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

Landmark/District:	Capitol Hill Historic District	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	May 23, 2013	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	12-562	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Amanda Molson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

Owners Charles and Susan Parsons, with drawings prepared by Jennifer Fowler, request concept approval for the raze of an existing building and new construction at 418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Property Description

Sanborn maps (1888, 1904, 1916, and 1927) show that this parcel remained vacant as lots around it were filled with houses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Built in 1940, 418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE was constructed by owner/builder Percy J. Grady according to drawings by architect Joseph H. Abel. A Washington native and eventual Fellow of the AIA, Abel received his degree in architecture from GWU and apprenticed with George Santmyers in the 1920s. Together with his later partner, Charles E. Dillon, Abel was among the first architects in Washington to adopt the austerity and functionalism of the International Style.

Most of Abel's projects were large-scale apartment houses or long rows of houses. Compared to Abel's other projects, particularly those of the late 1920s through the 1940s, the rather unarticulated and modest building at 418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE is among his lesser works. It evidences some traits of the International Style, but its visual qualities pale in comparison to other Abel designs including: 2101 Connecticut Avenue, NW (designed with Santmyers in 1927), the Broadmoor Apartments at 3601 Connecticut Ave NW (1929), Fulbright Hall/The Everglades Apartments at GWU (1939), the since-demolished Governor Shepherd Apartments at 2121 Virginia Avenue, NW (1940), and groups of modern rowhouses in the 4000 block of Arkansas Avenue, NW (1941) and the 1700 block of Harvard Street, NW (1943). Dillon & Abel together designed the apartment building at 1100 F Street, NE (1937), just outside the boundaries of the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Proposal

The applicants propose to raze the existing building on the site in order to construct a new house. The new three-story brick building would extent the width of the lot, eliminating the existing open court on the left (north) side. The new house would extend 67' in depth, inclusive of a two-story screened porch on the rear elevation. On the front elevation, the main body of the house would extend 22'-6" in width, with an additional section measuring 8' in width set back 6' from

the front wall. A one-story bay window is proposed for the front elevation, measuring 10'-9" wide and 5' deep.

The applicants have selected a traditional Italianate design for the building, picking up style cues from similar houses on the other side of New Jersey Avenue. The third floor is detailed as a slate-covered mansard roof with dormers and a bracketed cornice, and the lower levels feature 2-over-2 windows. A separate basement unit would be served by entrances at the front and rear (in the dogleg) of the property. On the front, the applicants have placed the basement areaway in front of the recessed section of the building, with steps running parallel to the main entry staircase.

Evaluation

Raze

As detailed in the attached structural engineer's report and as confirmed by HPO during a site visit to the property, the building is evidencing severe structural failure and may be unsafe at this time. At the basement level, the compromised nature of an interior wall has led to the displacement of beams supporting the upper levels of the building. The entire building is leaning considerably to the left (north), which can be easily observed from the exterior, and the structural engineer reports that some interior floor joists have separated from their pockets. The façade evidences cracks where the building has shifted to the left, and the interior subfloor and finished floor are dramatically leaning.

The report advises that the existing fill below the foundation has led to movement of the walls, with new fill and new foundations necessary to correct the problem. Even if the foundation issues could be addressed, the building would need substantial shoring in order to be made somewhat safer. As noted by the structural engineer, mere shoring may not restore structural integrity, perhaps necessitating a more radical approach such as reconstruction.

Given the drastic measures necessary to stabilize the building and make it assuredly safe for occupation, the owner has proposed its demolition and replacement with a new structure. It is within the Board's purview to grant raze requests when a loss of integrity – such as the reconstruction needed to make this building safe – renders the building non-contributing. Though the decision to raze a building constructed within the period of significance should not be made lightly, the significance of this building to the character of the historic district and within the architect's body of work is very minimal. Given the evident structural failure, the building should be deemed non-contributing. As such, the proposal to demolish it would be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act.

New Construction

The Board's design guidelines for new construction in historic districts state that, "Perhaps the best way to think about a compatible new building is that it should be a good neighbor, enhancing the character of the district and respecting the context, rather than an exact clone." Though the Board has certainly welcomed contemporary design, an overwhelming number of property owners on Capitol Hill have voluntarily selected historicist designs for new construction in recent years.

Given that this new house will be the only infill project on an otherwise intact block of historic buildings, opting for a traditional style in keeping with the surrounding context is not an inappropriate choice in terms of helping it to fit in well. However, the generous width of the lot – an atypical 30’-6” – presents some design challenges if a traditional design is to be used. Merely “stretching” the scale of a traditional, three-story Italianate building to fit a wide lot could introduce awkward proportions that are neither traditional nor contemporary. There are several ways to address this challenge, and Capitol Hill’s existing historic buildings provide helpful models for how to address scale, proportion, and massing on atypically wide lots.

Many of Capitol Hill’s wide residential buildings were designed with a center hall, often flanked by one or two bays to visually divide the building into component parts. This model was prevalent for Capitol Hill’s small apartment buildings and some grand homes of the late 19th- and early 20th centuries.¹ HPO suggested that the applicants explore a center hall design early in the review of this project.



