

HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
APPLICATION FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS
JULY 27, 2020
C14H-1996-0003
BARTHOLOMEW-ROBINSON BUILDING
1415 LAVACA STREET

PROPOSAL

Construct a mid-rise addition to the building.

PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS

The applicant proposes to construct a mid-rise hotel addition to the building, which has been rendered untenable by long-standing sewerage and drainage problems. The proposed addition will rise from within the existing walls of the building, and will have 10 stories of hotel rooms above a 29-foot (up from 24 feet in previous iterations) tall glass-clad story that will house hotel meeting rooms and amenities. The total height of the building will be 150 feet.

The base of the addition, clad in glass, will be set back a minimum of 10 feet from the existing parapet wall of the historic structure. The remainder of the addition will be cantilevered out over the walls of the existing building; the bottom of the cantilevered section will be 12' – 8" (up from 8 feet in previous plans) above the existing mansard cupolas. The main entrance to the building will be located at the historic entrance location at the corner of 15th and Lavaca Streets. None of the windows or doors on the existing building will be modified.

The walls of the addition will present as white and light gray.

The current condition of the building must be noted here to give this proposal its due context. This building has been gutted, and the south one-third of the building has been used as a parking lot with no roof and no windows in the window openings for many years. The former owner was forced to vacate the building due to long-standing plumbing and sewer line issues. Plainly stated, this building, in its current condition, would be extremely difficult and costly to renovate and return to economic viability. The current proposal preserves the historic walls and distinctive architectural features of the building. The proposed hotel will offer the resources to preserve this building, which might otherwise further deteriorate.

STANDARDS FOR REVIEW

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation are used to evaluate projects on historic landmarks. The following standards apply to the proposed project:

- 1) *A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.*

Evaluation: The building has historically had a commercial use, most recently offices. The change of use to a hotel necessitates the construction of the proposed addition. The existing historic walls, openings, and distinctive mansard cupolas on the corners of the original section of the building will be retained but will be visually impacted by the size and scale of an addition that does not meet Standard 9. Thus, the project also does not meet Standard 1.

- 2) *The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.*

Evaluation: The existing building will be retained. The addition will be built inside the existing walls.

- 3) *Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.*

Evaluation: No changes proposed for this building will convey a false sense of historical development.

- 4) *Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.*

Evaluation: The historic aspects of this building will remain.

- 5) *Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.*

Evaluation: This proposal does not affect the historic architectural features of the building.

- 9) *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*

Evaluation: The proposed project will add a mid-rise hotel to the one-story building. Guidance from the National Park Service in *Interpreting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation Bulletin No. 47: Rooftop Additions on Mid-Size Historic Buildings* is relevant to consider in this case. The bulletin states that rooftop additions generally are not appropriate for buildings under three stories, and additions to mid-rise buildings usually should be one-story or less to minimize visibility. The proposed addition is not compatible with the size and scale of the historic building and does not meet Standard 9.

The Commission has shown some willingness with prior projects to consider large-scale additions to historic buildings in the central business district, given the surrounding context of mid- and high-rise buildings. If permitted, the design goal of such projects should be to minimize the visual impact of the addition through setbacks and other design choices, so that the addition recedes and the landmark retains its prominence. This addition is now designed to provide over 12 feet between the existing historic cupolas and the base of the cantilevered section of the addition (up from 8 feet previously proposed). The bottom of the cantilevered section is now flared slightly to provide a greater visual sense of separation between the top of the historic cupolas and the base of the addition, and the base of the addition is now 31 feet above the street, corresponding to the height of the cupola corners of the historic building.

The maximum height of the building is constrained by its zoning, and applicants have indicated the proposed building size accommodates the number of rooms needed to make the project financially viable.

- 10) *New additions and adjacent or related construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.*

Evaluation: While the building has been previously gutted, the proposed project would likely damage the existing historic building if it were to be removed in the future.

The project does not meet Standards 1, 9, or 10.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee viewed the plans that showed only an 8-foot separation between the top of the cupolas and the base of the addition, and recommended increasing the distance as much as possible. While the Committee is not comfortable with the construction of mid- or high-rise additions to low-rise historic landmark buildings in general, they did express appreciation for the changes in design presented to the Committee over the course of several meetings and the clean lines that characterize this addition. The applicants have returned to the full Commission with the instant set of drawings with the changes requested by the Committee.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff offers a neutral recommendation, given the unique circumstances of this proposal and this property. The proposed project does not meet standards for the treatment of historic buildings, but also presents a unique condition in the doomed viability of this building without a major intervention, and the continued work of the applicants to comply with the recommendations of the Commission and the Architectural Review Committee over many months.

Staff is very concerned, as are members of the Commission, that as each project of this scale gains approval for construction, the precedent is set for more proposals that may be more incompatible with the character, context, and integrity of low-rise historic landmark commercial buildings in the city. Our historic landmark buildings deserve great consideration and protection from incompatible additions that compromise, if not destroy their integrity and context. If the Commission approves this proposal, then the Commission's motion and decision should definitively state that this is an exceptional and unique case based upon the condition of the building and the preservation of what remains of its historic fabric. This building has been vacant for years, and providing a means for its revitalization will be beneficial to its long-term viability, but it should be clear that this does not constitute a "green light" for future proposals to construct tall additions to one- and two-story historic landmark buildings.



NOTIFICATIONS

Location: 1415 Lavaca Street

-   SUBJECT TRACT
-  PENDING CASE
-  ZONING BOUNDARY

1" = 173'

This product is for informational purposes and may not have been prepared for or be suitable for legal, engineering, or surveying purposes. It does not represent an on-the-ground survey and represents only the approximate relative location of property boundaries.

This product has been produced by CTM for the sole purpose of geographic reference. No warranty is made by the City of Austin regarding specific accuracy or completeness.





