



*Brandon M. Scott
Mayor*

**COMMISSION FOR
HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL
PRESERVATION**

Tom Liebel, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



*Chris Ryer
Director*

July 13, 2021

REQUEST: Concept Hearing 1 – Construct a Five-Story Mixed-Use Residential Building

ADDRESS: 1517 Eastern Avenue (Fells Point Historic District)

RECOMMENDATION: Approve height, massing and scale with final design to return to the full commission.

In addition, staff suggests the following guidance for final design:

- Through design elements break up the massing of the proposed building along South Dallas Street. The stepping down of height along South Dallas St. can resemble the stepping down of many rowhouses structures at the corners of alley streets. The setbacks break up this elevation into three parts. This elevation should be treated as three components of a single whole.
- The main elevation that faces Eastern Avenue should be treated as a single whole with a base, middle, and top. It should also follow the rhythm of many of the historic rows in Fells Point. Therefore, the design should visually break up the facade into vertical components but allow the main entrance to be easily recognizable.
- Explore increasing the setbacks from 10 feet to 12-15 feet in order to complement the rhythm of historic blocks found in the district.
- The Eastern Avenue façade needs further depth and dimensionality. Use window reveals and architectural elements to create shadow lines in the design.
- Use proportions of solids and voids that complement the historic character of the district.
- Materials of the design need to complement the masonry (brick) look of the historic district.

STAFF: Eric Holcomb and Walter Edward Leon

ARCHITECT: Justin Seto

APPLICANT: Brandon Chasen

SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT

Fells Point Historic District: The site is located on the western edge of the Fells Point Historic District. Fells Point is one of the original three settlements that merged to form the earliest form of Baltimore City. The area is directly linked to early maritime trade, an essential early force in Baltimore's growth and development. In addition to the significance of Fells Point in the eighteenth century, the community has continued to play an important role in Baltimore history as a constantly growing and changing urban place. Many of the earliest extant buildings were expanded in the Victorian era creating a unique blend of pre-Revolutionary War and post-Civil War architectural styles and characteristics. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fells Point has been a diverse neighborhood composed of many ethnic groups each influencing the growth and development of the area.

Site Conditions: The building is located on the south side of the 1500 block of Eastern Avenue situated between Bond and Caroline Streets, with South Dallas Street – an alley street – bisecting the block. 1517 Eastern Avenue is a one-story commercial structure/warehouse constructed with concrete block, featuring a clad-brick facade on the Eastern Avenue elevation, with a parapet wall that is clad with cedar shingles. The building was considered noncontributing to the historic character of Fells Point and **was approved** for demolition and the site of a five-story residential structure.

The proposed building will be designed in context of the immediate streetscape of the 1500 block of Eastern Avenue. The primary façade of the proposed structure will dramatically change the character of this portion of Eastern Avenue. Currently, the north side of the 1500 block of Eastern Avenue comprises a nonhistoric two-story building with a 1970s faux mansard roof, two parking lots, a one story utilitarian garage structure (now used as a commercial enterprise) and a gas station. In addition, on the south side of the block directly east of the proposed building site, sitting at the southwest corner of Eastern Avenue and Bond Street, is a 1970s nonhistoric large two-story building. This building adds no historic character to the block.

Nevertheless, this block has historic character as exemplified by the row of buildings directly west of the proposed building site. This row of historic one-to-three-story structures were built from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries and today provide a microcosm of building development for Fells Point. These buildings ranged from Antebellum gabled structures, a rare flounder-type structure, several Italianate slanted flat roof buildings, and one 20th century one-story infill structure.

Dallas Street is as historically important as Eastern Avenue. Known as an alley street, Dallas Street represents a rare development pattern found only in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.. These streets usually run parallel to a main street. The scale, however, is significantly smaller. The building types range from small two-story houses, carriage houses, and small industrial buildings. The 500 block of S. Dallas Street comprises mostly two-story houses and several small industrial buildings. It includes Douglass row, a row developed by Frederick Douglass in the 1890s. The main historic characteristic of this block is its intimate, small scale, even though a five-story building (vertical addition built in the late 20th century) exists.

The proposed building site must relate to South Dallas Street as much as Eastern Avenue.

