

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

October 17, 2019

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Executive Director

Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

Mr. Raul Duverge
Boston Planning and Development Agency
One City Hall Square
Boston, MA 02201
Re: 350 Boylston Street

Dear Mr. Duverge,

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 39 Organizational Members, 143 Corporate Members, and a reach of 35,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city.

When this project was first proposed over a decade ago, the Alliance strongly opposed the demolition required, particularly of the historic Arlington Building. We still believe that this ornate Art Deco building successfully anchors this prominent corner at the edge of the Public Garden, complements the Arlington Street Church and the Back Bay Architecture District across the street, and creates a dynamic, authentic sense of place in the neighborhood. Our effort to preserve was widely supported in the community. Though we continue to believe the highest and best use for this site would be restoration of the Arlington Building, we acknowledge that the previous effort to protect the building was not successful and that demolition has been approved. Therefore, we will not lead any further efforts for its preservation.

We have recently met with the proponent to further understand the proposal, the subject of the September 17, 2019 Notice of Project Change. We confirmed that overall little has changed since this effort was last underway which presents a challenge for us. Some of the concerns we expressed back in 2008 remain pertinent. In particular we continue to be concerned that the proposed design does not relate well to the existing, varied, and undulating rhythm of facades of Boylston Street. It is critical that a building that is significantly more massive than the existing buildings on this block not overwhelm its context. For example, the previous design included projecting bays that helped, to a limited degree, break up the façade, although at the time the Alliance felt that gesture was still insufficient. Rather than enhance that design intent, the revised design eliminates those elements, creating a monolithic presence in the streetscape and public realm space that is not sufficiently human

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scaled. This proposal contrasts with The Druker Company's adjacent Heritage on the Garden which successfully provides a contemporary, large scale building with a more welcoming, less homogeneous street presence.

We feel strongly that the success of this new development is wholly contingent on the design and execution of the details of the building, which we are told have not yet been developed. The renderings presented are woefully inadequate, some little more than Sketch-Up models. The materials, proportions, depth, shadow lines, etc. that could perhaps alleviate some of our concerns are highly ambiguous. The buildings proposed for demolition demonstrate profundity of craft, technique, and design that we would ask to be surpassed in their replacement. In particular, the Arlington Building exhibits a level of craftsmanship in its Art Deco facades – its ornate cornice, ornamentation, carvings, and grill work as well as the variety of planes and complex depth detailing. While we are not advocating for replication of these features, we do feel that the same degree of craft should be embraced in the new building.

Though our Board may have confidence in the proponent's capacity to meet such a high level of standard based on previous work, it is difficult to support approval of a project when so many crucial details have not yet been presented. We feel that imperative details include, for example:

- The depth and relief of the fenestration
- The distance between window panes and the overall proportion of stone to glass
- The size of the window panes and whether secondary fenestration will be needed
- The angles of the chamfered windows and the rhythm this chamfering creates
- The type and color of limestone, which will dramatically impact overall appearance
- The monolithic nature of the building, the uniformity of the façade, and options for breaking down the massing, especially within the pedestrian realm, to be more in keeping with the neighborhood.
- The salvage and potential reuse of iconic elements and unique fabric of the existing buildings, preferably on site in the new lobbies or retail locations.
(Demolition of this scale has been demonstrated to have highly negative environmental implications and should be discouraged in keeping with the City's sustainability goals. We strongly urge the City to require deconstruction instead of demolition, especially at this site.)

Although we recognize that this project was fully approved ten years ago, we feel it is important to recognize that much has changed over ten years in design perspectives, methodology, and the priorities we impose on proposals to reflect our collective attitudes and desires. That evolution is in part reflected in the level of review projects receive today, a process far more robust than it was in the past. The Boston Civic Design Commission now commonly provides valuable and constructive guidance on design details that are crucial to the success of a project, particularly at such a prominent location. That scrutiny consistently results in better projects. On principle we feel that a proposal like this should be reevaluated through today's lenses and

standards. Redevelopment of this prominent site presents a unique opportunity that our Board feels should benefit from the constructive feedback that BCDC has been providing in recent years. We therefore suggest that it is appropriate that the proposal return to the BCDC, in particular to review design details like those noted.

Furthermore, we are disappointed that this project is being reviewed, and potentially approved once again, without consideration of the pending development project at the abutting parcels on Boylston Street which are now clearly in play. With the adjacent parcels approved for demolition due to what we would describe as “demolition by neglect,” the City has a responsibility to consider the proposal within this new context. The near total loss of this classic Boston, eclectic streetscape, bookended by the Arlington and the Berkeley buildings, will be substantial and will have a profound impact on the character of the neighborhood. Though this block is technically outside of the local historic district, that arbitrary line is not legible in the pedestrian realm and this series of buildings is very much a part of the context of the historic neighborhood. If two monumental, contemporary buildings fill the block, the experience along this street will be substantially different than what could have been if these buildings had been properly maintained and utilized over time.

Finally, given the proposed loss of several historic buildings listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places and the historic significance of the Arlington Building (note the Massachusetts Historic Commission’s previous recommendation that alternatives to their demolition be carefully considered), we also urge two elements of mitigation. First, well-executed documentation of the buildings before demolition through high resolution photography, made available to the public. Second, a contribution equivalent to \$1 per square foot of new construction (\$221,230) to the Legacy Fund for Boston upon receipt of construction permits. Through the Legacy Fund, monies can be distributed to historic sites impacted by this and other developments, in particular the Arlington Street Church.

We appreciate the BPDA’s attention to this important site and the concerns of the community.

Sincerely,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

CC:

Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission
Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission
Elizabeth Stifel, Boston Civic Design Commission

Jonathan Greeley, Boston Planning and Development Agency
Ronald Druker, The Druker Company
Doug Kelleher, Epsilon
Liz Vizza, Friends of the Public Garden
Martyn Roetter, Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay
Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, Arlington Street Church
Kathy Kottaridis, Historic Boston, Inc.

Note regarding Conflicts of Interest:

Two Alliance Board Members are part of the project team. They have been recused from any discussion on this project. Additionally, The Druker Company is a long-time, generous financial supporter of the Boston Preservation Alliance.