

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 18, 2013

TO: CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE
OLD AND HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA DISTRICT
BOARD OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

FROM: HISTORIC PRESERVATION STAFF

SUBJECT: CONCEPT REVIEW #3 OF 220 SOUTH UNION STREET
BAR CASE #2013-0321

I. BACKGROUND

In September 2013, the BAR reviewed, for the second time, a concept proposal for a hotel at 220 South Union Street. The BAR considered the design with respect to the many regulations, ordinances and guidelines that apply to this particular waterfront site. The BAR and the public responded to the design with a wide range of comments, from a desire that the building should:

1. Look more like historic townhouses on Prince Street;
2. Look more like a waterfront warehouse;
3. Look more historic and authentic, to represent our Colonial past;
4. Look more modern and playful, to represent the 21st century;
5. Feature more brick and stone;
6. Feature more glass and steel.

While many comments were, obviously, conflicting, there was a consensus that the project should have a more cohesive and simplified design, similar to what the model showed. Several BAR members supported the height, scale, mass and general architectural character. It was also acknowledged that the applicant faced a great design challenge in trying to respond to comments made by multiple reviewing bodies and the general public -- within the constraints of zoning ordinance regulations, design guidelines and the Waterfront Small Area Plan.

Following the second concept review, the applicant met with other community groups and continued to refine the proposal based on their comments. A revised scheme, presented to the Waterfront Commission in October, reflected the request for simplification, particularly on the Duke Street elevation, and was well received. Staff supported the revised design direction presented by the applicant and has offered a few refinements to further strengthen the applicant's design. The staff illustrations found here are not a specific design but rather a suggested direction and show how such changes might appear. The scale, height and mass remain the same but the suggested fenestration, color and materials alternatives have a significant effect on the

overall architectural character and may, perhaps, address additional concerns previously voiced by the BAR and the public.

As the first proposed building to be reviewed under the Waterfront Small Area Plan guidelines, this project has been subjected to a high degree of scrutiny. The community, naturally, desires a successful project that sets a high standard for future buildings on the waterfront. In late November, Planning & Zoning staff met individually with BAR members to update them on the status of numerous waterfront projects, including: the park and landscape plan, nuisance flood mitigation, utility undergrounding, the Robinson Terminal North and South proposals, potential alterations to the Food Court and Beachcombers buildings, and also to review the evolution of the applicant's hotel design since the last concept review. Given this rapidly evolving context, several BAR members expressed the desire for another BAR concept review hearing, prior to Planning Commission and City Council review of the DSUP. What follows is a review of the applicant's most recent revision with the staff suggested refinements.

II. HISTORY AND CONTEXT

As discussed in the two previous concept memos, this block is representative of the evolution of a typical waterfront block east of Union Street. The recently restored painted brick warehouses, located nearby at 204 and 206 South Union Street, represent typical mid-19th century warehouse buildings: simple vernacular, load bearing masonry structures containing punched window openings and whose footprints cover the entire parcel.

Historic map research indicates building heights on this particular block of The Strand were two, three, and four-stories. The ceiling heights of these warehouses would have been 12-15 feet on each floor, resulting in buildings from 48 to 60 feet in overall height. This block also had three east-west alleys, one of which was a small-scale pedestrian alley intended for fire separation, roof drainage, and loading access. As the warehouse buildings normally occupied their entire parcel without setbacks or open space, and these uses filled the entire block, such alleys would have been useful for providing waterfront access from South Union Street. Compared to residential and commercial buildings on adjacent blocks to the west, the buildings east of Union Street represented a completely different scale, height, orientation and architectural character from the rest of Old Town, reflecting their location and commercial use on the waterfront.

The warehouses in this area were constructed on land created in the shallow waters of the Potomac shoreline in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, though land was still being filled in east of The Strand through the mid-20th century. The oldest surviving building east of Union Street is the ca. 1796 Fitzgerald Warehouse at the corner with King Street. There are no other 18th-century warehouses in this area because most of it was under water during that time. These utilitarian waterfront warehouses were significantly larger and less "high-style" than buildings in other parts of the City. Their gable ends were generally oriented toward the river, a feature precluded in the rest of Alexandria under the 1752 ordinance to prevent roofs draining on to an adjoining neighbor's property. The earliest warehouses were likely constructed of wood, though these frequently burned and were replaced with brick buildings with a local fieldstone base to resist deterioration of the soft early brick from rising damp and flooding.

