

RECEIVED

D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING

2006 DEC -6 AM 8:55

December 6, 2006

Carol Mitten, Chair
D.C. Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW
2nd Floor
Washington, DC 20001

Re: Zoning Commission Case Nos. 06-11 & 06-12/George Washington University
Campus Plan

Dear Chairperson Mitten and Commissioners:

Following are my comments relating to the "historic preservation plan" as outlined in the latest version of George Washington University's Campus Plan application cited above. First, there is no evidence that The George Washington University will follow through on "maintaining a strong commitment to preserving important architectural and historic resources in Foggy Bottom." If members of this Commission are not aware of the university's dismal historic preservation record, they have an obligation to educate themselves. In fact, the university has already destroyed much of the historic neighborhood, replacing smaller scaled structures with oversized spec-style office buildings in the brutalism and post-modern styles and oversized dormitories in faux "colonial" styles that do not respect neighborhood history. I have observed the university demolish many historic buildings over the years with a complete disregard for historic character being lost. For example, over the past decade the entire block bounded by 23rd Street and Virginia Avenue was demolished except for a 1980s condo/hotel and three non-university-owned historic structures. The destroyed row houses represent a lost aspect of what 23rd street looked like at the turn of the last century. Now, the few pathetic buildings that remain are overshadowed by a modern behemoth dormitory that contributes nothing to—and in fact detracts from—the "historic streetscape" that the university so proudly touts.

Preserving the historic character of a neighborhood does not include gut-job renovations, "façadeacisms" (an act of demolishing an entire building except the front), and the complete destruction of entire blocks of historic structures that make up the very character of the Washington, DC streetscape (such as row houses). As the university should be fully aware, the mere placement of a structure on the National Register does not assure its ultimate protection nor do these "listings" include interiors that are just as important as the pretty façade.

The "preservation" of the historically land marked "President's House" on the corner of 20th and G Streets NW is another perfect example of the university's insensitivity. That building was supposedly restored but in fact was demolished, leaving only two exterior walls (and no roof) whose now modern interior relates little to the outside. The two orphan walls were incorporated into an unattractive melange of old and new structures running the entire length of the 700 block of 20th Street NW, and were capped with a

District of Columbia

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 06-11 & 06-12
CASE NO. 06-11
EXHIBIT NO. 237

double mansard roof having nothing to do with the historic aspects of the original structure. A very nice paneled staircase was removed from that house and discarded in the dump as no doubt were other elements like paneled wood doors, trim molding as well as all the historic windows. Contrary to what the Historic Preservation Office might say, this is *NOT* preservation.

The university indicates that it has designated "historic districts" as well as historic buildings, but I see little evidence of this when walking the neighborhood. In fact if a neighborhood were listed as historic, there should be little evidence of the university's presence tacked to the facades of such buildings (like ugly flag poles, building designation plaques and non-historic paint schemes that proclaim university ownership). This overt marking of its properties, much like a cat does when marking its territory in the wild, by GWU mars and devalues the historic landscape.

The university also notes proudly that it has "assumed the expenses associated with the preparation and submission of the multiple landmark applications and the preparation of the historic district application for submission by the Historic Preservation Office." My understanding as a professional in the field is that this is the responsibility of the owner of an historic structure in the first place, not some amenity. The university is not providing a service when evaluating its historic properties but instead has an obligation imposed upon it through the preservation law.

However, it *is* the responsibility of the Historic Preservation Office to make sure that the university complies with local preservation laws and if it is not overseeing this responsibility, then HPO is in dereliction of its duty. The Historic Preservation Office usually does not fund historic building surveys of privately owned properties nor does it necessarily perform such detailed reports. Instead it should evaluate any proposed restoration project with a critical eye to make sure any changes or additions meet with the special character of an historic structure. Sadly both the Historic Preservation Office and the preservation laws of this city are far too lax and I am not surprised that the university is being allowed to evaluate its own properties without any critical official city oversight.

One of the most troubling omissions in this gerrymandered historic district is the now-land marked Grant School, which this Commission has further injured through its preliminary approval of the university's separate plans involving this building. The Grant School, like its land marked sister—Stevens School—just a few blocks away, is one of the most longstanding and intact pieces of Foggy Bottom's history and its context in the neighborhood story will be ruined if carried out in the manner that GWU and the School System are proposing.

There is little left, in my opinion, of the "historic built environment" that would benefit the character of "the entire city." Why, because so much of it is gone and the pathetic bits that remain are only connected with each other through oversized structures. Most of the open space that characterizes such a neighborhood has been aggressively redeveloped, leaving monolithic facades occasionally broken by old buildings whose original surrounding contexts are gone. Foggy Bottom is not the idyllic neighborhood

that the university proclaims, but instead a developer's dream of unplanned overdevelopment and mega structures resulting in a generally banal campus area

In closing, I would urge you to reject the university's application for yet another development-oriented "campus plan" scheme. I can't imagine that the National Trust for Historic Preservation would look kindly on a plan with no connection to the real history of the Foggy Bottom community particularly if it's being foisted off on the community as an amenity.

Patrick Sheary,
Curator of Furnishings, DAR Museum
GWU, Museum Studies '92

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized initial 'P' followed by a long, wavy line that extends to the right.

RECEIVED

D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING

2007 DEC -6 AM 8: 55

Facsimile Transmission

To: Carol Mitten, Chair D.C. Zoning Commission
Fax Number: (202) 727-6072
From: Patrick Sheary
Date: 12/6/06
Subject: GWU Planning

A total of 4 page(s) have been sent. If there is a problem with this transmission, please contact Patrick Sheary, at (202)879-3242.
