staff believes that the most appropriate way to assess Southwest is by looking at the *tout ensemble*, the entire district of buildings that is the product of the urban renewal program. Unfortunately no one can conclusively forecast the timing or the likelihood of designation of such a district.

The staff and developer have also consulted with the D.C. Preservation League in this situation, and the developer has conferred with the Advisory Neighborhood Commission and residents.

The staff has discouraged the filing of a historic landmark application for the two buildings alone, but the staff and DCPL nonetheless agree that the project should be submitted to the Review Board for its consideration as a project that involves a property with clear historic potential given its context. The developer has agreed to this voluntary review as a reasonable corollary of the preservation design solution. The developer also anticipates using the preservation of the property and an HPRB assessment of compatibility with the historic context to support the argument in favor of PUD approval by the Zoning Commission.

### **Background**

Within the past several years it has become increasingly apparent that both historic preservation and another wave of redevelopment have arrived at the doorstep of Southwest Washington. Modernism is clearly on the preservation agenda nationwide. Here at home, the massive urban renewal project of the 1950s and 60s is nearing 50 years of age, the common marker for a sufficient lapse of time for historical perspective and scholarly assessment. Buildings of this vintage are also usually ripe for an overhaul to replace worn-out components and systems—and they may start to lose their appeal, seeming tired or dated. Major government planning initiatives have refocused attention on the quadrant, investors are active, and private developers are moving ahead with plans for new projects. With this increased development attention, DCPL and others have begun to pay much closer attention to modernism as part of the city's architectural heritage. Scholars and students are already documenting and making the case for Southwest's historic potential.

Preservationists have pointed out what many longtime Southwest residents have always known—that there is much to be admired about its modernist environment. But one reason for the renewed planning focus on Southwest is the realization that something finally needs to be done about its equally evident shortcomings as an urban neighborhood. Like many experiments, the urban renewal project suffered from some ideas that were unsuccessful, compromised in implementation, or simply ill-advised in hindsight. Inward-facing superblocks have created many pleasant secluded places but starved the streets of activity. Cul-de-sacs stymie both traffic and pedestrian circulation, and high fences betray the lack of “defensible space.” In place of the envisioned town center is the dreary and nearly vacant Waterside Mall. The hoped-for social integration of old and new communities never really succeeded. Southwest shows the down side of rebuilding from the ground up.

As a result, continued government involvement in Southwest redevelopment seems probable, and not just on the waterfronts. It is unavoidable for major actions like the reconnection of broken streets like 4<sup>th</sup> Street. It is also likely in the form of Planned Unit Development reviews because the standard zoning categories retroactively applied to the renewal area in the 1990s were formulated for traditional urban patterns and do not always fit well with the idiosyncratic building patterns in Southwest. The controversy at the Capitol Park Apartments (Potomac Place) is a cautionary example. In essence, it was matter-of-right zoning rules that led to the sprawling mid-rise buildings that have destroyed the historic landscape. With a PUD, there might have been taller construction that would have matched the scale of the existing high-rise and preserved its courtyard and the open pathway to the rowhouse neighborhood beyond.

HPO has begun to work with its planning colleagues and private development teams in search of new models that would help reinvigorate Southwest in a way that preserves its essential attributes and attractions as a pioneering modernist environment. After the lesson of Potomac Place, most

parties would agree that a new paradigm for redevelopment in the area is needed. It is with these considerations in mind that the staff has approached the Fairfield proposal for Marina View.

### **Characteristics of the Southwest Redevelopment**

Southwest can be analyzed like any environment for its “character-defining features.” The basic organization is similar to many 20<sup>th</sup>-century neighborhoods, where small concentrations of public and commercial buildings on major streets are surrounded by many more blocks of entirely residential character. The dominant building forms are the rowhouse or townhouse and the high-rise apartment block. These are assembled into streetscapes that may recall certain aspects of historic Washington, but that clearly reflect modernist planning ideals, as well as the way in which the redevelopment project was parceled out and implemented. After demolition, most of Southwest was assembled into “superblocks” formed by the selective elimination of streets and alleys, and typically these superblocks were redeveloped as unified complexes designed by a single architectural firm. Many are organized around an internal green space or plaza, or a network of open space both private and communal. Typically, vehicular access to these superblocks is through a combination of perimeter streets, cul-de-sacs, and consolidated parking lots. For pedestrians, there is a secondary pattern of interior walkways that supplements, or in some cases supplants the traditional urban sidewalk.