For much of its history, there was nothing charming about the appearance or smell of the working waterfront in Alexandria. The 1877 G.M. Hopkins *City Atlas of Alexandria* shows the range of industrial uses present on the waterfront in the second half of the 19th-century, including: mills, lumber yards, ship works, fertilizer warehouses, coal yards, manufacturing and rail. By the early 20th century, additional larger warehouses, such as the shipbuilding facility at Jones Point, the Ford plant, the Torpedo Factory and later the Robinson Terminals, dominated the view of the City from the river (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. Ford Alexandria Plant administration building east elevation, Albert Kahn, Architect, 1932
(Ford Motor Car Company History, www.Ford.com)

Historic photographs, such as the circa 1865 view of the waterfront from Pioneer Mill shown in *Figure 2*, show a series of warehouse buildings, several four stories in height, with a strong visual presence on The Strand. The warehouses were both visually and physically connected to the piers and the waterfront beyond. *Figure 3* depicts McVeigh's and Reardon's warehouses and illustrates the size of such warehouses, one eight bays in width and the other eleven bays.



Figure 2. Panoramic View of Alexandria at Duke Street and Strand taken from Pioneer Mills looking northwest, 1865. *Alexandria Library, Special Collections, William F. Smith Collection*

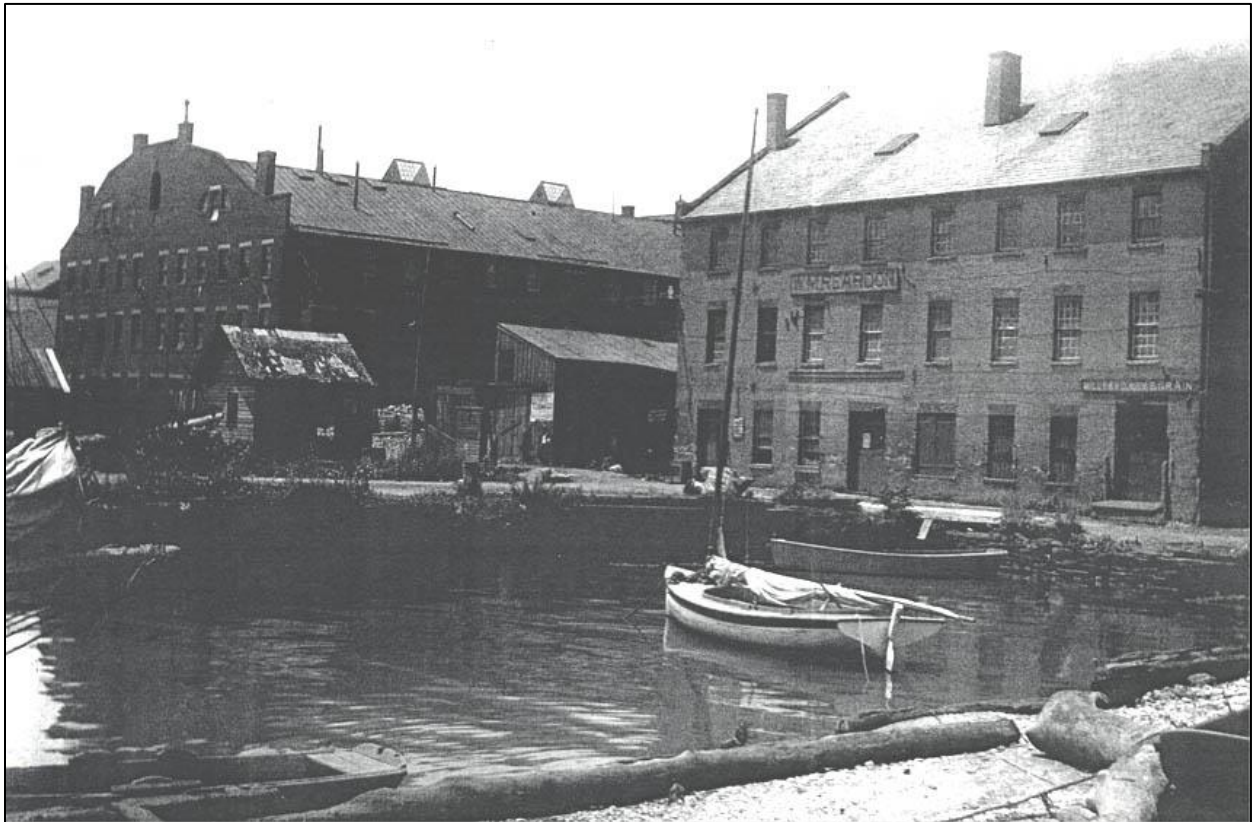
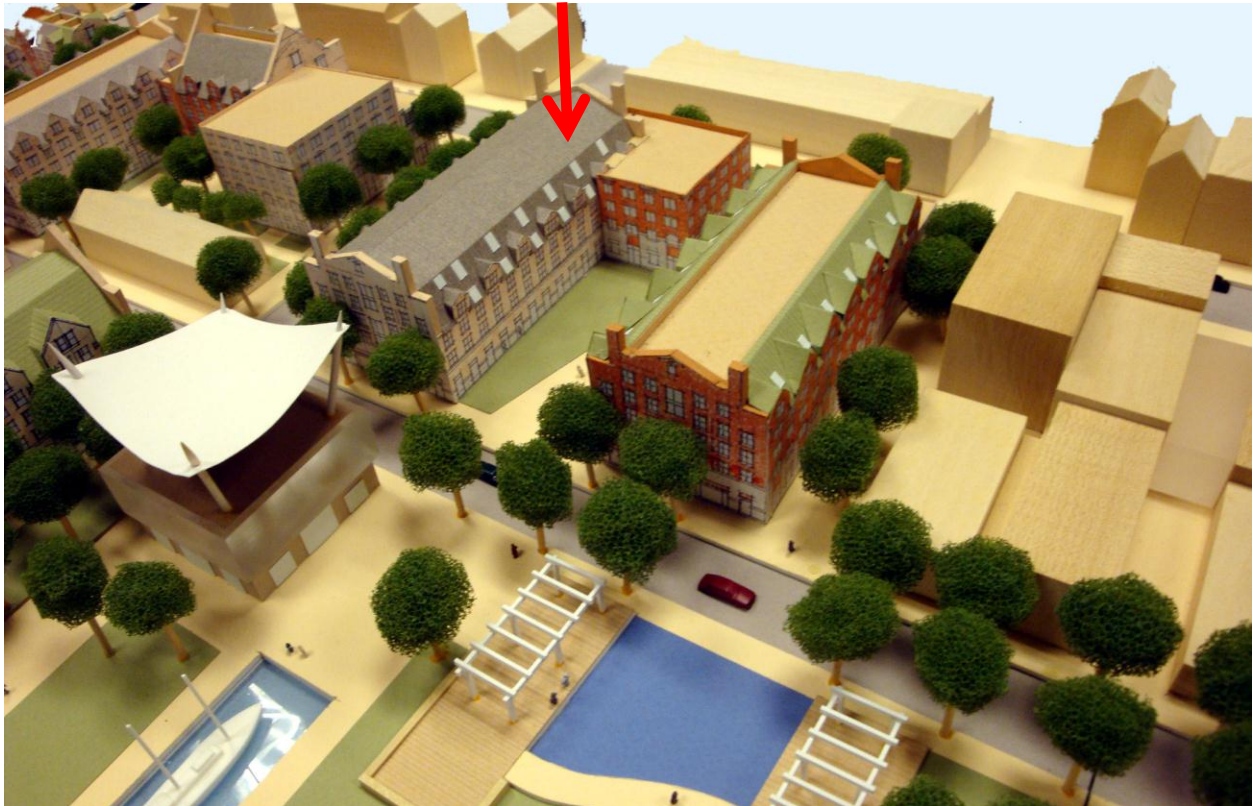


Figure 3. 100 Block South of the Strand ca. 1910, McVeigh's and Reardon's Warehouses. *Alexandria Library, Special Collections, William F. Smith Collection.*

Through the 1950s, this area of the waterfront was zoned industrially (I-2) with a permitted height of 77 feet for sites less than five acres and 150 feet for sites more than five acres. This site was rezoned to W-1 in 1983 and the height district adopted in 1987 permitted a maximum of 30 feet or up to 50 feet with a special use permit. The majority of the 20th century buildings on Union Street, including both Harborside and Ford's Landing, were constructed to the 50 foot height limit. Additionally, it is important to remember the context and scale of this particular site. The block bounded by Duke Street, South Union Street, Prince Street and The Strand is approximately half the depth of the average Old Town block. The subject property comprises less than one third of this smaller block, meaning that the project site will have a size one sixth

that of the typical Old Town block (*Figures 4 and 5*). The development site immediately to the south, Robinson Terminal South, is comprised of an entire standard Old Town block and will soon be redeveloped under similar design and zoning parameters with a 50 foot height limit. Although they must comply with all ordinances and guidelines, it is unrealistic to think that any proposal for this site, or the other waterfront redevelopment sites, will propose anything substantially less than 50 feet.