BACKGROUND

- On May 11, 2021 the Commission approved demolition of the existing building because it did not contribute to the historic character of Fells Point.
- On June 8, 2021, the commission disapproved a proposal to construct a five story structure because it was too large for the adjacent context, especially its relationship with Dallas Street.

PROPOSAL

The applicant has modified its June 8, 2021 hearing proposal by adding several setbacks to the west and south elevations which step down the height of the building along S. Dallas Street.

The applicant continues to propose a five-story mixed-use residential building on the site of the non-contributing commercial building. Today, the applicant is seeking approval for massing, height, and scale. If approved, the applicant will return with a completed design for final review. Facing Eastern Avenue, the proposed building is five stories high with the fifth story set back 10 feet from the front façade. Visually, the proposal will read as a four-story building along Eastern Avenue.

Along South Dallas Street, a series of setbacks bring the building down to the two-story height of the adjacent building. The fifth story is set back 10 feet **from the Street**. Then the fourth floor is set back ten feet, joining the fifth floor, for ten feet. The last ten feet of the massing is two stories along S. Dallas Street as the third, fourth and fifth floors are set back 30 feet. The fourth story is 38 feet long and the third story is 48 feet long, as measured from Eastern Avenue. This series of setbacks provides breathing room for the intimate scale of South Dallas street.

APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES

CHAP Staff applied the following sections of the *Baltimore City Historic Preservation Design Guidelines* in reviewing this proposal: Section 2.1 Guiding Principles for New Design, Section 2.2 Site Design, and Section 2.3 Scale and Form.

2.1 Guiding Principles for New Design

- Avoid demolishing historic buildings, structures, and landscapes when designing new construction projects.

The applicants have received approval to demolish a non-contributing structure that stands on the site. The design massing does not radically contrast to the overall character of Eastern Avenue, which runs the length of the district. There are several five-story buildings along Eastern Avenue.

2.2 Site Design

- Retain established property line patterns, street and alley widths, setbacks, primary and secondary building orientation, and landscape elements.
- Incorporate character-defining site design features of the historic district into the designs of new construction projects.
- In areas with varied setbacks, the setback for new construction should be within ten percent (10%) of those of neighboring buildings. Variations to these setback guidelines may be warranted in some cases, but decisions should be carefully considered with respect to their impact on the overall streetscape.
- The spaces between buildings help define the historic character of the neighborhood. Design new construction to follow the existing pattern of building widths and spacing between buildings.
- Primary buildings should have a similar orientation and relationship to the street as the existing buildings. Primary entrances and facades should be located, oriented, and sequenced to be consistent with the pattern of entrances and facades in the neighborhood.
- New construction at corners or abutting public spaces require special consideration in the design of entrances and multiple, publicly visible facades.

The proposal follows all the property lines within the original boundaries of the existing building. The site is a simple rectangular site that is landlocked on the south and east sides. The plans propose to have the fifth-floor set back so that the streetscape does not feel out of scale from either Eastern Avenue or South Dallas Street. The building will face both Eastern Avenue and South Dallas Street. Careful consideration through a series of setbacks along South Dallas Street is given as this elevation relates to the neighboring rowhouses along South Dallas Street. The building is located on a primary street through Fells Point that is heavily trafficked by both vehicles and pedestrians, and thus is highly visible within the district.

2.3 Scale and Form

- The scale and form of new buildings must be compatible with the height and depth of surrounding buildings. Where there is variation of building height within the immediate neighborhood, the new building should generally relate to the predominant pattern.
- New buildings must complement the massing of surrounding buildings, including the proportion of solid surfaces (walls) to voids (window and door openings.) Respect the characteristic rhythm (fenestration, bays, rooflines, etc.) of existing buildings.
- Design the new building to be proportional to surrounding buildings. Consider important

building proportions such as floor-to-floor heights, the size and placement of windows and doors, the scale of articulated elements such as porches, overhanging cornices, and bay windows.

- Floor-to-floor heights in new construction should be within ten percent (10%) of the floor-to-floor heights of adjacent historic buildings.
- Design rooflines to be compatible with those found on surrounding buildings.