Nearly all of the apartment buildings are slab-like structures of uniform height (typically 90 feet) that hew to the modernist idea of the “tower in the park”—in its origins, the notion being to raise living units up from the traditional small lots so as to free up the ground for open green space that could be shared by all. The towers are widely spaced and usually arrayed as large pieces of sculpture—sometimes parallel, sometimes perpendicular, sometimes pinwheelled. In execution a few of the towers achieved the idealized freedom of open space, but mostly the internal “parks” are concealed from the streets and limited to use by residents only. The best of these spaces are still superb examples of modern landscape design.

Most of the complexes combine apartments with townhouses, establishing a common theme throughout the neighborhood. Many of the townhouses face onto perimeter streets in the traditional manner, but others help to define the internal courtyards, serving as a foil to the taller apartment blocks and allowing sunlight onto the public lawns. Also scattered throughout the neighborhood are a few free-standing churches, schools, a public library, and the Arena Stage. Many of these are free-form sculptural buildings employing unusual structural systems. Apart from the waterfront, there are very few separate commercial buildings, and no “main street” type commercial strips. Waterside Mall replaced the original commercial spine, along the old streetcar route on Fourth Street. Because of its late date of construction and variation from the original design ideas, Waterside Mall would most likely be considered a non-contributing complex in any designation of the area.

Because the renewal projects were nearly all constructed within the compressed span of about a decade—from the late 1950s to the late 1960s—and because a few architects designed multiple projects, there is a sense of commonality in the architectural treatment. Nearly all of the buildings reflect the dominant “International Style” modernism, with frankly expressed structural elements, expanses of glass, and repetitive cantilevered balconies. Visual interest is largely achieved through the texture of materials; natural landscape and commissioned works of art generally replace ornament and decoration.

### **Design Problems**

Some of the inherent characteristics of Southwest are either mixed blessings or necessary evils. In some areas, cul-de-sacs have disrupted the visual coherence and flow of the L'Enfant streets that are also historic features. The design idea was to create a pleasant walkable neighborhood, but too often the result has been a confusion of deserted and circuitous routes, especially where security fences have cut off the old rights-of-way. Open vehicular parking areas are common throughout, and while convenient, these sometimes occupy front yards where they deaden street life and destroy the definition of public space. Vehicular and service entrances sometimes impinge upon pedestrian entries and park-like settings. Overall density is low for an urban neighborhood, and in some places there is a surfeit of open space—park upon park—that upsets the intended balance of built and natural.

### **Design Guidelines for New Construction**

Given the historic potential of Southwest and the inevitability of new development, the Board should give specific consideration to design principles or guidelines that will help promote compatible new design and construction within a potential modernist historic district. Suggested principles include the following:

- New construction should reflect the best of contemporary modern design, and should be distinguishable from the original buildings;
- Tall buildings should compliment the prevailing pattern of slab-like towers grouped in composed arrays;
- Tall buildings should be spaced sufficiently far apart to allow generous open space, light, and air on all sides;
- Mid-rise buildings (50 to 70 feet) should be considered only sparingly, and perhaps most appropriately as secondary wings of taller structures or for special purpose structures like religious, academic, cultural, or civic buildings;
- Residential complexes should include low-rise as well as high-rise structures;
- Highly sculptural forms and innovative designs should be considered especially appropriate for symbolic buildings like churches and cultural centers;
- Designed landscapes should be protected and enhanced;
- Parking lots and non-contributing buildings should be the sites considered for new construction;
- New construction should maintain a balance of built and open space;
- New construction should reinforce the clarity and continuity of street corridors;
- New construction should help frame existing public parks and shape new courtyards;
- New construction should reinforce the town center concept through a concentration of

buildings, more open access, and a better commercial layout and design;

- New development should reinforce the L'Enfant street plan as the primary historic feature that ties Southwest to its Washington context;
- Primary L'Enfant streets and views should be reconnected where possible without destroying significant modernist structures or landscapes;
- Public space design should emphasize the open continuity of communal green space; and
- Visually obtrusive security features should be avoided wherever possible.

### **Fairfield at Marina View**

The proposed redevelopment of Marina View involves the rehabilitation of the two I.M. Pei apartment towers, construction of two new apartment towers on the existing parking lots, and redesign of the surrounding open space. The Pei towers would be restored to retain their historic appearance, with some changes at the ground level and penthouse. The flanking new buildings would follow the alignment and basic overall form of the of the Pei buildings, but would be of a contrasting design, taller with a more complex shape and visual texture. At the center of the project, between the Pei towers, the original Great Lawn would be reinstituted in a form similar to the original, but with the addition of low pavilions defining the open sides. Two new courts would be created between the old and new buildings, and these would be landscaped as largely paved entry plazas above below-grade auto courts.

