
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	2208 Wyoming Avenue, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	May 26, 2011	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	11-269	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		New Construction
			Demolition
			Subdivision

Owner Edward Shulman seeks conceptual approval to construct a deck on the roof of a one-story garage at the rear of a lot occupied by a four-story rowhouse in the Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District. The deck would not be visible from the front of the property along Wyoming Avenue; it may have very limited visibility through a parking lot located between two large apartment buildings on California Street.

Proposal

The property currently has a deck at the second floor on the side of a rear ell wing. The proposal calls for retaining and extending that deck at the same level along the east property line to connect to a new 18'9" x 16' 9" deck covering the roof of the one-story brick garage. The deck would be finished with a 6' privacy screen at the rear facing the alley; the other sides and the connector would have an open 3' high railing. A new stair would connect the deck to the rear yard in essentially the same location and configuration as an existing stair.

Evaluation

Decks on the rear of historic properties have generally not raised significant preservation concerns. They are often a widespread, inherited condition in many neighborhoods at the time of designation, and they are removable and relatively impermanent elements that generally don't result in permanent alterations to a property or affect important characteristics of historic districts. The most common type of deck is one that extends off the rear of a house, although decks on garages are not uncommon in many neighborhoods. Roof decks have received somewhat more scrutiny from the Board, but have been regularly approved if they meet the criterion that they not be visible from the street. Because decks have not typically raised preservation concerns, they were an element of work that the Board delegated to the HPO to approve on its behalf in the late 1990s; as such, it is rare that a deck proposal is presented to the HPRB.

As an historic district that has both urban and suburban building types with larger lot sizes that often allow for gardens and terraces, decks are somewhat less common in Sheridan-Kalorama than in many of the city's rowhouse neighborhoods. While the staff has not conducted an exhaustive survey, decks on garages also appear to be far less common than in other historic districts but can be found in limited concentrations (2100

block of Bancroft Place, 1800 block of 24th Street, Kalorama Circle). There are no garage roof decks that are visible from the alley in this block of Wyoming Avenue.

The proposal has generated a significant amount of community reaction, with concerns raised about privacy, livability, the arrangement and relationship of open spaces to buildings, and the precedent that this proposal might set for the rest of the historic district. To be fair, not all of the letters oppose the application and some immediate neighbors that would be able to see it have expressed their support. However, the prevailing sentiment – reflected in the position of ANC 2-D, the Sheridan-Kalorama Historical Society, and other individuals – is that the deck is not appropriate for the Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District. As many of the letters in opposition rightly point out, Sheridan-Kalorama is different from Dupont Circle and many of the rowhouse neighborhoods where garage decks are common and widely accepted. As stated in the National Register application for the historic district, it is a community that reflects the movement away from the established urban center “in its quest for the suburban ideal;” a neighborhood “comprised of a network of cohesive town- and suburban-like streetscapes” that “hold nationally significant buildings by some of the country’s most celebrated architects, successfully juxtaposed with the urbane work of accomplished local designers.”

The policy question for the Board is whether this district’s characteristics and distinctiveness should result in a different (and more stringent) standard for decks than has been applied in other neighborhoods. Arguments could be made on both sides. On the one hand, Sheridan-Kalorama’s service alleys are not particularly distinguished or noted in the historic district application as having qualities that contribute to the special character of the historic district, which could argue that the Board’s prevailing relaxed standard for decks in other neighborhoods should be applied similarly here. On the other hand, the relative scarcity of such garage roof decks, the relatively unaltered and consistent nature of the district’s alleys (including this one), and the extent of community concern that the proposal has generated could argue for establishing a different standard.

While the Review Board has encouraged the HPO to work with communities in developing design guidelines specifically tailored to the qualities and preservation issues of a neighborhood, this hasn’t happened yet in Sheridan-Kalorama and with a shortage of staff time to devote to such an effort, isn’t likely to happen in the near future. Nor has the neighborhood been surveyed or systematically studied regarding this and other design review issues that might be of particular sensitivity to this neighborhood.

Recommendation

The HPO can only point out that the Board has traditionally applied a consistent standard for decks in historic districts, which is that they not be prominently visible from a street; this proposal will meet that standard. However, the HPO seeks the Board’s guidance as to whether it believes a different standard for decks should be established for the Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District.