

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



www.committeef100.net

Mr. J. Peter Byrne
Mayor's Agent Hearing Officer
Historic Preservation Office
1100 4th Street SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024

The West Heating Plant
1051-55 29th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20007
HPA No. 17-263
HPA No. 17-633

Founded 1923

Chair

Stephen A. Hansen

Vice-Chair

Meg Maguire

Secretary

Erik Hein

Treasurer

Carol F. Aten

Trustees

Charlie Bien

Judy Chesser

George Clark

Monte Edwards

Larry Hargrove

Kathy Henderson

Kate Montague Perry

Elizabeth Purcell

Laura M. Richards, Esq.

Marilyn Simon

Jim Smailes

Pat Tiller

Kirby Vining

Beverly Wheeler

Evelyn Wrin

945 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001

202.681.0225

info@committeef100.net

16 July 2018

My name is Kirby Vining and I'm testifying today on behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, Washington's city-wide planning and preservation advocacy organization. C100 is opposed to the application before you today that proposes to demolish approximately 75% of the West Heating Plant, an individual landmark on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. C100 has twice testified before the DC Historic Preservation Review Board in support of landmark designation for the West Heating Plant; testified before the Old Georgetown Board in opposition to the proposed demolition of the WHP; testified before the Commission of Fine Arts in opposition to the proposal; and testified at HPRB in opposition to the proposal. In all of these actions, C100 has recognized that the West Heating Plant is not simply a contributing building in the Georgetown Historic District, but a building that is significant in its own right as 1) indicative of the industrial role that Georgetown played in the history of the nation's capital for more than two centuries; 2) an exemplar of late Art Moderne design as applied to an industrial building; 3) a monumental presence in Georgetown that has served as a familiar landmark of the waterfront, and a way-finder that can be seen from Rock Creek Parkway, the Potomac River, the C & O Canal, Key Bridge, Rock Creek Park, and even from Virginia.

We wish to address the applicant's claim that there are three significant components to the redevelopment of the WHP site. First, that the proposal will transform the abandoned structure that now envelopes the inoperable plant into a roughly 265,000 square-foot 65-unit residential condominium building designed by world-renowned architect Sir David Adjaye. Second, that the project will include a one-acre park designed by legendary landscape architect Laurie Olin. And, third, that it will include a pedestrian and cycling bridge and path that will connect the C & O Canal and Rock Creek Park to the

Georgetown Waterfront Park. The applicant concludes that these attributes may be why the project has enjoyed extraordinarily enthusiastic neighborhood and broader community support.

We would like to begin by addressing the applicant's conclusion. It may well be that the project has enjoyed enthusiastic support by neighbors but that is likely because 1) the units are predicted to sell from \$5,000,000-\$10,000,000, thereby raising the value of proximate properties; 2) by its own admission (Applicant's document titled Economic and Fiscal Impact of the West Heating Plant Redevelopment Washington, DC, dated 1/31/18) at any given time, only 50% of the units will be occupied, thereby creating minimal traffic and demand for parking spaces; 3) there will be ample parking spaces incorporated into the project that will essentially eliminate parking demand on the street.

Regarding the first attribute of the project, that it will transform an abandoned building into 65 residential units, C100 responds that there is no demonstrated need for additional luxury condos at this location, nor, very possibly, in any location in Washington. However, it is widely known that there is a critical shortage of affordable housing. Further, it is likely that this building could accommodate three times as many units, i.e. approximately 195, if they were affordable. Further still, were the units in the affordable category, the project would not require the amount of demolition that is proposed for the luxury units. More modest housing does not require the large window-ratio demanded by luxury units. So, in fact, the original design of the building's elevations would not have to be altered. They might have to be reconstructed or even replicated but the iconic building would appear the same. A superb example of this is the Hecht Company Warehouse, 1401 New York Avenue, NE, a building that has been successfully converted to median-income housing.

One plan that might be considered for the WHP is inserting a new building within the existing walls, thereby leaving the configuration of the original walls intact. They would need to be braced internally but would present, on the exterior, the original design for which the building was deemed a landmark. In fact, inserting a new building within the original walls would be facilitated by the fact that there have never been structural floors in the building. An architect member of C100 asked Sir Adjaye if, in fact, the building is wide enough to insert another building inside of the original walls and with enough space between the old and new walls to provide light and air, and to also have an atrium to provide light and air. Sir Adjaye replied that there is. This demonstrates that there are unexplored solutions to reuse of the WHP that would not require the dramatic demolition that is now proposed.