The applicants propose a five-story building that fits the varied streetscape of Eastern Avenue from the eastern end to the western boundary of the historic district. The massing of the building is larger than the immediately surrounding buildings, but it is not out of character of the Eastern Avenue streetscape. The building does not loom over other historic properties on Eastern Avenue due to the floor-to-floor heights of this building, and set-back of the fifth floor, but it is larger than the buildings on the secondary streets it abuts. The floor-to-floor heights of the new building closely match those of the adjacent South Dallas Street houses. The new building will have flat roofs on both the fourth and fifth floors, which are compatible with those of larger-scaled structures in the district.

ANALYSIS

The building's overall height facing Eastern Avenue conforms to the CHAP guidelines for new construction and to the allowed zoning. The main facade facing Eastern Avenue fits the varied heights of Eastern Avenue which runs the width of the historic district. These heights range from one to five stories in both directions. However, the height as it relates to the immediate properties along South Dallas Street in particular is problematic. The series of setbacks mitigate a looming presence that adversely affects the character of the residential street. The fifth-floor is setback enough so that it does not appear imposing to the scale of the overall building as seen from Eastern Avenue.

In relation to the historic buildings on Eastern Avenue and directly west of the proposed site and across South Dallas Street, the proposed building is three stories higher than most of the two-story buildings. However, the setbacks of the fifth story along Eastern Avenue and South Dallas help to mitigate the proposed building's height. In addition, South Dallas Street separates the proposed building from the historic row along Eastern Avenue. The scale for the main street on Eastern Avenue is appropriate and would help to activate the Eastern Avenue corridor. These setbacks help the building respect and relate to the scale of the houses on South Dallas Street.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS

The Fells Point Design Review Committee reviewed the application for the new construction and has requested the applicants return for additional comments based upon the height, massing and scale design provided to them. Their decision is as follows:

There is currently a split decision regarding approval of massing, scale, and proportion.

- *One member opposed the overall massing and height noting a 30%+ increase in overall massing from the surrounding context, is concerned about the scale, and is opposed to a 4-story façade along Eastern and 5-story building overall.*
- *One member opposed the current massing, specifically at the corner of Eastern and Dallas and suggested a 3-story façade at the corner to transition between the proposed 4-story façade along Eastern and existing 2-story facades along Dallas.*
- *One member noted while the project is moving in the right direction, the massing and scale is not where it should be and does not recommend approval at this time and needs further refinement of the project.*
- *Two panel members recommend approval of massing, scale, and proportion with the following comments; - Special attention must be taken at Eastern and Dallas corner and along Dallas to transition from larger 4 story mass along Eastern to the existing 2-story residences along Dallas.*
- *Increase setbacks from 10' to 12'-15' in keeping with the existing rowhouse context. - Provide street elevations along Eastern and Dallas to show context. In addition, provide street views and additional drawings beyond aerial massing studies to provide ability to evaluate context.*
- *Provide sufficient details at building elevations to understand massing articulation and relationship to the existing context. The panel requests the Applicant return to our next FDRC meeting.*

Douglass District Association – The applicant met with the group several times and there was no unanimous position; therefore, there is not letter of support or opposition. Individuals will provide their own testimony of support or opposition.

Fells Point Residents Association. The applicant met with the group, described the project and was provided no feedback.

Fells Point Task Force was informed.

RECOMMENDATION: Approve height, massing and scale with final design to return to the full commission.

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Eric L. Holcomb
Executive Director

Photos and Maps
Exhibit 1: Fells Point Historic District, City View 2021



Exhibit 2: Property location, City View 2021



Exhibit 3. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Baltimore 1914-53, Vol. 4-1914: republished 1952, sheet 322

