

Memorandum
Department of Planning and Development
Historic Preservation Office



To: Chair Morrisette and Members of the Planning Board
From: Deborah Andrews, Historic Preservation Program Manager
Date: October 4, 2012
Re: Proposed Hotel at Northeast Corner of Fore and Union Streets -
Historic Preservation Board's Analysis of Historic Context,
Comments on Preliminary Design Proposal

Introduction

On September 19th, representatives of Cow Plaza Hotel LLC met with the Historic Preservation Board to present preliminary elevations of their proposed hotel development at the northeast corner of Fore and Union Streets. As the hotel will be located directly across the street from a portion of the Portland Waterfront Historic District (see Attachment 1), the Historic Preservation Board was being asked to review the proposed hotel and provide comments relative to its "general compatibility with the character-defining elements of the...portion of the district in the immediate vicinity of the development".

Sec. 14-526 (a) of the site plan ordinance requires that any project within 100 feet of a historic district boundary be found by the Planning Board to be generally compatible with its immediate historic context. To assist the Planning Board in making this determination, the provision requires Historic Preservation staff to provide a written analysis of the development's immediate historic context, identifying the major character-defining elements and established building patterns that characterize the context. As has become standard practice since this site plan standard was approved by the City Council in 2009, staff forwards proposals for major developments abutting historic districts to the Historic Preservation Board for their review and comment. This is especially appropriate in this instance, as the subject parcel is located at a key gateway into the Portland Waterfront Historic District as one approaches from the west on Fore Street.

Following the project architect's presentation on September 19th, Historic Preservation Board members were asked to review the directive provided in Standard 14-526 (a) and do the following:

- 1) identify the major character-defining elements and established building patterns that characterize this area of the Old Port; and
- 2) comment on the proposed development's general compatibility with these prevailing development patterns.

Fore Street Context

In determining what constitutes the proposed development's "immediate" historic context, Board members noted that it was appropriate to consider not just the buildings immediately across the street from the subject property, but also the larger Fore Street streetscape, especially in consideration of the fact that an expansive view of Fore Street opens up as one crosses Union Street and proceeds east into the heart of the Old Port—see Attachment 2. The proposed hotel will most certainly be viewed and experienced in this larger context.

Board members described the historic Fore Street corridor as a continuous streetwall which is subdivided by increments of property that are typically quite narrow. The narrow width of individual properties creates a series of vertical divisions or punctuations in the streetwall. Individual storefronts, which are typically 15 feet wide, serve as another strong organizing feature of the streetscape. Storefronts and building entries are typically delineated by a series of heavy granite or brick piers.

Although building heights vary somewhat, this long block of Fore Street is generally characterized by modest three and four story buildings. Building bases throughout this section of Fore Street are fairly consistent in height—ranging from 10 to 14 feet high.

Fore Street's consistent material palette of brick and granite is another character-defining and unifying element of the street. (What lends variety to this otherwise homogeneous treatment is the architectural and textural manipulation of these materials. This is even more the case on Exchange Street, where most of the buildings were built after the Great Fire in more exuberant Victorian building styles. Fore Street, on the other hand, features many pre-Fire buildings which are not only smaller in scale, but also more architecturally modest.)

In summarizing the Board's observations, it is fair to say that it is the *overall streetscape character* of Fore Street that is its most compelling characteristic. Fore Street is not noteworthy for its individual buildings, but for its harmonious building *fabric* and its human scale. Here, subtle variations in height or architectural treatment lend interest, texture and variety in an otherwise strikingly homogeneous streetscape.

Historic Preservation Board Comments and Observations re: Proposed Development's Relationship to Historic Context

After identifying the prevailing development patterns of the proposed project's historic context, Board members offered a number of observations about the proposed development and addressed the question of "compatibility." They also responded to some of the project architect's characterizations of the context and the focus of his

contextual analysis. For example, Board members felt strongly that this intersection is perceived as a strong gateway into the Old Port, rather than an “edge” and that the historic context for consideration should not be limited to the four buildings across the street (which were the focus of the project architect and which were characterized as mostly non-contributing) but to the larger block of Fore Street which is within clear view of the proposed development. While acknowledging that the project’s context is very mixed and presents considerable challenges in developing a design solution, Board members expressed some concern that the larger developments outside of the historic district were viewed as the primary context for the design solution, as opposed to the historic streetscape across Fore Street.