The second significant component of the project, according to the applicants, is that the project will include a one-acre park. This park, however, is mandated by the Future Land Use Map 6, which designates this area for "parks, recreation, and open space." Thus, an elevated park isn't a material net gain for the community. Such a claim is tantamount to saying that a building is of special merit because it will only be 50 feet in height when, in fact, zoning will allow only a 50-foot-high building.

The third significant component, according to the applicant, is that the project will include a pedestrian and cycling bridge and path that will connect the C & O Canal and Rock Creek Park to the Georgetown Waterfront Park; but there are already crossings of the canal at both ends of the same block.

Regarding the applicants' request that the preservation covenant that conveyed with the property be modified, C100 replies that the owners of the property have twice violated the covenant by virtue of having appeared as a party in opposition to landmark designation. The covenant, to which the Applicant agreed when purchasing the property, "acknowledged that the West Heating Plant is individually eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Sites and the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites." According to the covenant, *any violation of the covenant is subject to suit*. Rather than waiving the covenant, the Mayor's Agent should refer the violation to the DC Attorney General.

Rather than a waiver to the covenant, what is needed is an exploration of uses for the building other than as a luxury condominium. The Office of Planning is already firmly on record supporting rehabilitation rather than demolition. ("The Office of Planning continues to recommend rehabilitation as the appropriate approach for the heating plant, with reconstruction limited to what is necessary to achieve rehabilitation....". HPRB Staff Report in Case No. 17-263, 11/2/17.)

The Applicant's attempted showing of "special merit" is extremely weak and is not a reasonable or appropriate basis to approve demolition of the West Heating Plant. Some of the reasons why the developer's attempted showing of "special merit" is deficient are the following:

- 1) the Applicant estimates that the average annual income of the owners of the condos will be between \$900,000 and \$2 million, but since they won't be full time DC residents, they may not be paying income taxes, nor will they be spending money in the community, generating additional income and sales tax revenue;
- 2) the Applicant's showing of overall economic benefits is economically irrational, because it fails to compare the revenues which it claims will be generated under its proposal with what would be generated under other development approaches.
- 3) the Applicant's claim that the proposed development will generate 578 affordable housing units is absurd. At the very low cost of approximately \$100,000/unit, that would require a donation of \$57,800,000 to housing funds but the Applicant is making a donation of only \$2,800,000.
- 4) the proposed bridge essentially connects the proposed condominiums with the Four Seasons Hotel that will be providing concierge services to the residents of the new building. It might, in fact, not be accessible to the general public.
- 5) remediation of the contaminants also appears to be a merit that the Applicant claims but, no matter the use of the building, remediation would have to occur.
- 6) promotion of specific policies of the Comprehensive Plan, like the park, are mandated and, therefore, cannot be considered to be meritorious.

Roger Lewis, in a Washington Post "Shaping the City" article of September 29, 2012, wrote in defense of preserving those historical buildings that contribute to creating a sense of place for a community, or those buildings which serve as way-finders, "...powerful forces – regulatory, economic, demographic, technological – can work against preserving a historic neighborhood's collective character and scale." Further, "Neighborhood preservation challenges arise when private property owners and developers, or governments, propose eliminating parts of buildings contributing to their historic architectural character; demolishing historic buildings to make way for new buildings..." It is incumbent upon those charged with upholding preservation ordinances to guard against such expediency and, instead, to rule in favor of posterity.

The engineering firm that has been hired by the Applicant contends that the amount of demolition being proposed is necessary in order to construct a building of any type. However, this does not concur with the

report of the structural engineer who was independently retained by the Secretary of the Commission of Fine Arts to assess the building. He found that a significant amount of the original building could be retained. And, in fact, HPRB determined that the concept design shows that repair, or if necessary, in-kind reconstruction of the brick facades is a technically feasible response to irreparable deterioration. Furthermore, at the November 2, 2017 hearing before HPRB, the Applicant's engineer for the applicant made a presentation in which he showed images of the building at the time the Applicant purchased it and then showed images of the current condition of the building, remarking that the building had deteriorated considerably in the intervening years. We believe that the Applicant should not be rewarded for neglect of the building by being issued a demolition permit.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.