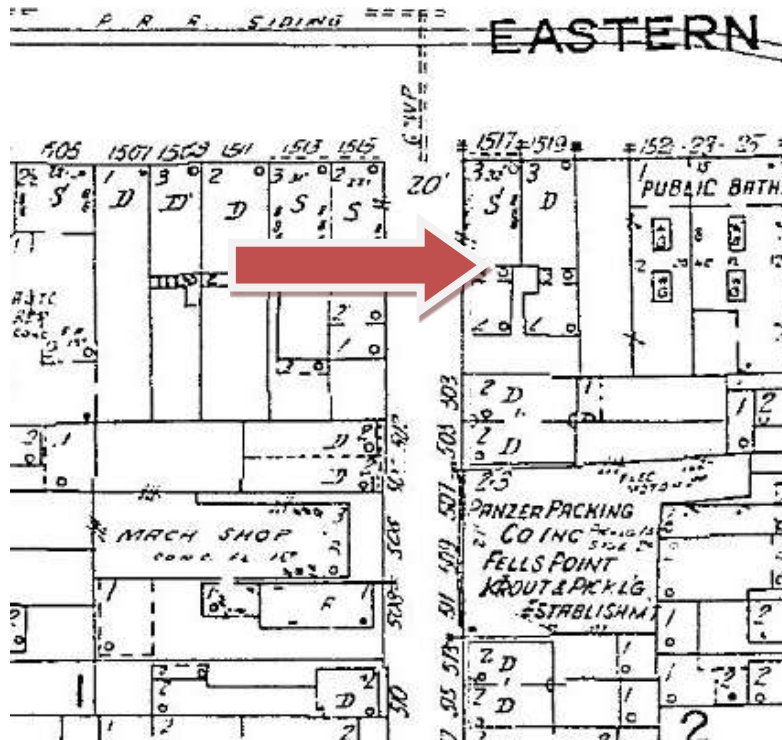


Exhibit 4. Aerial view, Pictometry 2020



Exhibit 5. Aerial view from the north, Pictometry 2020



Exhibit 6. Aerial view from the east, Pictometry 2020



Exhibit 7. Aerial view from the south, Pictometry 2020.

