



## Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C

PO Box 21009, NW, Washington, DC 20009

[www.anc1c.org](http://www.anc1c.org)

*Representing Adams Morgan*

**Commissioners:** November 7, 2016

**Julie Seiwel** (1C01)

Kim Williams

**Hector Huevo** (1C02)

DC Office of Planning/Historic Preservation Office

**Ted Guthrie** (1C03)

1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650

**Gabriela Mossi** (1C04)

Washington, DC 20024

**Alan Gambrell** (1C05)

**RE: HPRB Review of the Meridian International Development**

**Billy Simpson** (1C06)

Dear Ms. Williams:

**Wilson Reynolds** (1C07)

We are writing to you on behalf of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C ("ANC1C"). At a duly noticed public meeting on November 2, 2016, with a quorum present, ANC1C voted 6 to 1 (with one abstention) to approve the attached resolution regarding Meridian International Development. ANC1C asks that HPRB give great weight to our concerns as it undertakes its review of this project.

**JonMarc Buffa** (1C08)

We would be happy to discuss this resolution and answer any questions that you may have at your convenience.

Sincerely,

JonMarc P. Buffa, Esq.

ANC1C-08 Commissioner

Chairman, ANC1C Planning, Zoning and Transportation Committee

**Resolution Regarding the Revised Meridian Redevelopment Proposal**  
**HPA #15-205**

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C (“ANC1C”) adopts the following resolution, votes to send it to the District Historic Preservation Review Board (“HPRB”). Further, ANC1C authorizes any Commissioner of ANC1C to represent ANC1C before the HPRB in connection with this matter:

Whereas, the project team for Meridian International Center (“Meridian”) has submitted redesigned plans to HPRB for review of the concept, height, and massing of a new residential structure and Meridian conference space proposed for the portion of Meridian International Center’s property closest to 16th Street NW (hereinafter “the Project”);

Whereas, the White-Meyer House and the Meridian House are jewels designed by renowned architect John Russell Pope, who designed the Jefferson Memorial, the National Gallery of Art (West Building), and the National Archives;

Whereas, the White-Meyer House and Meridian House buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are listed at the “National level” of significance, and accordingly deserve the highest level of protection by HPRB;

Whereas, the Project is to be located within the Meridian Hill Historic District which is listed in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites as an historic district;

Whereas, the historic district designation recognizes, and HPRB is legally required to preserve, the special architectural and landscape characteristics of the area;

Whereas, District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines call for compatibility of new construction, with particular attention to setback, alignment with front facades of neighboring buildings, height, width, proportions, rhythm of doors and windows, roof shape, ornamentation, projections, and landscaping;

Whereas, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that “...alterations and new construction [be] designed with extreme sensitivity” and “[t]he mansions and churches of Meridian Hill represent the most significant aspect of the neighborhood’s built environment and should be treated with the highest standards of sensitivity and care;”

Whereas, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines state that: “Meridian Hill Park is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Its physical and visual centrality necessitates that alterations to surrounding buildings take into consideration views to and from this nationally significant urban garden;”

Whereas, the Project's proposed scale, massing, and height exceed that of the adjacent residential and historic buildings (the Envoy, 1661 Crescent Place, Beekman Place, Meridian Crescent, the 17th St row houses, White-Meyer House, and Meridian House);

Whereas, this Project must be reviewed in context of the historic district, the two historic buildings, and historic Meridian Hill Park;

Whereas, there are significant concerns about the revised Project regarding the height, total massing, setbacks on all sides of the lot, and elimination of green space and landscaping;

Whereas, the Project's revised setbacks on Belmont Street, though better, are clearly insufficient to preserve the views of White-Meyer House and Meridian House as one enters Belmont Street, NW from 16th Street, NW and from Meridian Hill Park and fail to respect the setbacks on Crescent Place, NW;

Whereas, on March 19, 2015, the staff at Rock Creek Park, an unit of the National Park System, that maintains administrative jurisdiction over Meridian Hill Park (U.S. Reservation 327) submitted a comment letter to the HPRB raising significant concerns with the incompatibility of the Project to the historic Meridian Hill Park ("National Park Service Letter");

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter states: "The infilling of the historically open space just across 16th Street, NW from the 16th Street Terrace Overlook, will alter the existing open vegetated spatial character of this external view. What has historically been a filtered, distant view of the historic White-Meyer House at 1624 Crescent Place, NW (built in 1912) will become a truncated view that creates a hard edge terminus to the axial vista running west across the Terrace Overlook."