The most striking feature of this redevelopment plan is that it preserves the original core of the complex essentially intact, while accommodating a substantial amount of new development on the outer periphery of the site, where it is most desirable as a means of establishing built frontages along M Street on the south and opposite the public park (Reservation 721) on the north. The new buildings are taller and fatter than the originals, yet the design carefully modulates their shape to emphasize slender end facades and to loosen up the relatively narrower shape of the new courtyards. In response to a preliminary directive from the Zoning Commission, the heights of the new towers have been lowered from the original proposal down to 112 feet (or about 115 to the top of the parapets). At this height, they create an intermediate step up from the 90-foot Pei towers to the 130-foot office tower on the adjacent Waterside Mall property (one of two identical towers that are the tallest in the neighborhood). They are further modulated in scale by recessing the top floor, so as to establish a secondary cornice level at about 105 feet. Although compatibility with historic structures is not usually established by building higher, in this instance the new towers are part of a large architectural composition that includes the 130-foot tower, and the gradual step up to the maximum height helps in several ways—by adding visual relief, differentiating the new and old towers, and slenderizing the proportions of the fatter new buildings.

The design of the new buildings reflects the dominant patterns of Southwest. They are visually raised above ground on splayed piers that echo both 1950s design motifs and the sculptural concrete piers of the Tiber Island and Carrollsburg Square complexes. The basic structural grid is strongly expressed as is typical in Southwest, there are large expanses of glass, and the dominant texture of the facades is created by the pattern of projecting balconies. Flowing curves on the inner facades echo the curvilinear forms of other buildings that approach the waterfront.

Perforated balcony screens and an earth-toned color palette pay subtle homage to Chloethiel Smith. Overall, the facades create an effective foil to the cool coloration, flat surfaces and cerebral geometries of the Pei towers—harmony through balanced contrast.

The two disparate pairs of towers are drawn into a more unified composition through the landscape of the three open courts. The Great Lawn in the center court remains faithful to the original design, but two added elements—a pergola stretching between two small one-story pavilions on the street side and a two-story amenities building on the inner side—blend the materials and motifs from both the Pei and new apartment towers. The façade of the amenities building, for example, copies the base of the Pei towers as an arcade stretched between end blocks faced with the same brick as the new buildings. The two outer courts are designed as vest-pocket parks in the manner of the classic example of the type, New York’s Paley Park. Each features a water wall and seating under a bosque of trees. Each also features a glass pyramid that lights the auto court below. Again, these are subtle tips of the hat to the architect and landscape architects of the original Marina View—Pei as the designer of similar courtyard pyramids at the Louvre and National Gallery East Wing, and Zion & Breen as the designers of Paley Park. All of the landscape for the new project is entrusted to Zion, Breen, and Richardson, the successors of the original firm.

In sum, the staff finds the concept design both extremely thoughtful and highly successful as compatible design in its context. It should serve as a real model for how to integrate substantial new construction within the Southwest environment. Only a few items should be mentioned as needing specific attention as the concept is refined and developed. First, the eastern edge of the property is landlocked along the long internal property line with the Waterside Mall complex. In the traditional Washington block, this edge would be defined by an alley separating and providing shared access to both properties. In this case, the superblock layout leads to some design features that are less than ideal. Because there is no alley, the eastern edges of the two new apartment towers must accommodate a service drive that tunnels through the lowest two floors in an awkward arrangement. The eastern facades of these two towers also sit on the property line, so that they are relatively flat and somewhat like party walls, despite the inset balconies that give some sense of relief and depth. The freedom from party wall restrictions allowed Southwest apartment blocks to be designed fully in the round, and the lack of that freedom is unfortunate here. The upward extension of the property line wall at the top floor terraces, where a corner pergola would be more desirable, only emphasizes this anomalous condition.

This situation also makes attractive public space design more difficult. In effect, each owner has to provide a service alleyway that might better be shared. Consolidated servicing is precisely the kind of arrangement that the Southwest planning project was intended to promote, and it seems notably inconsistent with that model for these large adjacent projects to duplicate curb cuts, service drives, and the like. Looking at the preliminary site plans for both projects, it seems that a better site plan might involve a shared service “alley” that enters from the streets onto the Waterside Mall property, then shifts onto the Marina View property in midblock. Whatever the solution, the staff encourages both property owners to continue working together toward a solution that meets the standards of the Zoning Commission.

On 6<sup>th</sup> Street, the vehicular ramps leading down to the below-grade auto courts also deserve very careful attention as to surface materials, landscaping, and general ambience. The glass pyramids

providing light into the underground courts might perhaps be slightly larger. Similar ramped entry conditions at Harbour Square and Waterside Towers may provide some salutary lessons.