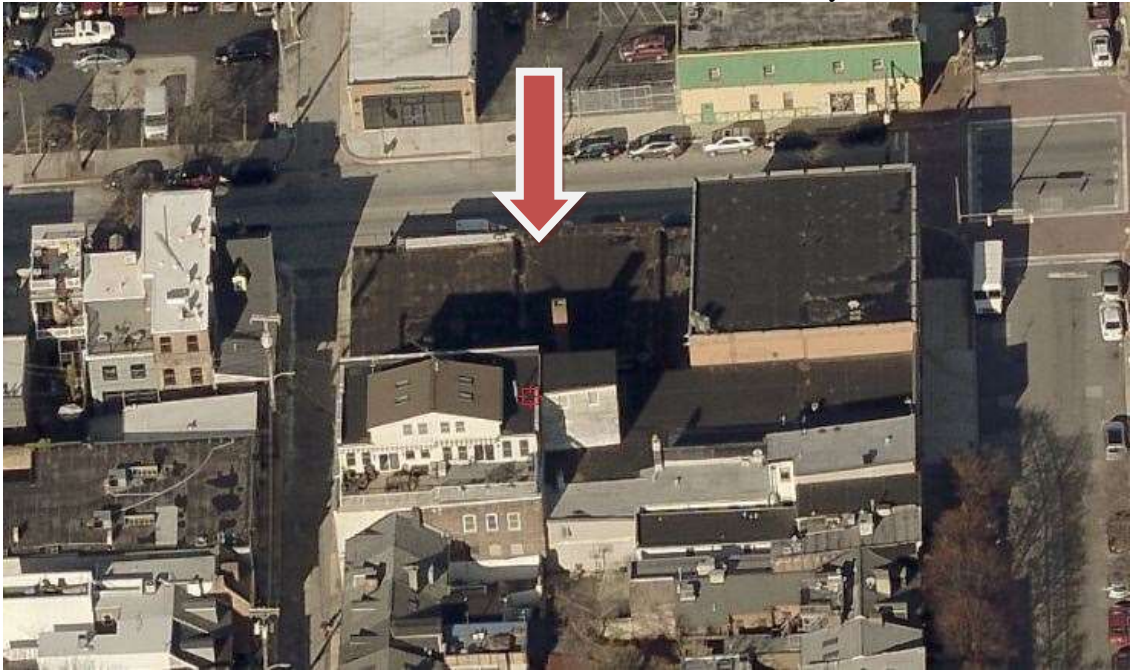


Exhibit 8. Aerial view from the west, Pictometry 2020



Exhibit 9. Google streetview Eastern Avenue elevation, 2020



Exhibit 10. Google streetview Eastern Avenue, 2020

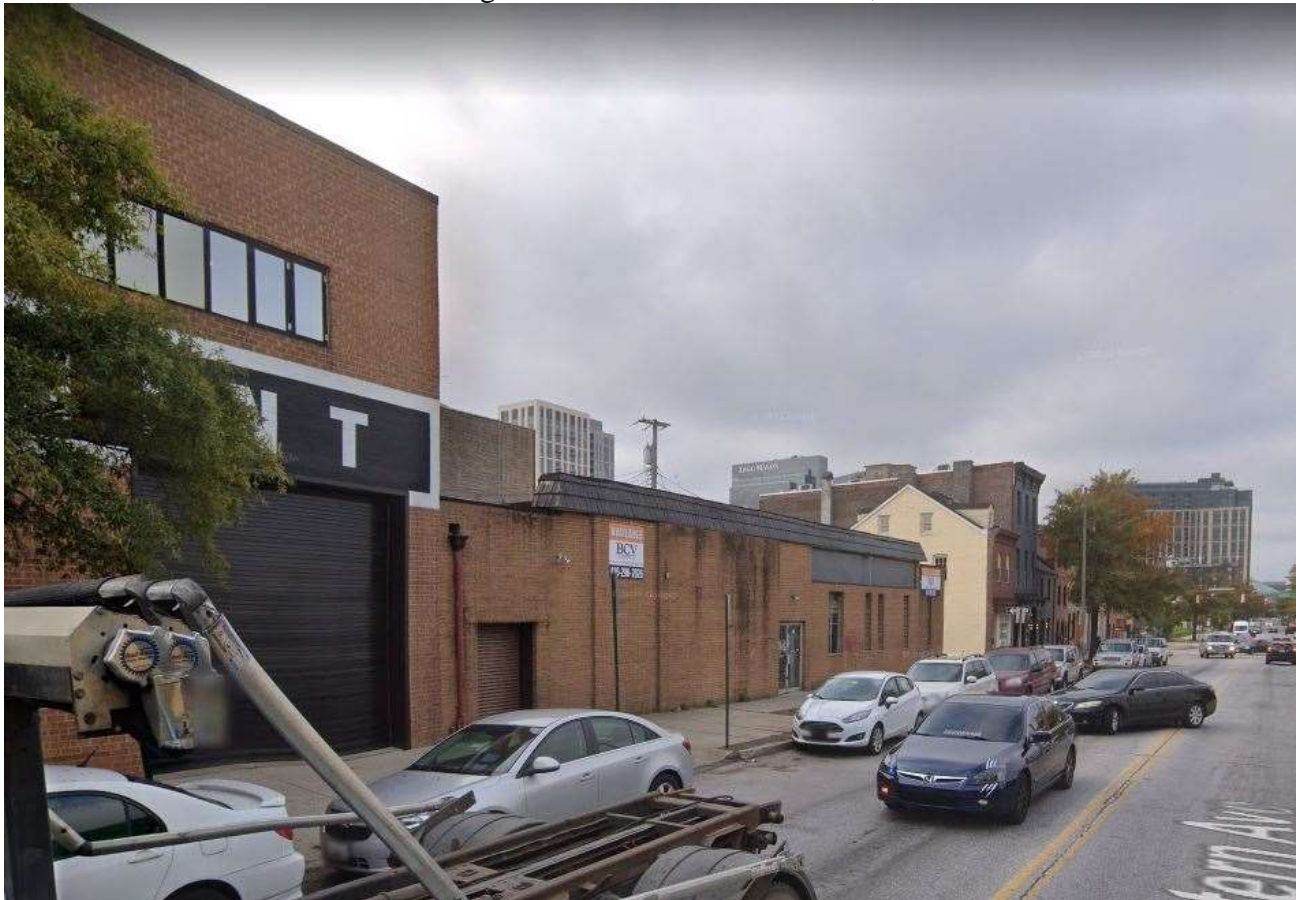


