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

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	3150 17th Street NW	
Meeting Date:	October 25, 2018	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	18-557	(x) Permit

The applicants, property owners Richard L. Barnes and Janet Staihar Barnes, request the Board’s review of a public-space application to construct a parking pad in front of the property, between the concrete-block retaining wall and the alley that bounds the property.¹ The property presently has one small parking space under a deck that abuts the alley.

Background

Probably decades ago, before the establishment of the historic district, the area in question was paved.² There is no evidence of a building permit or public-space construction or occupancy permit for that work. While it is possible that one existed, it is also quite possible that the work was done without permit. This paving has been torn up, as part of a project in 2014-2015, and we are told that topsoil was then laid over a “TrueGrid” plastic matrix.

In a September 2014 building permit, the applicants proposed a sixteen- by sixteen-foot stone terrace beneath the aforementioned side/rear deck.³ The plat submitted with that permit did not depict any paving or any parking area being extended to the area in question (the BZA order allowing the deck said only that the “concrete pad beneath the deck would be repaved and retained as a parking area”).⁴ The plan submitted with the permit application, however, showed the pavers extending into the front yard, beyond the specified dimensions. So, in clearing the permit application, HPO staff restricted the “Extent of paving to be limited to that area of the deck and underneath. Softscape [is] to extend from the house to the sidewalk.” The staff noted the same on the drawings. The application was for a construction permit on private property, and not for a public-space construction permit (as would be required for paving beyond the lot line) or for a public-space occupancy permit (as would be required for parking in the front yard).

¹ The narrative submitted with the present application states that the request is for a building permit from DCRA, but no such application has been opened. On the other hand, there is a pending public-space permit application before the Department of Transportation.

² The applicants have introduced photos taken in 2005 that show the concrete already deteriorated.

³ B1408190: “New stone terrace approximately 16' x 16', and new deck with columns.” The terrace depicted in the plans is actually larger in both dimensions.

⁴ The applicants’ lot would accommodate two compact parking spaces, of more than eight feet wide each, if the space had not been interrupted by the posts supporting the new deck. One of the applicants’ arguments for the variance necessary to construct the deck was that, if they instead constructed a by-right patio at grade, *that* would have displaced their parking. (BZA Application 18679, Decision and Order, August 25, 2014)

The applicants recently began laying pavers in the public space, and according to the present application, were stopped by an inspector from the Department of Transportation (DDOT), who pointed out that a public-space permit would be required for such work. As the steward of the public space, DDOT must approve paving or parking there—and can also require the removal of paving or parking, whether previously permitted or not.

Project

The drawings are no longer clearly scaled, but the description of work in the online application states that the extended parking pad would come forward of the building line seventeen feet and that it would be eighteen feet wide. The parking pad would consist of herringbone-pattern bluestone dry laid on sand and stone aggregate.

Evaluation

Not all properties are equally favored with off-street parking. There are many houses in historic districts that lack both alley access and front-yard parking. These have generally not been permitted parking pads in public space or front yards.⁵ The reasoning rests largely on planning principles originating with L'Enfant's plan for the federal city, which envisioned broad streets flanked by trees, monuments and greenswards. This idea was enshrined in the 1870 Parking Act, which allowed the city government to set aside parts of the street rights-of-way as parkland "to be adorned with shade-trees, walks, and enclosed with curbstones." After the consolidation of the District of Columbia government, these green "parking" areas were partly given over to private maintenance and even enclosure, as long as fences were low and open in character. Such "parking" was extended to the inner-ring suburbs and later promoted in the farther ones by the establishment of building-restriction lines. Many of the innermost neighborhoods were developed before private automobile ownership was common, and others, like Mount Pleasant, were largely built out with an alley network to handle car storage and utility access.

The Historic Preservation Review Board has recognized the importance of this development pattern and has upheld the principle of retaining the continuity of the historic landscaped streetscape as mostly green, interrupted by walks as necessary and, when enclosed, done with low and open fences and with retaining walls as few and as low as feasible. This also tends to discourage cars parked incongruously and immediately next to historic buildings.

While the Board has no authority to enforce against people putting cars in their yards, it does have a say in the permitting of paving for the purpose, on public or private space. The Board's design guidelines for landscapes state that:

Adding a new driveway or parking area to a front yard or area of the property that can be seen from a public right-of-way is rarely appropriate, as it will significantly alter the setting of the main building. On the other hand, locating a new drive or parking area in the rear yard or another area of the property that cannot be seen from a public right-of-way will usually not detract from the landscape or the building. In either case, the new driveway or parking area must still conform to the District of Columbia's building and zoning codes.

⁵ Of course, others have driveways that cross the sidewalk. Driveways are more typical of some of the farther-out suburban districts, such as Cleveland Park and Takoma Park, characterized by single-family detached homes. The idea even there was not to park in the front yard, but in the side yard, or often, a rear corner of the lot.

One of the most important bodies of policies relating to the character of the city is the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital*. Its Policy HP-2.5.4 addresses landscaped yards in part, by promoting the preservation,

of the continuous and open green quality of landscaped front and side yards in public space. Take special care at historic landmarks and in historic districts to protect this public environment from intrusions, whether from excess paving, vehicular access and parking, high walls and fencing, or undue disruption of the natural contours or bermed terraces.

While there are some examples of front-yard parking in Mount Pleasant—generally predating the historic district—they cannot be said to be characteristic of the neighborhood. Paving for the sake of parking cars in the front yard is generally an incompatible idea, and it is harmful in this particular instance. It would undoubtedly be convenient to regain two parking spaces at a lot that now only accommodates only one, but the property’s yard had already been harmed by the construction of an unnecessarily tall concrete-block retaining wall (conceivably constructed at the time of the former paving) that elevated and leveled the yard.

At seventeen by eighteen, the proposal is unnecessarily expansive for a parking space, but there should be no paving even near the minimum extent of a parking space, nor should front-yard parking be promoted. Instead of re-covering the rest of the “parking” with hardscape, the applicants and the government have thus far coordinated to restore this area.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board recommend against issuance of a public-space permit or a building permit for the proposed paving, as it is incompatible with the character of the historic district and therefore contrary to the purposes of the preservation law.