The primary preservation concern on the Pei towers should be the quality of the replacement glazing systems, including the internal blinds or sunscreens. Together these virtually define the appearance of the facades, as is evident from photographs of the existing conditions. Window systems need to be durable and energy efficient as well as faithful to the original design in all aspects of their appearance. As to the penthouse, the addition of the intended screens is certainly appropriate to shield the exposed rooftop paraphernalia. On the ground floor, expansion of the lobbies is also reasonable, but the new curved glass enclosures should probably be pulled in a couple of feet and maybe flattened a bit so that they encroach less upon the original arcades and have a more subdued effect on Pei's subtle design aesthetic.

For the new towers, the design development phase will be critical in ensuring a superior result. The applicant should continue voluntary review with the Board, in cooperation with the Zoning Commission. Elements should be scrutinized for both design and practicality—for example, the alignment of balconies directly above sidewalks might be considered a cause for concern. If so, projecting bays might substitute.

The landscape in Southwest was always integral with the design of buildings, and this concept fits that tradition superbly. The landscape elements should not be lost to value engineering. Inevitable security features should be designed as integral elements tying the architecture to the landscape; the graceful integration of the security fence around the great lawn is a good example. Perhaps less successful are the secondary fences shown at 4 feet high; these might be more comfortably scaled at 36 or 42 inches.

### **Recommendations**

The staff recommends that the Board endorse the concept plan for the Marina View project as compatible with the historic character of the I.M. Pei towers and a potential Southwest Historic District.

This action is valid for a period of two years under DCMR 10A Section 332. It should not be construed as an endorsement of any needed zoning relief.

## ATTACHMENT

### SCHOLARLY COMMENTARY ON THE SOUTHWEST URBAN RENEWAL AREA

Most scholarly commentators, including Frederick Gutheim, James Goode, and Antoinette Lee acknowledge the shortcomings of the Southwest Urban Renewal project, while noting its historic import and the generally high quality of architecture, planning, and landscape design. Goode, for example, concludes that “[f]or all their drawbacks, the many apartment houses in Southwest constitute the most important urban renewal project in the country.” Gutheim calls it “extravagantly overoptimistic.” Lee notes, “In the process, strong community ties that had developed over nearly a century and a half were severed. An ambitious experiment, the redevelopment of the Southwest is still a study in contrasts.”

Antoinette Lee provides a concise summary of the planning and architectural significance of the Southwest Urban Renewal Area in her chapter on the Southwest Quadrant in *Buildings of the District of Columbia*:

The architectural unity of the city’s smallest quadrant derives from an ambitious 1950s urban redevelopment plan. Although the developers and architects undertook similar projects in other American cities, such as Hyde Park in Chicago, none has surpassed the comprehensiveness of the Southwest Washington Redevelopment Area. With its new high-rise and town house residential clusters, shopping centers, office structures, parks, and cultural facilities, the Southwest became the most complete post-World War II urban renewal community in the nation.

Redevelopment was tumultuous, however, for building owners challenged the legality of the undertaking. In the famous Supreme Court decision of 1954 on the case of *Berman v. Parker* upholding the 1945 D.C. Redevelopment Act, Justice William O. Douglas found it “within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well-balanced as well as carefully patrolled.” The legality of the Redevelopment Land Agency to condemn land occupied by deteriorated housing was thus confirmed, but the effort suffered in the eyes of the public because extended delays between demolition and new construction left entire blocks empty for years. . . .

Clusters of high-rise apartment houses and related town houses, an innovative concept at the time, were sited loosely throughout the quadrant in order to provide light, air, and splendid views to the occupants. The town houses were arranged around residential squares of parking and green spaces, following London’s example of private parks. Portions of old Federal style row houses were incorporated into the clusters. Neither urban nor suburban, the high-rise and town house clusters were hybrids. Unlike many speculative suburban developments, the architectural design and landscape standards for the clusters were exceedingly high. The result was a Southwest Quadrant style of development distinctive in the District. The shopping center, churches, schools, public library, and parks filled the interstices.