Exhibit 11. Google streetview, South Dallas Street elevation, 2020



Exhibit 12. Google streetview, South Dallas Street, 2020



Exhibit 13. Site Plan

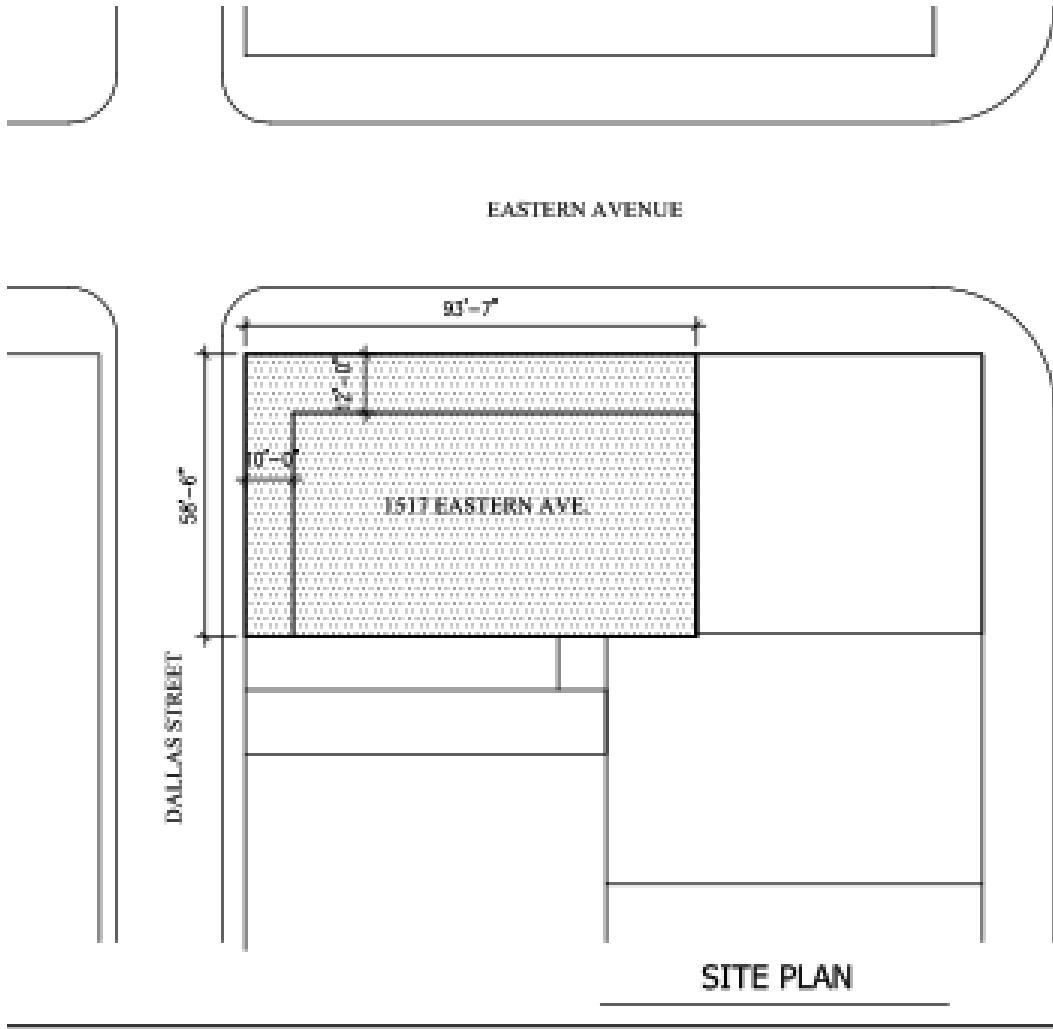


Exhibit 14. Eastern Avenue elevation