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter states: "In addition, the Beekman Place townhouses that replaced the former Henderson mansion (demolished 1959) located just south of the project area on the west side of 16th Street, NW, are low in scale and do not impede the views to the southwest. Combined with the open character of the White-Meyer property, the lack of large street-facing buildings along this stretch of 16th Street allows visitors to Meridian Hill Park to experience how the park's designers took advantage of the elevation and sloping topography to create excellent distant views toward downtown Washington, D.C. Looking southwest from the Upper Park, the low scale and openness in the area south of Crescent Place allows park users to perceive the way the natural land drops off to the south and southwest of the park and demonstrates why the park's designers selected this site for parkland – for the views. Furthermore, the White-Meyer House appears to be the only property that retains the open character of the estate type development that dominated this side of the park at the time it was designed."

Whereas, the National Park Service Letter concludes: “The National Park Service would prefer that any development on the White-Meyer House property (1624 Crescent Place, NW) be lower in scale and be sited and designed to avoid truncating the views from the park’s overlooks.”

Whereas, ANC1C held a duly noticed public meeting of the full Commission on March 4, 2015 where the full ANC1C voted unanimously (7-0) to approve a resolution to the HPRB urging significant changes to the proposals because it is incompatible with the historic nature and character of the Meridian Hill Historic District, the two historic houses, and the neighborhood, and fails to comply with the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines (“ANC1C March Resolution”);

Whereas, on April 2, 2015, HRPB held a hearing on this Project. At that hearing HPRB sought revisions to multiple aspects of the design, notably including the height and mass of the structure.

Whereas, at the April 2<sup>nd</sup> hearing, the HPRB provided a detailed list of revisions that the Project must implement if they wish to win approval for the Project;

Whereas, at the April 2, 2015 HRPB hearing, the HPRB additionally found that “the entrance, detailing, penthouse of the new building, and the design of the Meridian meeting rooms and parking court were among the elements identified as needing modification to improve the proposal’s compatibility with the historic district.”

Whereas, on July 8, 2015, the ANC1C held a duly noticed public meeting of the full Commission and unanimously (8-0) adopted a resolution that explained in detail how the re-proposed Project failed to address the important concerns raised by ANC’s March Resolution and the HPRB’s April hearing (“ANC1C July Resolution”). The ANC1C July Resolution called on HPRB to reject the Project as incompatible and inconsistent with the historic nature and character of the Meridian Hill Historic District, the two historic houses, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines and the purposes of the preservation act;

Whereas, in the summer of 2015, the developer asked HPRB to halt consideration of the Project so that the developers could revise the Project;

Whereas, in the fall of 2016, the Project was re-proposed. The revised Project made improvements to the exterior design and proposes a slightly reduced the height of the 16th St building (5 feet shorter) and the Crescent building;

Whereas, the re-proposed Project fails to address the important concerns raised by ANC1C in the ANC1C March Resolution and ANC1C July Resolution;

Whereas, there are significant concerns about the Project from neighbors regarding quality-of-life concerns relating to traffic, and other disturbances are arising from a significant expansion of

conference activity. Though these quality-of-life concerns are expected to be addressed through a zoning process, they also directly related to the massing, scale, and height of the Project that is the subject of HPRB review;

Therefore, it is the view of ANC1C that the Project, as currently re-proposed, is incompatible and inconsistent with the historic nature and character of the Meridian Hill Historic District, the two historic houses, Meridian Hill Park, and the neighborhood and fails to comply with the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines;

Therefore, ANC1C calls on HPRB to:

I. Overall: The White-Meyer House and Meridian House mansions are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are listed at the “National level” of significance, and accordingly deserve the highest level of protection by HPRB. As the cornerstones of the Meridian Hill Historic District, Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines expressly state that “[t]he mansions and churches of Meridian Hill represent the most significant aspect of the neighborhood’s built environment and should be treated with the highest standards of sensitivity and care.” Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that “particular attention should be paid to siting, massing, size, scale and materials.” The Project fails this test. The Project towers over and obscures the White-Meyer House and Meridian House and eliminates their freestanding character. The Board should find the re-proposed Project incompatible with the character of the Meridian Hill Historic District and inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation act.

