

3 Washington Circle, NW, #706
Washington DC 20037
November 14, 2006

Carol Mitten, Chairman
The Zoning Commission
441 4th Street NW, Suite 200 South
Judiciary Square
Washington DC 20001

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RE: Square 54 (Case # 06-27)

Dear Ms. Mitten and Commission Members,

Much of the Square 54 project is acceptable, especially many of its ground-level details. But one part -- the office block on the north edge, that faces on Washington Circle -- is much too massive, tall and blank.

Its great size and monotonous white all-glass design are in conflict with Washington Circle's rich, historic neighborhood quality. Most of this Circle's buildings have a much smaller, human-sized scale, a variety of designs and colors, and a brisk but welcoming ambience. George Washington's statue, standing at the heart of this historic Circle, would always face a huge, blank corporate stare. So would everyone else involved in the Circle. The office block would wipe out most of Washington Circle's character. It would be like placing the massive World Bank building right next to the White House.

Several Important Specific Changes Are Needed.

Probably no changes that keep this office block's main design can mitigate enough the harm to the Circle. But at the least, your Commission can reduce the damage if it will require these four types of changes:

1. Require a reduction in height, by about 20 feet. The current height it forbidding, in this setting. It looms too high above the Circle (even with the top-level setback), and it creates a deep, narrow canyon on 22d Street.

2. Require a greater ground-level setback and a widening of the front sidewalk by about double. This would make it consistent with the very wide sidewalk setback on I Street. It would welcome the large volumes of pedestrian activity in both directions. The current plans would create too much crowding.

3. Require the addition of interesting human-scale details on the first two or three

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stories, such as faux store fronts and other innovative designs. This would invite foot traffic, strolling, sitting on benches, looking into first-floor stores, and other normal doings. A massive monolith would discourage personal interest and activities.

4. Require visual variety, in the building's texture, color and variety of design details. Such surface details may seem merely cosmetic, but they can greatly warm up and enliven even a massive building.

The whole effect would be to integrate the office block style with the rest of Square 54's plan. In the current plan, the office block sticks out as a cold and unsuitable intrusion into Washington Circle. George Washington University does not own Washington Circle, and it should not be allowed to degrade this historic Circle.

The Basis for the Recommendations.

My own basis for these suggestions is pretty thorough. I have been a Professor of Economics at the University of Michigan and the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, working among buildings of all styles, sizes and uses. I have also led efforts to preserve and improve collegiate building designs. As a widely-published economist, I know that the money incentives always favor the biggest building that the owners can manage to sell. Builders routinely begin by asking for grossly oversized buildings, knowing that they should be cut back sharply.

That pressure toward giantism is at work here, to push you to accept a "compromise" building that is still too large. The same pressure is, of course, relentless all over downtown DC, pushing to stretch the height limits. Perhaps your biggest task is to constrain it. Economics also favors plain and inexpensive design, as the K Street area has demonstrated. That pressure for plainness also seems to be at work here, in the office block.

Luckily, the design changes I recommend would not impose onerous added costs or cut the revenue too deeply. The whole project would still be a strong economic success.

My residence at 3 Washington Circle is precisely opposite Square 54 across Washington Circle, and I have been carefully analyzing the project's planned office block for at least 2 years, when the plans were first floated. I have urged these critical points on GWU officials at various meetings and by long letters, but they seem to have been not receptive. If you approve the plans as they are now, that will probably freeze out any future hope of securing the changes I recommend. I have much experience with builders and design issues, as you do too. Regrettably, the receptiveness to design improvements usually stops once the initial plans get approved.

Washington Circle Has Rich History and Special Character.

Before you vote on the Square 54 plans, I'd warmly urge you to stroll around Washington

Circle to reaffirm its special nature. It's a major historic open space, deep in the heart of the city, close to both the White House and Georgetown.

The Circle is rich in history and architectural variety. You may be familiar with the outstanding and historic Schneider Triangle, located on 22d Street, the Circle, and New Hampshire Avenue. It is a National Historic Place, listed since 1982, and it is very close indeed to Square 54. Its vintage style, detailing, color, texture, and human scale are superb. Similarly 3 Washington Circle, straight across from Square 54, involves a highly distinctive mixture of row houses, turrets, various setbacks, and details, as well as of color and texture. Nearby is a third important visual anchor of Washington Circle, the Spanish Embassy on 24th Street. It is another striking and complex set of buildings, which the Square 54 project would clash with.

An added reason for care about Square 54 is that GWU already is planning to replace soon the small building that stands just to the west of GWU Hospital, between New Hampshire Avenue and 24th Street. If you allow an oversized monolith at Square 54, you will place yourselves in a chokehold to permit a similar type of blank building in this next project.

Summary.

In summary, the southern and interior parts of Square 54, especially at ground level, seem to be generally acceptable, though the 22d Street building seems much too tall. The office block fronting on Washington Circle would be unsuitable and damaging to the historic character of the Washington Circle and its neighborhood. The office block not remotely suitable to be what George Washington University officials have promised to be a "Gateway to the University."

It would probably be best to simply reject the office block outright and require a new start with a more suitable building. At the least, it seems crucial that you require -- at this point - the improvements I have suggested, and perhaps others as well. The changes will be practical to do, and they will still allow the whole project to be highly profitable. Your approval of the current design, instead, would kill off most or all of Washington Circle's special character.

Requiring these moderate changes will at least reduce the harm to the Circle. The surrounding neighborhood will also gain significantly. And all Washington DC will benefit from your protection of this major historic place.

Most sincerely,



William G. Shepherd