**Figure 4. View of Cummings/Turner block, looking southwest in the Waterfront Master Plan model.
Subject property noted with red arrow.**



Figure 5. Illustrative plan of plan area south of King Street from the Waterfront Small Area Plan. Subject property is outlined in red.

III. STAFF ANALYSIS

The previous staff memos on this project focused primarily on applicable regulations and guidelines which the BAR must consider, including:

1. Potomac River Vicinity Standards,
2. *Design Guidelines* Chapter 8: Buildings along the Waterfront,
3. Potomac River Vicinity Height District, and
4. Development Goals and Guidelines for the Cummings/Turner Block in Alexandria Waterfront Small Area Plan.

In an attempt to address conformance with the numerous regulations and guidelines, staff offered limited analysis of the building design in the two previous concept memos. The current proposal does not reflect a significant departure from previous design with respect to height, scale and mass. As a result, that discussion is omitted for brevity but may be referenced in the September 25, 2013 memo. The following pages review the previous schemes that the BAR has seen and commented upon as well as provide an analysis of the most recent revision with suggestions for further refinement.

July 25, 2012 BAR Submission

On July 25, 2012, the Board held the first informal work session with public testimony for this project (*Figure 6*). That proposal included a covered carriageway and more closed courtyard. It also included a two-story mansard style roof with two-story dormers on the east elevation, fronting Duke Street. This building mass was separated by a hyphen from what was intended to appear as a cluster of small warehouses that were assembled and extended over time. This aggregation occurred with the historic warehouses at the north end of this same block. While not mandated on the waterfront, as it is on Washington Street, the design approach of breaking the apparent size of the building exterior down into multiple smaller scale components was used in the 100 block of South Union to reduce the visual mass of the building on the east side of the street. Such an approach has received strong public support in the past.



Figure 6. July 2012 scheme with proposed courtyard space (green) and covered carriageway (yellow).

September 25, 2013 BAR Submission

On September 25, 2013, the Board held a second informal work session with public testimony (*Figure 7*). In this second scheme, the applicant tried to further reduce the building mass by increasing the number of setbacks and further fragmenting the styles and materials of the building into five or more different architectural components. While the BAR supported elimination of the carriageway in favor of a pedestrian alley open to the sky, the BAR also stated that the transformer should not block the view down the alley from Union Street and that the alley should be made visually welcoming to the public. Staff notes that the 11' wide pedestrian alley provided by this project is only half of the future alley width, the other half will be constructed when the site to the north redevelops.

Although the BAR and public made varied comments, the majority of the BAR, and many members of the public, recommended that the scheme be simplified, as the building now had too many individual parts and did not reflect the architectural character of the illustrative Waterfront Small Area Plan model. The BAR thought that simplifying the overall design would reflect the general architectural character of the large, simple mid-19th century masonry warehouses with punched windows found historically on the Alexandria waterfront. However, the BAR also agreed with some speakers that these should be modern, contextual buildings and the hotel should not pretend to be a Disneyesque reproduction of any particular warehouse.



Figure 7. September 2013 scheme with the pedestrian alley open to the sky but terminated by a transformer at the east end.

Current Submission from the applicant

In response to comments made by the BAR, the applicant revised the design and presented it to the Waterfront Commission in October 2013 (*Figures 8 & 9*). The Waterfront Commission established a sub-committee to review the scheme and report their findings to the Commission who then drafted a letter to City Council. Upon reviewing the October 2013 scheme, the Waterfront Commission found that the design was in conformance with the guidelines of the Waterfront Small Area Plan and generally found the revisions reflecting a simplified larger warehouse character to be an improvement. The changes included the following:

- The transformer was relocated from the pedestrian alley/courtyard to the parking garage.
- The entrance on Union Street was emphasized.
- The overall architectural design was simplified, with a large warehouse on Duke Street reflecting the historic warehouse scale.
- Introduction of more contemporary elements, such as the window type.

