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

Property Address:	1232, 1234, 1236 4th Street NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	Mount Vernon Square Historic District	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	6C	<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
		<input type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
Meeting Date:	November 17, 2011	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	#12-023	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Brendan Meyer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Raze
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

Owner, Third Street Church of God, seeks permit to raze three c. 1870 rowhouses at 1232, 1234, and 1236 New Jersey Avenue NW in the Mount Vernon Square Historic District. The Board previously heard and approved a concept application to demolish portions of the rowhouses in June 2011.

Property Description and Context

The three rowhouses were originally part of a row of four, flat-front brick rowhouses built 1866-1867.¹ The early construction date qualifies this group as some of the oldest structures surviving in the historic district and they are representative of the speculative housing built on the outskirts of the city in the boom years immediately following the Civil War.

The three rowhouses that stand today vary from each other in only minor detail. All are two stories tall and two bays wide with covered and enclosed passageways along the property lines. Front facades and passageway walls are solid masonry construction. All are two rooms deep with a masonry ell at the rear. Ornament is modest, but original, and includes a wood cornice with modillions and brackets, metal window hoods and timber window lintels.

The disposition of the row was most recently discussed by the Board in June 2011. At that time, the Owner submitted a concept application to demolish rear portions of the buildings and testified to a desire to eventually raze the three structures and replace them with an expanded parking lot. The Board adopted the staff recommendation that the front sections of the rowhouses maintained their integrity, were buildings that contributed to the historic character of the historic district, and should be preserved. Additionally, the Board approved partial demolition of rear portions of the buildings that had collapsed and did not affect the “contributing” status of the buildings.

Prior to June 2011, the rowhouses were addressed by the Board relative to a concept application for an addition to 1208 3rd Street NW.² The Owner submitted to Historic Preservation Office Staff an engineer’s structural condition report for the rowhouses. The

¹ The house originally on the south end of the row was documented in a 1983 survey but was demolished prior to designation of the historic district in 1999.

² Due to a complex and unusual land arrangement, the three New Jersey Avenue rowhouses sat on the same building lot as the proposed addition at 1208 3rd Street, thus making the disposition of the rowhouses germane to the question of the addition.

report was based on limited accessibility and upon further consideration, the engineer drafted a plan of how the front facades and brick party walls could be braced and retained.

Revised Proposal

In the process of partially demolishing the structures, the Owner removed interior finishes which exposed floor joist framing in the front rooms and brought new information to light regarding the condition of the buildings. Staff conducted a field investigation and concurred that enough new information was available to warrant revisiting the raze request. The Owner proposes to raze the three rowhouses completely and to grade. The cleared site would be incorporated into their plans for an expanded parking lot servicing the addition at 1208 3rd Street as detailed in the June 2011 staff report.

Affected Party Comments

At the most recent ANC 6C meeting the raze question was debated but a quorum of Commissioners was not present. A previous ANC action failed to support the raze application by a vote of 3:3:1 and still stands as their most recent opinion.

Evaluation

Staff maintains its past position that the most important and character defining features of the rowhouses at 1232, 1234 and 1236 New Jersey Avenue—the front facades and structural load-bearing masonry party walls and passageway walls—maintain their integrity and that the rowhouses should not be razed.

Removal of floor boards and plaster has revealed the condition of the front room floor joists and load bearing party walls. In the two north-most houses (1234 and 1236) most joists show severe rot in excess of 50% of their original mass; several are missing entirely or displaced completely from where they originally pocketed into the brick party walls. Few if any can be considered structurally sufficient. As a result the entire floor framing requires replacement. On the other hand all brick party walls remain intact and plumb, exhibiting only minor displacement of individual bricks at joist pockets. All masonry walls can be put in like-new condition with a reasonable amount of repointing which is an ordinary maintenance requirement for any masonry wall exposed to moisture.

The subject rowhouses retain their historic integrity, despite deterioration of the floor joists. The loss of the interior floor joists in a load-bearing masonry wall rowhouse cannot be considered sufficient to compromise the historic integrity of a building so much as to render it “noncontributing.” Despite the loss of fabric, such floor framing is not the definitive element of a load-bearing masonry building’s character. The Board has stood by this position in recent cases involving masonry buildings that have lost portions of their interior or roof framing (1310 East Capitol Street NE, #10-247; 2201-2011 14th Street NW, #07-268). The Board only very reluctantly categorizes buildings as non-contributing due to deterioration, and primarily in cases of *frame* buildings where rot extends throughout nearly 100% of the fabric of the building’s structure and cladding (1221 4th Street NW, #06-374; 1223 4th Street NW, #06-375).

The discovery of poor joist conditions at 1234 and 1236 does not even apply to 1232 New Jersey Avenue. This south-most rowhouse was the only one of the three that the Owner put to any type of use. While 1234 and 1236 were left vacant and abandoned to the weather and elements, 1232 was used as storage. This caused the Owner to perform a modicum of maintenance on the building (primarily a functioning roof) and resulted in floor joists free and clear of rot. The Owner came into ownership of the rowhouses several decades ago (1232 and 1234 in 1992, 1236 in 1984). The conditions at 1234 and 1236 can largely be blamed on 20 years of deferred maintenance. The juxtaposition of three rowhouses of the same vintage, where two are not maintained and in poor condition and one is maintained and in fair condition—by the same owner—could not be a clearer lesson on the importance of basic maintenance.

The Board has always stood against approving razes of buildings brought to a state of dilapidation by lack of maintenance, as approval would not only result in the loss of historic fabric and character in the particular, but would reward and encourage such neglect in general. Just as reconstruction is an appropriate remedy for unpermitted active demolition, so is rehabilitation the appropriate remedy for passive demolition. Demolition of this structure is contrary to the purposes of the preservation law, and specifically its intent “to retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use.”

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board recommend to the Mayor’s Agent that the raze application be denied as inconsistent with the purposes of the historic preservation law.



1236 New Jersey Ave, interior front room, north wall (September 15, 2011)



1236 New Jersey Ave NW, interior front room, south wall (September 15, 2011)



1234 New Jersey Avenue NW, interior front room, north wall (September 15, 2011)



1232 New Jersey Avenue NW, interior front room, south wall (September 15, 2011)