HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Woodley Park Historic District**	(**x**) Agenda ( ) Consent
Address:	**2608-2612 Connecticut Avenue, NW**	
Meeting Date:	**July 23, 2009**	( ) Subdivision
Case Number:	**09-241**	(**x**) Addition (**x**) New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	**Tim Dennée**	(**x**) Concept

The applicants, owners Sharam and Maria Taginya (with Studio 27 Architecture), request the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to construct on an existing parking lot a five-story residential building with ground-floor parking. The structure would face 24th Street but would technically be an addition to the one-story, historic commercial buildings on Connecticut Avenue (as a later phase of work, there would be some refurbishment of the storefronts). The new building would stand slightly more than 50 feet tall from the proposed grade at its 24th Street front.

Because of the triangular shape of Square 2203, the façade and rear walls of the new construction would not be parallel to each other, but the former would run along the 24th Street right of way and the latter would abut the rear walls of the commercial buildings, parallel to Connecticut.

The top floor would be set back six feet from the main wall plane, and two three-story bays would project four feet. At the rear, facing Connecticut over the commercial buildings, there would be similar bay projections, but the "penthouse" would have a negligible setback. While the building's primary exterior material would be a buff brick, the top floor or penthouse would be clad in bronze-color Alucobond (aluminum) panels.

This substantial an addition triggers its own parking requirements despite the availability of a parking waiver to the existing historic buildings. Although the constrained site cannot accommodate all of the parking required, the design nonetheless incorporates a ground-floor garage, and thus an entrance in the building's façade.

The immediate context of Square 2203 is an otherwise built-out block of one- to four-story buildings, nearly all commercial and contributing to the character of the historic district. It would be flanked by a two-story building and a three-story one. The proposed building would certainly be the tallest on the square, but the variety here is acceptable given the combination of facts that there is no standard height; that the new building would be only a story taller than the tallest there now (2602 Connecticut, with the Marilyn Monroe mural) and would sit on a lower grade than those facing Connecticut and have a set-back top floor; that it would face the ten-story Calvert House Apartments across 24th Street; and that the project has managed to keep new construction off the historic buildings.

While the design has developed in a positive direction, there remain a few issues, principally the compatibility of a building with multiple planes and materials with fairly restrained, even modest, flat-fronted, monochromatic buildings.

Having projecting masonry bays is sufficiently compatible, especially as many of the adjacent buildings have projecting canopies or enclosures at the ground floor. It is odd to have these fairly massive bays stop above the base of the building. While they can be structurally supported that way, bays were traditionally grounded or, in the case of oriels, their mass was visibly tied back into the building with brackets or some other device, functional or not. Because the base of the building is proposed to be so low—to keep the main floor level equal to that of the commercial buildings and to get the garage under that—the vertical space under the bays is very low, quite possibly illegally low given that this would be public space. At only seven feet, they would be rather mean, uncomfortable areas, and it would be much better instead to ground the bays, even if that means flanking the garage entrance with perpendicular walls.

The details of the bays can use additional refinement. The articulation of the brick corners of the lower two stories contrasts with the more blunt corners of the cast stone above, thus flipping the more monolithic and more massive-appearing masonry upward, contrary to more typical hierarchy. With their widths presumably determined by the necessary width of the garage opening, the bays crowd the windows that flank them.[1] At the fourth floor, the windows do shrink relative to those below, an expression of a hierarchy of parts but one more suited to a traditional attic story, something that the drawings suggest—with a secondary cornice or belt course and a slight step back in the plane of the bays—but do not wholly achieve. If this floor is truly to be an attic story and the top floor expressed as a penthouse, then the bays should terminate at the third story. If not, then there should be more consistency in the windows between floors and between those in the main wall and in the bays. In fact, all of the fourth-floor windows should be heightened in any case to better align with the adjacent openings and to reduce the amount of solid wall above.

The further projection of balconies *from* a bay projection, creates unfortunate relationships with the neighboring buildings and is a nontraditional way of handling bays or balconies, creating a façade that is too active and informal. The traditional pattern is for bays either to have no balconies or to have balconies or terraces set into them between walls or piers, like a multi-story porch. Indeed, cantilevered balconies, except for a handful of masonry or decorative ones, are seldom seen on buildings in the historic districts. Concrete-slab, steel-railed balconies are obviously a more modern or Modern innovation that is associated with high-rise and garden apartments, intended to bring some sense of suburban living to urban, multi-family buildings. But even these are usually more engaged to the building, frequently with masonry parapets and/or supported at their ends by masonry walls. A solution is merely to eliminate the bays' balconies and perhaps bound the remaining ones with brick parapets. This would also allow a better proportional balance between wall and opening across the building, if the French doors were eliminated from the bays and replaced with more typically sized windows over brick.

The rails at the top of the fourth floor are problematic in a manner similar to the balconies in that they penetrate and erode the primary cornice—meant to be a significant, crowning gesture—and further expose the "penthouse," weakening the effectiveness of setting it back in the first place.

[1] The central vertical channel on the façade, expressing the physical separation of the units behind, also has the effect of visually or actually reducing the space available for the adjacent windows.

As the penthouse is meant to be recessed and recessive, it would be an advantage to further lower it, something that can be done simply by reducing the three-foot parapet height. Happily, the building's elevator requires no overrun, and the HVAC units will be small package units with flexibility in siting that will not require substantial visual screening. The darker color of the penthouse cladding may indeed make it recede as seen from the front of the building, but it will nonetheless present a striking contrast on the other sides of the building, where there is little or no setback. While acceptable on the set-back face of the penthouse, the other side of the building should be clad with matching field brick so that there is not a band of contrasting material wrapping the top of the building. Of course, this would beg the question of whether the entire penthouse should be of brick.

Because the grade at the front of the building will be somewhat lower than that at the adjacent buildings, the front "yard," the public space inside the sidewalk including the driveway, would ramp down toward the building. The planters at the sides of the property play a retaining function. This issue requires further exploration and discussion between the applicant and staff.

The City Archaeologist has determined that this site has no archaeological potential, because in modern times the location has been severely graded and nearly 25 feet of soil has been removed.

The staff recommends that the Board approve the proposal in concept, i.e., its height, general massing and general materials, with the condition that the applicant continue to develop the plans to address the issues raised above, relating to grounding the bays, eliminating the bay balconies, modifying the fenestration and remaining balconies, lowering the penthouse parapet, cladding most of the "penthouse" in brick, and dealing with the grade or slope in front of the building.