II. Require that the height be reduced. The Project as re-proposed has a jarring height that on the 16<sup>th</sup> St side is a mere five feet shorter than previously proposed structure. The Project is still taller than all of its adjacent buildings and out of character and incompatible with the neighboring structures in the Meridian Hill Historic District. The revised Project towers more than a story taller than the Envoy (when you include the penthouse) which is the tallest adjacent structure and multiple stories taller than historic White-Meyer House and Meridian House mansions and its neighbors Beekman Place and Meridian Crescent.

Historic Guidelines 4.1 and 4.2 state: “The scale of a new building should usually respect the prevailing scale of its neighbors. In a few cases, a new building's use or symbolic importance may make it appropriate for its scale to differ from that of its neighbors.” This condominium building has no special use or symbolic importance that would justify a significant difference in height and mass from the surrounding buildings.

Historic Guidelines 8.1 through 8.3 state: “While a new building does not necessarily need to be exactly the same height as its neighbors to be compatible, it should be designed to respect existing building heights. Typically, if a new building is more than one story higher or lower than existing buildings that are all the same height, it will be out of character. On the other hand, a new building

built in a street of existing buildings of varied heights may be more than one story higher or lower than its immediate neighbors and still be compatible.”

The Project is incompatible in height within its context of its neighboring low-scale buildings as it is multiple stories taller than its neighbors on three of its four sides. The Envoy is not the touchstone of height for this Project. Importantly, the 16<sup>th</sup> St structure towers over and hides the White-Meyer House and Meridian House which share the lot. No longer will one be able view Pope’s masterpieces (White-Meyer House and Meridian House) from numerous vantage points. The Project is discordantly tall and overwhelms rather than enhances the buildings adjacent thereto. Notably, at the April 2, 2015 HRPB hearing, the HPRB raised significant concerns with height and mass of the penthouse of the building which adversely amplified the height of the Project. HPRB found that the penthouse needed “modification to improve the proposal’s compatibility with the historic district.” The current design suffers the same flaws as its predecessor.

Also, the Project violates the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital (2006). The Comprehensive Plan states:

*910.11 - Policy UD-2.2.4: Transitions in Building Intensity:* Establish gradual transitions between large-scale and small-scale development. The relationship between taller, more visually prominent buildings and lower, smaller buildings (such as single family or row houses) can be made more pleasing when the transition is gradual rather than abrupt. The relationship can be further improved by designing larger buildings to reduce their apparent size and recessing the upper floors of the building to relate to the lower scale of the surrounding neighborhood. 910.11 (Chapter 9 Urban Design).

There is no transition from the Project to the shorter 16<sup>th</sup> St. buildings. ANC1C notes that the heights of the existing buildings in the Meridian Hill Historic District follow the natural downward slope of Meridian Hill. However, the Project, as re-proposed, would be taller than the building up the hill from it (the Envoy), and would then extend that height southward creating a cliff-effect with respect to the next property down the hill from it (Beekman Place) and with the adjacent White-Meyer House. This presents an incongruous transition on 16th St with the rest of the block and breaks the natural downward slope of structures that is a feature of 16th St as it runs towards downtown. This fact compels a transition in height from the Envoy to Beekman Place in order to echo the topography of Meridian Hill (after which the Historic District is named). The Project’s height cannot pass muster.