Much of the Board’s discussion centered on the question of how compatibility can best be achieved in this homogeneous historic context given the fact that the proposed building--by virtue of its large footprint and the height allowed by zoning—is fundamentally uncharacteristic of the size and scale of buildings within the district. The project architect argued that the way to best respect the historic context was to provide a contrast or counterpoint to it. He also argued that if the design were to echo some of the architectural characteristics shared by its historic neighbors (a regular window pattern, for example), the hotel building would appear bulky and ponderous. Some members of the Board were generally satisfied with this approach, identifying a number of other design and massing characteristics that served to tie the hotel to its historic context. Other members felt that more could be done to reinforce some of the strongest architectural characteristics of the context. For example, they pointed out that the irregular window pattern of the hotel’s upper floors belied its very regular structural organization and building program on the inside. They argued that one of the key characteristics of the historic buildings on Fore Street was that their structural organization was reflected on the exterior. By adjusting the fenestration on the upper floors of the hotel—even slightly—to reflect a series of organizational “bays”, the building would better reflect its actual organization and exhibit some of the vertical divisions that are characteristic of the existing Fore Street streetwall.

Regarding the proposed massing and vertical organization of the building, members appeared to be generally satisfied, especially given the presence of Two Portland Square immediately west of the intersection. The height and massing relationship of the hotel to its neighbors would not be unlike that of Two Portland Square to its neighbors across the street. They also noted that the series of stepbacks at Two Portland Square helps to mitigate its overall height.

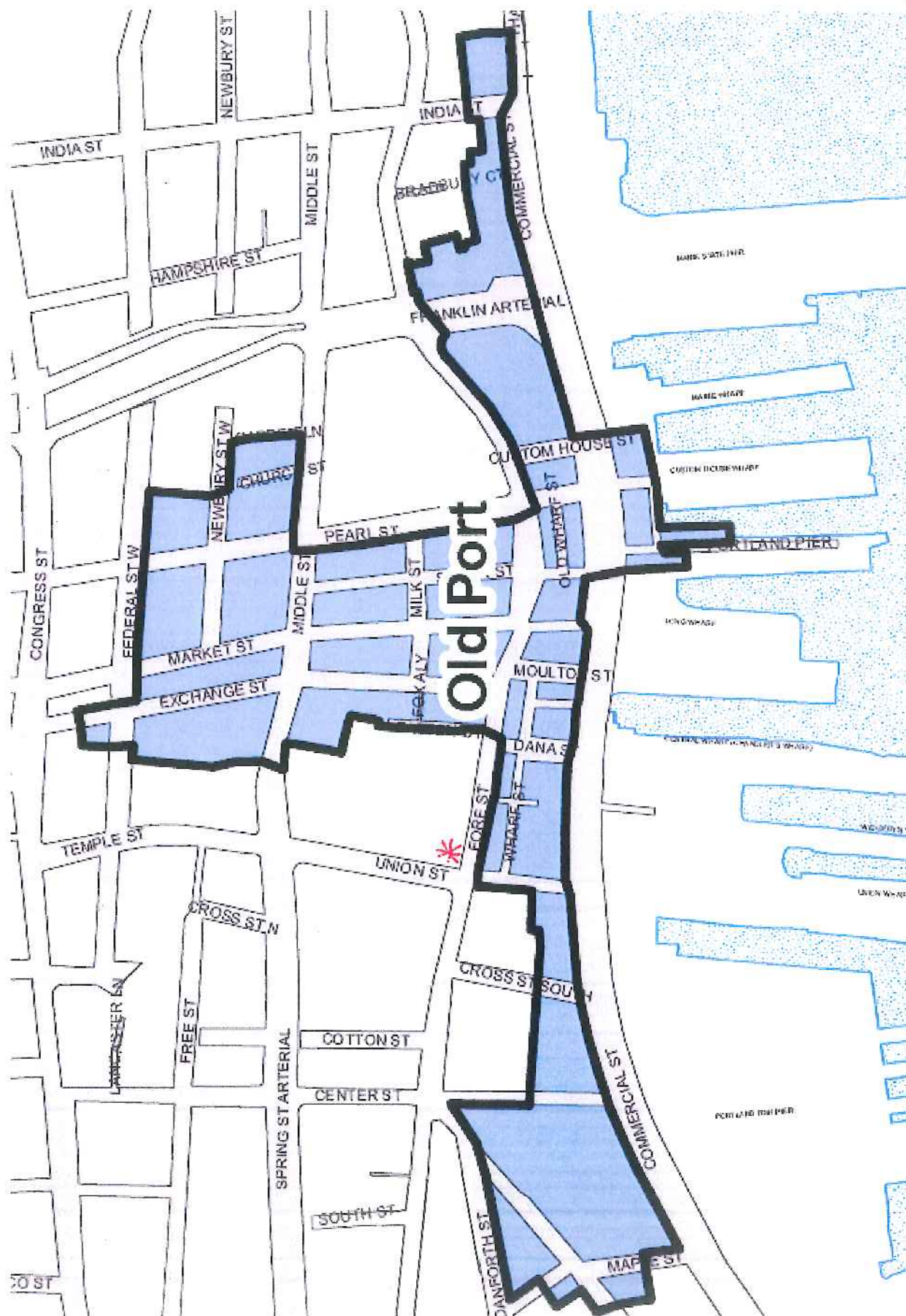
Following are other specific observations, comments and concerns expressed during the Board’s discussion:

