

CAPITOL HILL RESTORATION SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 15264 WASHINGTON DC 20003 202.543.0425

Ms. Catherine Buell
Chair, Historic Preservation Review Board
1100 Fourth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024

June 24, 2011

Re: HPA #11-058; Hine School

Dear Ms. Buell:

The Capitol Hill Restoration Society is pleased to offer comments again this month concerning the revised mixed-use redevelopment proposal of the Hine School site that connects Eastern Market, the Metro Plaza and Barracks Row. We believe that a successful development here is critical to the cohesiveness of the Capitol Hill Historic District as well as to the vitality of the entire Capitol Hill business community. As we noted in April, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development has established a number of housing, retail, and office goals to be achieved on the site and many have also rightly emphasized the importance of the proposed plaza for weekend vending and the shared parking facility to support those goals.

Eighth Street Residential:

The architect has transformed this apartment building from a building inspired by a street of Capitol Hill houses to one inspired by 19th-century "terrace houses", such as Capitol Hill's Grant's Row that was torn down in 1930 for the Folger Shakespeare Library. The building still retains the rhythm of a Capitol Hill streetscape. Three-story bays help to visually reduce the height of the building, rounded forms help reduce the angularity of the ensemble, and the set-back garden spaces provide some visual breaks along the street. The row is now unified by a palette of common materials and a base of rusticated stone. We are pleased that individual entrances to some units have been retained and hope the landscaping plan will show appropriate fencing to reinforce this pattern. CHRS supports this change and appreciates the architect's efforts in completely redesigning this significant element of the project.

The Committee had a few concerns that we hope will be addressed as the design develops:

1. It appears that the entrances to the northern units may be below grade, which is an unusual condition on the Hill and seems out-of-place for such relatively formal buildings. Also at the northern end, the rusticated base of the units does not extend as high on the windows as it does on the southern units. Both of these conditions may be due to the slope of the street/ground but these elements should be studied to see if there are better solutions.
2. The new design is fairly successful in articulating bays, balconies, and other projections to break up the façade and in suggesting a three-story height. The design also uses slate to suggest

higher and lower rooflines but in spite of that effort it still retains a strong horizontal line across the facade with none of the 'tower elements' extending above the established front façade line. This limitation is particularly striking at the 8th & C streets corner.

Eighth Street Residential Building at Pennsylvania Avenue:

While this portion of the apartment building did not receive such an extreme make-over as the rest of the row along Eighth Street, the "building" that turns the corner from Eighth to Pennsylvania has been refined in some very thoughtful ways: bays have been introduced to break the flatness; window and façade panels have been arranged in a more regular pattern; and, most importantly, the sixth floor has been pushed back on the front and side elevations. It still retains a completely different identity than the rest of the Eighth Street building in both materials and style. Consequently it does not serve as an emphatic ending to the row, except for the difference in height.

In spite of the welcome changes, a number of concerns remain, including:

1. Many have worried about this building as the materials, color and design do not seem to relate to the Capitol Hill Historic District and it will be a very large presence on this important square. While the building no longer seems representative of Southwest DC as it did in earlier iterations, we do not think it is yet compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District. The views at the bottom of A12 certainly highlight some of these concerns and the fact that the wide street and open plaza make it very difficult to hide setbacks, penthouses and the like. The setback on the 6th floor has helped to mitigate the height of the building from some middle distances, if not long-range.
2. While the bays have helped relieve the flatness of the façade, the building still reads as a large block, particularly when viewed from a long distance across an essentially open plaza. Capitol Hill's retail/office and some residential buildings, such as the Haines Department Store across Pennsylvania Avenue, have the traditional base/middle/cornice-cap pattern. The Committee thought that concept should be explored and felt the base needed to be more strongly differentiated from the middle section. (Perhaps the bays could be turned into oriel structures.) At the top, the open-closed balcony railing could be closed completely and combined with the present edge, to provide a stronger cap to the building at five stories, approximately 55', with the full height partially hidden behind it.
3. While the *Guidelines for New Construction provides for flexibility in materials*, the use of several forms of traditional pressed brick arranged in patterns of panels to provide texture to the building surface instead of simply decoration has been controversial – not only in design but also in color. It is not clear to us if the drawings exaggerate textural differences that might not be as apparent in real life as it is on the drawings but we feel certain that too many patterns in irregular placements may be visually confusing. Some regularity in the placement of the

windows and the panels has been introduced, which is a welcome improvement, but we think this aspect should continue to be studied.