As National Park Service explained, the Meridian Hill Park’s designers took advantage of the elevation and sloping topography to create excellent distant views toward downtown Washington, D.C. from Meridian Hill Park that would be permanently lost if this structure’s height is not substantially reduced. This inhibits an important view shed and completely conceals and obscures

the White-Meyer House and Meridian House from Meridian Hill Park. Never again will visitors to Meridian Hill Park be able to enjoy the historically significant views of these mansions. This violates the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines stating that: “Meridian Hill Park is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Its physical and visual centrality necessitates that alterations to surrounding buildings take into consideration views to and from this nationally significant urban garden.”

The Project is incompatible in character with the components of the historic district, will result in the irretrievable loss of the view of the White-Meyer House and the Meridian House, and generally impairs and intrudes upon the White-Meyer House.

HPRB should require the Project’s height be substantially reduced in real terms. In that regard, the Project should incorporate architectural approaches that reduce the height of the Project, particularly from the ground and from the neighboring and historic structures such as: removing multiple floors from the building, tiering or stepping the building as it moves southward on 16<sup>th</sup> Street, minimizing and/or modifying the penthouse to minimize its role in obstructing views and off-setting balance (e.g., by centering its location on the roof, maximizing its setback location, locating certain mechanical structures partially within floors below the roof, use of screening/surface material, and limiting its height), and reducing the height of the building as one moves towards the periphery of the structure.

A significant reduction in the height of the Project combined with tiering is warranted.

III. Require that the setback be increased. The Project, as re-proposed, fails to satisfy the setback requirements of the Historic Preservation Guidelines and the Meridian Hill Historic District Guidelines.

Historic Guideline 2.1 states: “In addition to complying with the legal setback requirements, a new building should respect the setbacks established by the buildings on a street. For example, the front of a new building should not extend beyond the line created by the fronts of existing buildings, even if allowed to do so by code.”

HPRB should insist that the setbacks be increased, particularly on Crescent Place., 16<sup>th</sup> St., and Belmont St., to avoid a “wall” that would block vista views from the Meridian Hill Park’s Grand Terrace and preserve the views of the White-Meyer House and Meridian House as one enters Belmont St. from 16th Street.

The White-Meyer House and Meridian House are significantly setback from Crescent Place. Renowned architect John Russell Pope set these historic landmarks back intentionally to create beautiful view planes. Conversely, the Project intentionally disregards Pope’s setbacks and adversely burdens the historic mansions. The Crescent Place component of the Project should align with the setbacks of the White-Meyer House and Meridian House.

HPRB should require increased setbacks on all sides.

IV. Require that the scale and massing be reduced. ANC1C notes that the Project, as re-proposed, is not proportional to other neighboring buildings.

Historic Guideline 5.1 states: "Proportion is the relationship of the dimensions of building elements, such as windows and doors, to each other and to the elevations. Often, proportions are expressed as mathematical ratios, particularly for buildings based on Greek, Roman, and Renaissance architecture. For example, many historic buildings designed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries use mathematical proportions to locate and size windows, doors, columns, cornices and other building elements. The design of a new building should respect, but not necessarily exactly duplicate, the existing proportions of neighboring buildings."

Historic Guideline 6.1 states: "The spacing of repetitive facade elements, such as projecting bays, storefront, windows, doors, belt courses and the like, give an elevation its rhythm. The space between free-standing buildings, the contiguousness of rowhouses and other party-wall buildings, and the heights of roofs, cornices, towers, and other roof projections establishes the rhythm of a street. A new building should respect the rhythm of its neighbors as well as that of the street."

Historic Guideline 7.1 states: "Massing is derived from the articulation of a building's facade through the use of dormers, towers, and other roof projections, as well as facade projections such as bays, porches, and steps. A building's massing significantly contributes to the character of a street, particularly in districts containing rowhouses or contiguous commercial buildings.

The Project seeks to fill out the site to the maximum extent permitted under the zoning regulations without regard to the prevailing height and scale of the existing structures. Since, the Project is being proposed as an 'addition' to the White Meyer House, the design must be deferential to the historic buildings as well as the historic district. This proposal must be reviewed under a heightened level of scrutiny and the project must mitigate any impacts on both the White-Meyer House and the historic district generally. It appears the White-Meyer house is being burdened by this 'addition' to help them defeat the intent of zoning regulations by contending that there is only one structure on the lot for zoning purposes, which would allow them to achieve additional FAR.