- The Board was generally supportive of the treatment of the ground floor level. They noted that the proposed height of the ground floor (11’4”) was consistent with the base heights of the historic buildings on Fore and helps create a human scale at the street level. The introduction of sun screens over the ground floor also reinforces this human scale and the presence of regularly-spaced heavy granite columns serves as a reference to the granite piers that define the storefronts on Fore.

- Board members supported the limestone-based material proposed for the exterior as it exhibits a natural, organic quality that will patina over time. They also noted that the pattern and scale of the panels establishes a fairly fine-grained texture, also characteristic of the area. Board members indicated that they would have concerns if the exterior were clad in a “slicker”, more monolithic material. The Board also indicated that the selection of granite for the ground floor piers was an appropriate choice. Finally, Board members stressed that any “value engineering” involving substitutions in exterior materials should be avoided to ensure that the new building is commensurate in quality with the architecture with that defines the Old Port.
- The general proportions of the individual upper floor windows were seen as compatible with those of its historic context. The organization of the windows, which creates something of a “digitized” façade, was a point of debate, however. (See above discussion.)
- Board members noted that the rooftop mechanical screen adds to the overall perceived height of the building and urged that it be lowered in height to the extent possible and de-emphasized.
- The Board noted that signage will be an important consideration in this instance and should be considered early on in the design process, including the signs for the parking garage and any tenant signage for the corner. Depending on how it is approached and where it is placed, signage can help integrate the building with the Old Port district or set the building apart from its immediate context. The elevations presented showed a sign on the rooftop mechanical screen and others at the top of the respective facades. It was noted that there are no rooftop signs in this immediate vicinity, nor signs at the top of the upper floors. The applicant was also encouraged to pursue a material, finish and source of illumination for the signs that would reinforce the uniqueness of the area and avoid standard corporate sign solutions.
- Board members stressed the importance of providing architectural interest to the rear or north elevation of the building. Given the presence of the CMP transfer station, it is likely that this façade will be highly visible for the foreseeable future and should not be treated as a strictly secondary façade.
- Board members stressed the importance of the eastern corner of the hotel, particularly at the ground floor level, where the corner of the hotel will project beyond the face of the garage next door. Glazing this corner and providing an entrance in this location was endorsed. Board members also noted that the sunscreen on this facade will extend beyond the face the adjacent garage. This design detail should be given careful consideration.

Additional staff comments:

- Although the project architect did not indicate during his presentation that the exterior of the building would be illuminated, staff understands that illumination is planned. Staff suggests that the nature and degree of exterior illumination be given careful consideration, as it will no doubt contribute in a material way to whether the building is perceived as part of the neighborhood or separate from it. The Planning Board should consider that the all-glass corner and storefront level are likely to be lit at all hours when it weighs the merits of adding architectural uplighting. Although it is clear that the applicant wishes to create a “signature” building, the development should be successfully integrated with its historic context as well. A lighting treatment that anchors the building and brings it closer to ground level will enhance its relationship to its historic context.
- Although the color specification for the limestone material was not available at the Historic Preservation Board’s meeting, the project architect indicated that it would be a medium gray scale. Staff would encourage this medium tone (as opposed to the more dramatic dark sample shown) as the tonal range of the building façade will be an important factor in achieving compatibility.



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