

# BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

September 16, 2016

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Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

Ms. Wajeha Qureshi  
Cabot, Cabot, & Forbes  
185 Dartmouth Street  
Boston, MA 02116  
Via email: [wqureshi@ccfne.com](mailto:wqureshi@ccfne.com)  
Re: St. Gabriel's Monastery, Brighton

Dear Ms. Qureshi,

As you know, 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. We represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects such as this.

Thank you for meeting with us on two occasions to discuss your plans to rehabilitate the Landmarked St. Gabriel's Monastery building and redevelop the surrounding site, located at 159-201 Washington Street. Thank you also for your call today and the candid discussion about the challenges and opportunities of your project, particularly your new consideration for finding a way to save the church on the campus. We look forward to your response to these comments before we share our thoughts with the various regulatory agencies reviewing the project.

The St. Gabriel's campus, given its large size and open space, presents a unique opportunity for development to meet the serious housing shortage in Boston, while demonstrating that such growth can be done in a manner sensitive to the adjacent neighborhood and historic resources. As we communicated in our meetings with you, we applaud your goal of taking a sensitive approach to many aspects of the project including the reuse of the house on Washington Street, the preservation of landscaping elements that were originally designed by the Olmsted Brothers, and the thoughtful rehabilitation of the monastery. You also propose preserving the buffer zone of landscaping and open space between the new buildings and Washington Street, which is important to the character of the neighborhood. You have attempted to respect the Landmark monastery building itself with some setbacks and other massing strategies including placing the bulk of new development toward the rear of the site, and we appreciate these efforts.

That being said, it is important to recognize that there are still significant losses in the approach presented. The density proposed for the site is significant and we do have concerns regarding some aspects of your proposal that we encourage you to reevaluate. First, we feel that the design and materials selected for the new buildings on the site are not particularly sensitive or appropriate in relation to the historic nature of the monastery. The monastery should feel like the centerpiece rather than a

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vestigial orphan in your new residential campus. There seems to be no common character woven throughout the project. We would prefer designs for the new buildings that more directly respond to the monastery. While you have stepped massing on the building closest to the street, we encourage you to consider stepping the massing back that is closest to the monastery to give the historic building more prominence within this dense cluster of buildings. While the renderings show trees and landscaping blocking the majority of views of the new construction, we have found that renderings typically exaggerate that camouflaging effect. We also feel that the fenestration on the new buildings should be more in keeping with that of the monastery in rhythm and scale. Elements that reflect and harmonize with the monastery rather than starkly differ can allow the new construction to play a visually supporting role to the historic building which should remain the visual focal point on this site.

To that end, the materials selected for the new buildings are key to the project's success. While new materials should not attempt to mimic the stucco, terra cotta, and copper of the monastery, they should be responsive and sensitive and serve as a backdrop to the historic building, highlighting the monastery's features rather than compete or overpower them. Materials should be high-quality and durable. The materials proposed are almost entirely painted surfaces, and we fear this will become a maintenance challenge and visual issue before long, particularly given the height of many of these buildings. We urge a reevaluation of the material selection, particularly on primary facades facing the monastery.

References to historic materials using new materials, as you have proposed with copper accents, are appropriate and encouraged. You might also consider other design features that relate back to the monastery and create a more unique, site-specific design for the new buildings. The current designs are disappointingly similar to many other new buildings currently being constructed throughout the city, and are not as responsive to this site as they could be.

The second aspect of the project that we encourage you to further evaluate is the proposal to demolish the church building, and I am pleased to hear that upon further consideration you are taking a serious examination of alternatives to demolition. While we understand that programming for this building is extremely challenging, and that rehabilitating the church for housing units would actually result in fewer units overall than the current proposal, we must reiterate that the church building would preferably be rehabilitated in some way. The clearly ecclesiastical design of the church is an important defining element of the history and nature of the site, which is less clear with the Mission-Style monastery alone.

There are many architectural features within the building that are worth preserving, and its relationship with the monastery on the site is significant. The church's continued presence would visually indicate that the monastery was once part of a larger complex. The two buildings could harmoniously communicate with each other

on the site, creating a unique and desirable dynamic for the new development. We understand from the structural report you shared that the building is not in dire condition or facing imminent and serious structural compromise. It could potentially be rehabilitated, although we recognize the challenge of the seismic upgrades. Before concluding that this approach is not possible, or would necessarily result in a large, new building closer to Washington Street, we encourage you to thoroughly explore and present all possible alternatives, especially ones that would retain both the monastery and church buildings but not the other existing structures. We do not feel the argument has been sufficiently made, nor a variety of creative options explored such as a partial retention of the church integrated into a new structure, which could create some unique spaces while maintaining the interesting and historic relationship between the monastery and the church which are historically so intimately associated and also retain an important sense of place that will be lost if the monastery remains as the isolated historic building of the complex.

The Alliance appreciates your sensitivity and attention to the historic resources on this special site. We look forward to continuing the dialogue as the project moves forward and hope to be able to support the project as it continues to evolve.

Thank you,



Greg Galer  
Executive Director

CC:

Michele Quinn, Cube 3 Studio  
Deborah Robinson, BH+A