V. Require the Meridian meeting rooms (aka Conference Center) be moved. At April 2, 2015 HRPB hearing, the HPRB found that "the design of the Meridian meeting rooms... were among the elements identified as needing modification to improve the proposal's compatibility with the historic district." The Meridian meeting rooms are built directly into the White Meyer house and fundamentally and adversely impact its freestanding character.

The Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that "...alterations and new construction [be] designed with extreme sensitivity" and "[t]he mansions and churches of Meridian



Hill represent the most significant aspect of the neighborhood's built environment and should be treated with the highest standards of sensitivity and care." Notably, the Meridian Hill Historic District Design Guidelines require that "connections should be minimal and preferably reversible, enabling the mansions to retain their freestanding character." The Project encroaches upon the White-Meyer house, eliminates its freestanding character, and is incompatible with its design. The most effective way to preserve the freestanding character of the White-Meyer house is to move conference center to the new 16<sup>th</sup> Structure.

The conference center is a massive and permanent addition to White-Meyer house. Improvements should be imposed to address how the conference facilities are setback, perceived, and experienced relative to the White-Meyer House and landscape.

VI. Require a clearly defined and prominent central entrance on the 16th Street facade. The re-proposed design, though better, still only provides a small and visually insignificant entrance on 16th Street. At the April 2015 hearing, multiple HRPB members called for a significant, if not monumental, front entrance on 16<sup>th</sup> St. consistent with the other buildings in the Meridian Hill Historic District, which have clearly defined central entrances in their primary facades at the same grade as the streets they face. Neighboring buildings utilize architectural and landscape hardscape and softscape elements that celebrate and are compatible with the Beaux-Arts classicism that defines 16th Street and Meridian Hill Park. However, the developers have built a minimalist and uninviting entrance that is neither monumental nor inviting. The revised Project fails clearly to deliver the monumental entrance that HPRB called for at the April 2015 hearing.

VII. The Loading Dock must be redesigned. The revised Project has a massive loading dock/parking court that mirrors the size and scale of the previous design. At the April 2, 2015 HRPB hearing, HPRB found that "the design of. . . parking court [was] among the elements identified as needing modification to improve the proposal's compatibility with the historic district." Multiple HPRB members raised significant concerns that the open motor court adversely truncated the view of the historic White-Meyer House and was visually unappealing. An open loading dock will diminish the White-Meyer House's open character of the estate-type development that dominated this side of the park at the time it was designed. The current view on Belmont St, NW is an uninterrupted continuous brick wall that frames the White-Meyer House and provides a prominent viewscape as one looks at the historic landmark from 16<sup>th</sup> St at Belmont St., NW.

HRPB should require only the most minimalist entrance on Belmont St., NW covered by an opaque gate that would replicate the uninterrupted continuous wall that frames the White-Meyer House. This would be facilitated if the Project had only a small vehicle entrance on Belmont St., NW and then had vehicle egress on Crescent Place, NW. This would result in a minor opaque-gated-opening on Belmont St., NW, which would preserve the prominent viewscape and would "blend" into the streetscape thereby highlighting the White-Meyer house, rather than detracting therefrom.

VIII. Improve the Orientation and Symmetry of the Project to the existing structures. The symmetry and orientation of Project on three historic streets must be addressed. As stated above, the current design places all traffic and parking (loading dock) on the Belmont side, but provides no such egress to the Crescent Place side. The historic White-Meyer House and Meridian House both are oriented towards Crescent Place, yet the Project has no connection to Crescent Place and turns its back thereon. The configuration is unsettling as the three-frontage streets deserve and demand equal degrees of relationship to neighboring properties. A solution is readily available, as described above; vehicle and even pedestrian egress on the Crescent Place side of the site.

Finally, the off-center mechanical penthouse is visually jarring. It is located far from the center of the building. It creates an asymmetry that is inconsistent with other structures in the historic district. The mechanical penthouse should be moved to the center of the structure and revised to reduce its scale.