In the *Southwest Study*, Mina and Roya Marefat provide a perceptive discussion of the dilemma



inherent in an evaluation of the project.<sup>1</sup>

The Southwest Urban Renewal Project pioneered urban renewal projects not only in Washington, but also in the rest of the United States. The impact of the project was beyond local and national, reaching to interested parties in the far corners of the world in search of the cure to urban decay. At first, the experiment seemed a total win-win proposition. The city would be revitalized while simultaneously receiving increased tax revenues; no small accomplishment for the impoverished and largely tax-exempt city. There would be new housing units replacing old and dilapidated substandard housing. Apartment buildings and townhouses would be built in place of alley dwellings and slums. Bureaucrats would be assured of more space for government offices for the ever-expanding federal government. Commercial interests would be served with new office buildings and shopping facilities. Urban planners and architects would have a clean slate upon which to construct the 20th century utopia of apartment blocks on *piloti*—structures overlooking expanses of landscaped common space. Perhaps the visionary design of Le Corbusier for the City of Three Million was the inspiration for the image of the Southwest in its completed stage, but the result was not utopia. What then was amiss?

Implicit are the problems for which many planners, with all their omnipotence, have few solutions. The unsanitary conditions of the Southwest were undeniable and public intervention was inevitable. But the drastic measures taken were not only costly, they effectively destroyed the sense of community once inherent in this and almost all the old sections of the city. The fate of the inhabitants of the Southwest was not a significant factor in the decisions for urban renewal. Buildings were demolished and families were relocated. The relocation and displacement of the inhabitants of the Southwest was treated with the pretense that the planners knew best and the local population was not capable of making the appropriate choice. Only a fraction of the existing population remained or returned to the Southwest. The city had simply removed the least economically advantaged and placed them farther out of sight. The price it paid was an increase in racial segregation and rise in racial strife that exploded in the 1968 race riots. The allegation that urban renewal was Negro removal was not unfounded. The effects would not just be local but rather national. It was not until urban renewal had spread beyond the Southwest and the domain of the poor and the blacks that local opposition groups began to mobilize and the attitudes of the planners finally changed.

The urban renewal movement provided unprecedented opportunities for the application of the modern movement. No longer the domain of the avant-garde, the urban renewal experiment allowed for the widespread use of modern architecture for habitation and the multiplication of concrete slab apartments raised on *piloti*, all very similar to one another, with open spaces no one could use. The Southwest, initially hailed as a revolutionary modern place, became a visible illustration of the failure of modernism. The mega eight-story apartment buildings with kindred names: Capitol Park, Capitol Plaza, Town Center Plaza, Town Square Apartments, Harbour Square, Waterside Plaza, look alarmingly alike. Furthermore, each building has one or more clones of itself, in close proximity and with

---

<sup>1</sup> Although some points are certainly debatable. For example, Pruitt-Igoe (a "tower-in-the-park" public housing complex) was not noted for the high quality of planning, architectural design, and public space treatment that characterizes Southwest.

few clues to set it apart from its brethren. And unlike the repetitive forms of townhouses which can be alleviated by a change in color and variation in yard treatment, these megastructures are impossible to differentiate. In the end, the promulgation of the highrise apartment slab as a solution for slum clearance was shortlived. The dramatic national turning point was the demolition of St. Louis' Pruitt Igoe urban renewal project in the early 1970s.

The unconventional street patterns of the renewed Southwest disturb the legibility of the traditional street and its arbitrary dead end cul-de-sacs do little to give direction by distorting orientation. The L'Enfant Plaza and the 10th Street Mall and Overlook Park, once hailed as an architectural gem and the heart of the new Southwest and its link to the rest of the city, is another visible example of the paucity of [imagination of] modern architecture. The desolate treeless "esplanade" instigates few to wander its red granite path. Waterside Mall, the colossal suburban shopping convenience with its dark, airless interior leaves the shopper little desire to linger and give it life. Neither L'Enfant Plaza, nor the Waterside Mall are successful people-spaces, the European-inspired urban piazzas anticipated by their architects and planners. The area has not only lost the implicit link it once had to the waterfront, but also the sense of community still visible in other so-called slum areas.

As the umbrella of urban renewal spread farther and farther, so did the breadth and scope of the impact upon existing communities. Highways cut through inner cities, and in the process many slums were removed and people were displaced. But the slums did not disappear. They were simply placed farther out of sight or remained suspended in concrete floors. Underlying the urban decay were issues of economics, politics, and race. Planners and architects were not equipped to solve these problems alone. While it took time and major sections of cities across the country were demolished in the process, the urban renewal experiments finally taught planners and public officials this lesson.

The indirect but important repercussion of the urban renewal program would be the birth of the historic preservation movement. The rise of a countermovement to preserve the past was intimately connected to the urban renewal wave—the urban renewal movement unintentionally gave birth to the historic preservation movement. The tremors of the new preservation movement were already commencing when bulldozers began to level the Southwest during the late 1950s. Once again, the birthplace for a movement was the nation's capital.