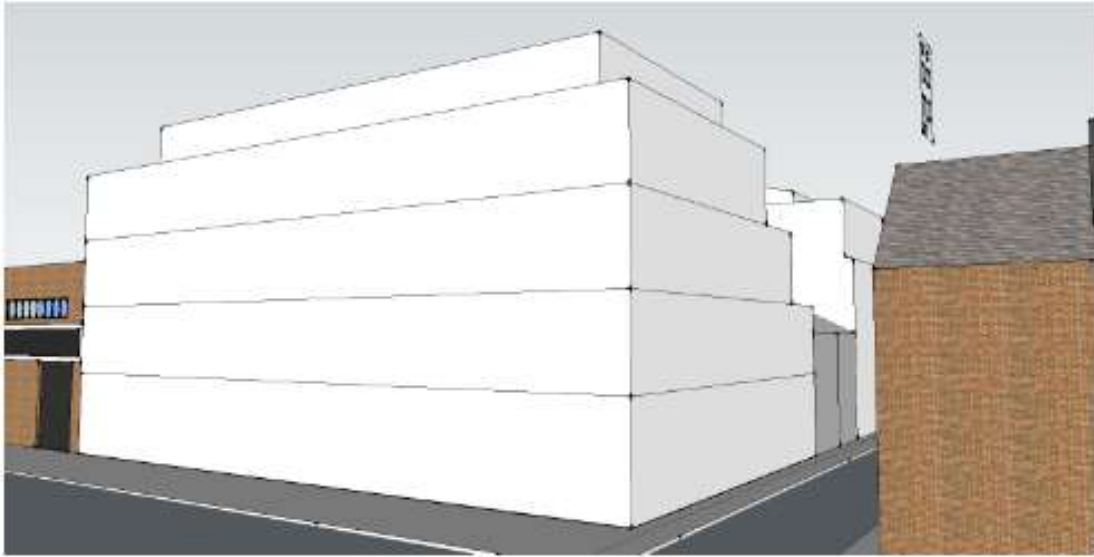


Exhibit 15. Dallas Street elevation

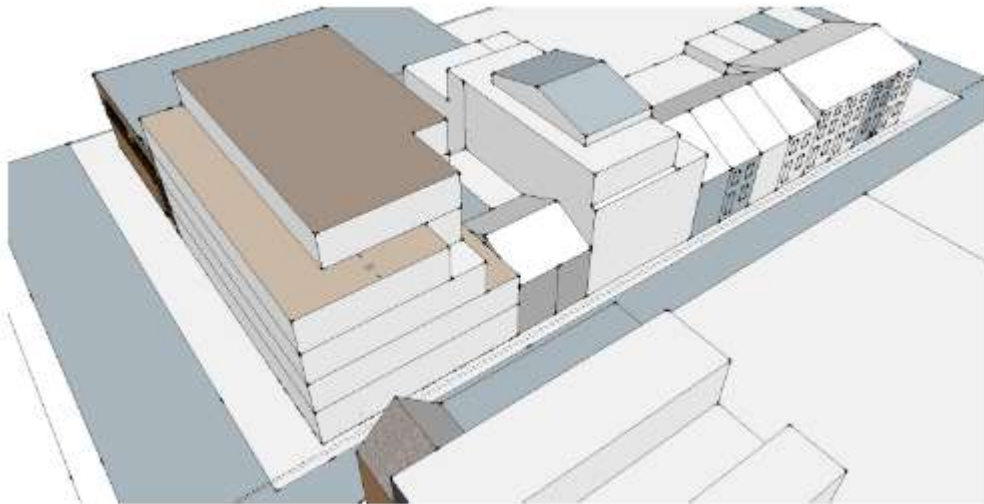


Exhibit 16. Eastern Avenue Streetscape

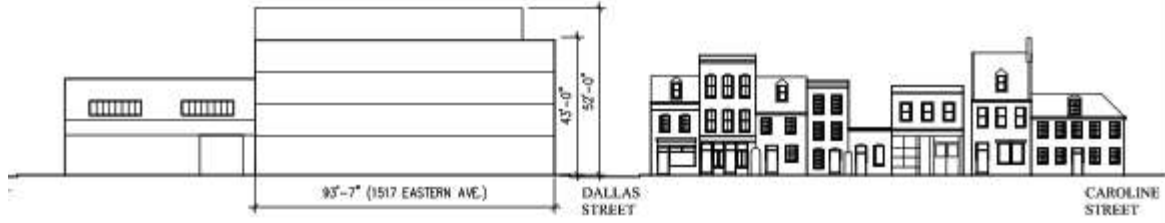


Exhibit 17. 3D Streetview model looking east on South Dallas Street