4. The building seems caught between two potential uses – either retail/office on ground level or Shakespeare housing. If residential, the windows seem quite large, particularly for the ground floor. The largeness of the windows is also an aspect that could be very troubling in real life when tenants decorate their homes in different styles as opposed to the simple portrayal on the page where all the windows look the same. Even Capitol Hill's large residential windows shield the lower portion of a room from view. The SEC building at Second and F streets, NE, gives a preview of this aspect.
5. We hope the landscaping of this portion of the site is carefully considered to help integrate it as a residential building and soften the boxy edges.

Pennsylvania and Seventh Street Building:

This signature building continues to be the most problematic and controversial aspect of the buildings being considered at this time in terms of size and architecture. We do not find it compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District and ask that this building not be given conceptual approval.

1. *Size* – CHRHS has expressed its concerns about this building's height in previous comments. While we agree that this is an appropriate location for a larger building, the question becomes what is the "right" height. Both the old and the present Hine Schools established a benchmark of sorts at 58' – a height that is obviously tall for a neighborhood of buildings mostly in the 20'- 35' range but a height that was still somewhat comfortable in this setting on a wide avenue. The Kresge building and Penn Theater buildings seem to be of similar heights. The new building, at 90', would be 30' taller than the already tall neighboring buildings – an increase of a third. Last month the staff suggested that a modest decrease in height, perhaps accomplished by a setback, might be sufficient for compatibility. Our assessment of the sketches presented this month is that the setback is not sufficient and that the seventh floor should be dropped and the sixth floor set back, although as noted above, set-backs may not be as effective in this location as in other places because of the openness of the view for essentially two blocks. The penthouse, essentially 1-1/2 stories tall, cannot really be hidden but it must be taken into account because of its impact on the perception of the building.
2. *Architectural expression* – We also find the architectural expression problematic in terms of the Capitol Hill neighborhood setting. It is a bold and confident building but also one that seems to build on a large-scale monumental or industrial sensitivity as if it should be the main office in a warehouse or manufacturing facility. The first floor is almost 18' tall (much taller than its neighboring buildings) and the floor heights are over 11' tall (compared with 10' on the east building). The "gigantic order" of two-floor boxes, framed in brick and

stacked above one other, serves to highlight rather than diminish the scale difference with its neighboring buildings, which are essentially 19th-century residential building stock. Although the “rotating” brick columns have their genesis in the corbelled brick trim of many Capitol Hill buildings, the columns on this building seem to compress and expand and appear to lean in different directions, totally confusing many viewers and negating the sense of firmness and apparent strength one expects from vertical columns.

Seventh Street Office Building:

Seventh Street is a relatively narrow street so great care must be taken in introducing larger elements. It is one of the most heavily traveled streets in this area, especially by pedestrians, a number of whom are first-time visitors or tourists who are introduced to the historic district by walking down this street. The present configuration of bays and stepped back facades is often seen downtown and in other parts of the city, where they form a backdrop to historic buildings, amidst other large buildings. Even with the height of the main building reduced to six stories, the resulting height is far above the “historic standard” of 58’ so careful consideration must be given to effective ways to break down the mass. Admittedly, bays are useful in reducing apparent height but they seem overworked here when they are being used to connect what should be perceived as two separate buildings to maintain the rhythm of the street. The repeated emphasis and use of bays also breaks into the much-needed “green space” that is an integral part of today’s streetscape. The present design and configuration of the Seventh Street Office building is not nearly as successful in bridging the ‘demands’ of the new construction with the historic streetscape as is the “terrace housing” model on Eighth Street for the residential building. We urge that the Seventh Street aspect of the building continue to receive careful study, particularly the expression of different “buildings” and elements used to break up the massing.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

Nancy Metzger

Nancy Metzger
Chair, Historic Preservation Committee