While the applicant's revised scheme certainly addressed the BAR's and public's largest concern about creating a larger, more cohesive design, staff thought that a few additional minor refinements should be considered. Specifically, the applicant's design appears visually heavy to some, with a two-story mansard style roof on Duke Street and the use of red brick throughout the project. In addition, a few changes in fenestration and window type would allow the project to be a contemporary interpretation of the historic warehouse building typology rather than a direct replica.

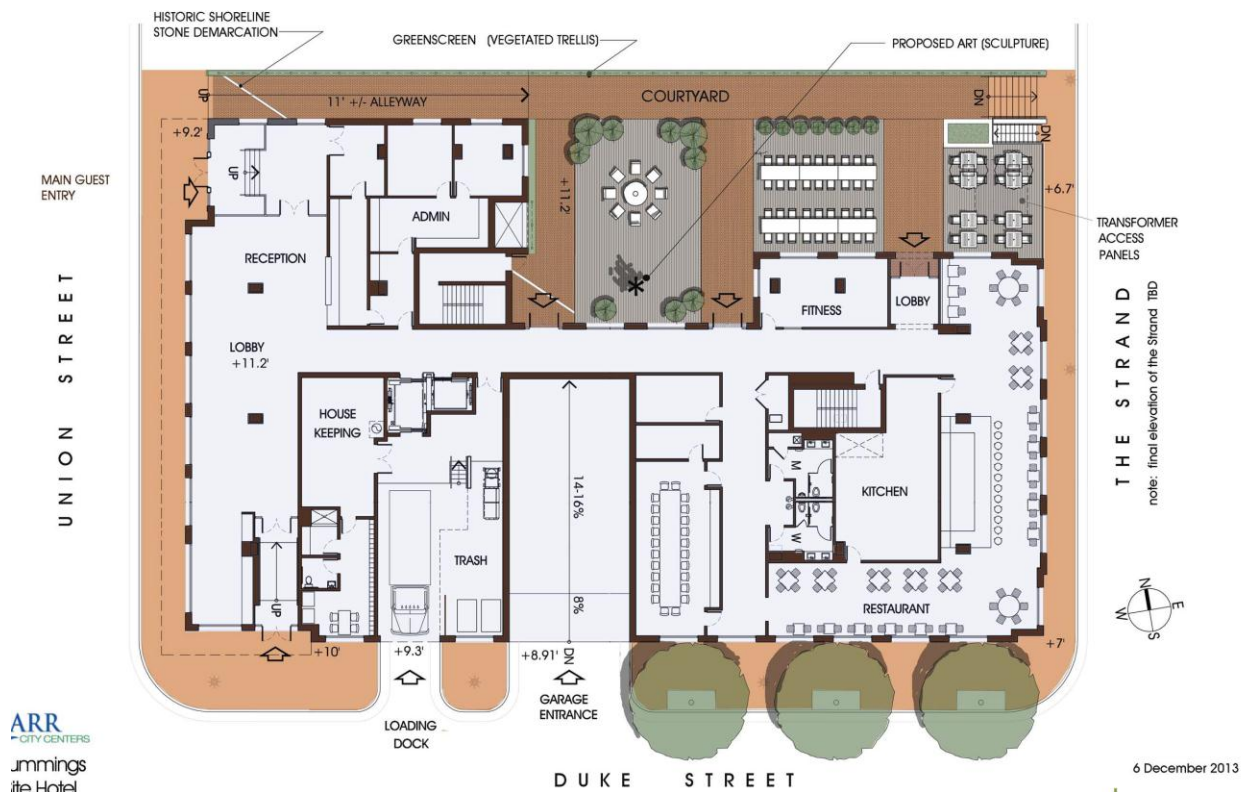


Figure 8. October 2013 site plan with transformer removed from the alley.



Figure 9. October 2013 scheme.

Staff Suggestions

Throughout this process, the applicant has had to work within the constraints of many regulations, guidelines and, often contradictory, comments from staff, City Boards and Commissions, and the public. Staff commends the applicants and their architect for incorporating many of the comments. Successful design is an iterative process and these changes have improved the design. Further, this project remains in the concept review phase and there will be an opportunity to focus on details, materials and colors during the Certificate of Appropriateness review.