424 East Capitol Street, NE



411 2nd Street, SE

¹ All photos in this report were taken by HPO.



308 East Capitol Street, NE



711 East Capitol Street, SE



314 East Capitol Street, NE

Alternatively, wide buildings with off-set entrances often devoted a portion of the width (either on private property or as a projection into public space) to a side porch, setback side bay of one or two stories, or a one-story side projection. The result was a clearly subordinate horizontal extension of the massing, differentiated by a change in materials, fenestration, or height.



712 East Capitol Street, NE (two-story side bay and one-story side porch)



28 9th Street, NE (one-story side bay and one-story side porch)



201 C Street, SE (one-story side porch)



316 A Street, NE (one-story side bay)



300 3rd Street, SE (one-story side porch and two-story side bay)



600 A Street, NE (one-story side projection)

Here, the applicants have recessed a portion of the front elevation in order to suggest a narrower (though still generous) façade. However, no additional design techniques have been employed to convincingly allow this recessed element to read as a secondary block of the building. Instead, this side element rises to three stories in height, utilizes the same fenestration, materials, and roof form as the remainder of the building, and lacks a convincing connection to the ground as the result of basement areaway excavation directly in front of it.

The historic use of a setback mansard roof is very rare on Capitol Hill, but an example exists at 137 C Street, SE (and its mate at 139 C). However, there are several notable differences between the proportions of 137 C, which is more modest overall and clearly demarcated into component parts, and the uninterrupted proportions of 418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE. First, though both lots are atypically wide for Capitol Hill, the width of the three-story main block of 137 C measures approximately 18', compared to nearly 23' wide at 418-420 New Jersey. Second, 137 C features a setback mansard portion of only 4' in width that then drops down to a wider side addition of one story in height, while the recessed portion of 418-420 New Jersey would measure 8' in width and constitute an entire room extending three stories in height. Third, 137 C is shorter than many of the houses on the block, allowing the wide nature of the building to fit quietly into the streetscape rather than being the dominant visual presence. 418-420 New Jersey, however, will be the tallest building on the east side of the block.



137 C Street, SE

A more historically appropriate and better-scaled solution would be to reduce the recessed element at 418-420 New Jersey to two stories, to detail it as an enclosed frame porch with smaller-scaled windows than the main block, and to place the basement areaway beneath the main staircase (as is recommended in the Board's written guidelines on basement entrances). If the applicants prefer to continue the use of brick material, removing the third floor mansard in

this section and differentiating the scale of the windows would be more in keeping with shallow side bays, one-story projections, and porches on other mansard-roofed buildings.

As shown in the applicants' elevation drawings, the new house would be taller than its surrounding neighbors in addition to being wider. In addition to exacerbating the design problems that come with "stretching" the proportions of traditional buildings, it is difficult to find that the building will rest comfortably and quietly into its context or that it will be a supporting player to the historic buildings on the block. Instead, it will likely become the most prominent structure in the streetscape. Some restudy should be devoted to the height of the building, with potential strategies including reducing ceiling heights, more generously sloping the mansard roof, and/or sinking the basement further below-grade. Increasing the height and the projection of the cornice would also better respond to the scale of the building, more successfully replicate Italianate detailing, and assist in reducing the proportion of masonry to glass.

The plans show that the front bay window will extend perpendicular to the façade for several feet before canting inward. The side elevations of the bay would be detailed as painted wood panels, rather than windows. It is very rare that one-story bays on Capitol Hill married together a box bay form and a canted bay form, or that bays featured wood panels on the side. Rather, the use of large windows in one-story bays alleviated the apparent massing of these projections. For example, all of the bay projections on this block are either three-sided canted bays (417-421 New Jersey) or box bays, and all feature windows on each elevation of the bay. A more historically appropriate solution would utilize a canted bay that connects to the façade, with windows on all three sides. This would help in minimizing the appearance that a historicist canted bay has been "stretched," similar to the scale issues with the setback portion of the façade.



Three-sided canted bays on the west side of New Jersey Avenue, SE



Three-sided box bays on the east side of New Jersey Avenue, SE

While the renderings show side windows on the first and second levels, in close proximity to the front façade, these windows do not appear on the floor plans or the side elevation drawings. It is rare for historic buildings to have side windows so close to the façade, except in cases of a projecting bay, and the proposal would be more successful if these two openings were eliminated so that the corner of the house could carry more visual weight.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Find the existing building at 418-420 New Jersey Avenue, SE to be non-contributing and approve the concept raze; and*
- *Find the concept proposal for new construction, as proposed, to be incompatible with the character of the historic district. Suggested revisions include:*
 - *Restudying the massing, materials, and fenestration of the recessed element of the façade.*
 - *Reducing the overall height of the building.*
 - *Revising the massing of the one-story bay on the façade.*
 - *Locating the basement areaway under the main stairs.*
 - *Removing the two side windows immediately next to the front entrance.*