Staff believes the applicant's present design, while going in the right direction, could be further refined to respond to additional BAR and the community concerns and enhance the overall project appearance. Many comments have indicated a strong preference for this building to look more like the one represented illustrative model and staff's suggestions reinforce that image.

Staff suggests the following refinements:

- Continue simplification of the overall architectural character
- Rebalance the proportions of the building wall on Duke Street
- Simplify the fenestration
- Introduce a lighter color palette for the larger building mass, as seen on the model
- Recall the iconic warehouse gable end forms on The Strand elevation facing the river and create a more vertical building orientation through use of glass shoulder elements

What follows is a street-by-street comparison of the applicant's most recent scheme with the staff suggestions and a brief analysis.

Duke Street Elevation



Staff suggestions, December 2013



Applicant's design, October 2013

Figure 10. Applicant's Duke Street elevation, below, with staff suggestions, above.

The Duke Street elevation best shows the overall simplification of the revised design into three distinct building elements, as opposed to the five or more design components shown to the BAR in September. However, staff suggests that there could be further adjustment to this elevation to rebalance and improve the proportions. A traditional building composition has a clear base, middle and top, as a classical column does, with the middle element (shaft) being proportionally larger than the base or top (capital). With a two-story roof atop a three-story building, it is difficult to achieve the appropriate proportions. The three-story wall height responds to the Potomac River Vicinity Height District requirements for a transition or set back above 30 feet. Staff's suggestion visually extends the wall in the "middle" by both lowering the stone base and alternating wall dormers at the fourth story, as shown on the model. This maintains the strong cornice at 30 foot yet reduces the apparent height of the roof because this elevation will only be seen in perspective and the dormers will partially screen the roof and animate the cornice against the skyline.

In addition, the staff version introduces a visual lightness due to the lighter color of the main block, again similar to the model and picking up on the positive public response to the recently repainted historic warehouses to the north on this block. At this time, staff suggests the lighter color could be accomplished either through painted or whitewashed brick or by using a light-colored brick. Old Town has several examples of large historic masonry buildings painted light colors, including the Cotton Factory and Tannery buildings on Washington Street, the painted stucco on the Torpedo Factory and the cream colored brick on the Ford plant (now demolished) on the waterfront.

Union Street Elevation



Staff suggestions, December 2013



Applicant's design, October 2013

Figure 11. Applicant's Union Street elevation, below, with staff suggestions, above.

The BAR and public generally supported the smaller scale of the three-story element with a five story section set back above this on Union Street, and this general form has been retained. The smaller building wall on South Union Street is more compatible with the scale of this street and the adjoining warehouses.

Staff suggests repeating The Strand elevation's gable end parapet behind the South Union Street building forms, to reinforce the notion of two or three distinct buildings joined together, as reflected in the model. Staff also suggests lightening the color of the five-story main building element to visually increase its set back behind the lower element. Staff further recommends some additional simplification of the fenestration above the entrance and of the five story building wall, particularly at the Duke/Union corner.

The Strand Elevation



Staff suggestions, December 2013



Applicant's design, October 2013

Figure 12. Applicant's The Strand elevation, below, with staff suggestions, above.

The Strand elevation is the one that most directly references the gable ends of historic warehouses found on the waterfront and reflects the public scale of the river side of this building. This facade will be increasingly prominent as the waterfront park plan evolves and this elevation will be viewed from both a large new park and boats on the Potomac River. Unfortunately, as the building's plan elements have evolved, the proportions of this gable end elevation have shifted from vertical to horizontal, making the building look heavy. Staff suggests a return to the more historic proportions of 19th-century warehouses by changing the two, three-story shoulder elements from brick to something more visually light and by lowering the stone base to the sill of the first story windows. Further visual lightening of this elevation is achieved through the use of light-colored or painted brick and the use of more glazing on the shoulder elements. Staff

believes that such a scheme responds to the request for a building that provides a contemporary expression of the historic warehouses found on the waterfront.

Next Steps

At this time, the project is docketed for review by the Planning Commission and City Council in January 2014. If approved, then the applicant will return to the BAR with formal applications for a Permit to Demolish and Certificate of Appropriateness which may include any necessary waivers, such as for the rooftop HVAC screening requirement. If the BAR finds the applicant's revisions and the staff's suggestions to be the right direction for the design, the BAR should request that Council support this direction and ask the applicant to work with staff and the BAR to implement the refinements as part of the Certificate of Appropriateness application.