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

Landmark/District: **Anacostia Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **1616-1618 and 1622 U Street SE**

Meeting Date: **September 18, 2014** (x) New construction
Case Number: **14-610 and 14-611**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Concept

The applicant, owner District Properties (Mohamed Sikder), requests the Board's review of two conceptual applications to construct a total of three two-story frame houses on vacant lots at 1616, 1618 and 1622 U Street SE. The reason for the two applications, reviewed together, is that one of the lots is not contiguous with the others, but separated from them by a house at 1620 U, recently constructed by the applicant (see the photograph on the third page), and a two-foot-wide lot owned by another party. The latter, skinny lot makes it impossible to build out the whole as a continuous row, but the two houses at 1616 and 1618 will be attached to each other, and 1622 would abut 1620.



The site.

The designs for the three houses are identical to each other or mirror-images, and similar to the design for 1620 U, which is derived from historic prototypes nearby, but wider because their lots are each two feet wider than 1620's. This poses a problem, because while 22 and 24 feet are

common Anacostia lot widths, the houses typically built upon them were narrower than 20 feet, with skinny side yards. Twenty-two feet, like 1620's lot, is about the maximum that that type of three-bay house can reach while maintaining the kind of vertical, Victorian proportions dictated by its design. Yet, the zoning regulations create an impediment to laying out a house the way they were done more than 20 years ago, because they require either an eight-foot side yard (meaning new houses eight to sixteen feet wide) or no side yard at all. And the presence of the two-foot-wide lot, plus the completion of 1620 removes the opportunity to subdivide differently, unless one were to build only one or two houses on larger lots. The site plan does leave some space, of course, at the two-foot gap in the middle of the project, and at either end of the project, where the neighboring houses have several feet of side yard.

Massing

As the applicant wishes to make the new, wider houses stylistically consistent with 1620, the design calls for some kind of plane change at their façades, to divide each into a primary mass with a vertical emphasis. Staff had suggested setting back a portion of the façade in order to achieve this. But the setback is only about two feet or a bit more. It should be somewhat more than that, at least three or four feet to be effective. Any setback is likely going to require a little more elbow room around the door, especially if the units are to be handicap-accessible, so widening of the set-back area at the expense of the forwardmost section of the façade is warranted, also making the façade division closer to two-thirds and one-third and allowing a wider second-floor window and a better balance of solid and void on the forward part of the facade.

Details

The reduction of the plans to eleven-by-seventeen-inch sets also reduced the legibility of the notes. The siding would be Hardiplank lapped boards (one note describes the exposure as six inches, but two other appear to say five inches). The partial mansard roof would be covered with fake slate. The materials of the windows are not specified. The front door would be wood. There would be a low balustrade on the front porch, possible because the concrete porch slab is low enough not to require a code-compliant rail.

Front and back yards would be fenced, as at 1620 U, with a solid-steel 42-inch fences in front and six-foot plank privacy fences around the rear, up to the parking pads off the alley.

Construction issues

The drawings indicate that the approach is to mimic 1620 U except for its massing. The problem is that 1620 U doesn't quite match its own drawings (see photo on next page). For instance:

- Drawn as regularly spaced and aligning vertically, the openings in the façade are actually more casually arranged;
- There is no continuous cornice, merely three small brackets without even a frieze behind them. The brackets themselves are acceptable for an early twentieth-century house, but they should have a frieze. The substitution, however, has the effect of putting too much solid wall between the eave and the upper windows and making the eave projection feel too great—with the brackets too small to support it.
- There is no flashing detail or ridge board at the ridge of the mansard, as was intended. Instead, the rubber slates are just folded over the ridge. The "slates" themselves are wider than drawn, so they have a horizontality to them that would not be seen in a historic house.

- The roof vents were constructed like little dog-house-shaped dormers, rather than the metal-roofed, arched vents that were drawn from historic examples.
- The porch posts became just typical, chunky Home Depot-type posts (the porch balustrade installed was wrong as well, but it has been corrected).
- The front door is different from the one-light over two-panel door specified, but that is probably the one element that matters less in new construction.

The larger point is this: the intention is to match the design for 1620, but 1620 doesn't match its design, and the new houses should not match 1620 as built. The HPO is not wedded to the particular cornice design shown, for instance, or to the overall approach for that matter, but a design has to be internally consistent to be successful, which is the purpose of both plan review and following the plans in the field. If there is a mismatch between the drawings and the capabilities of the builders, then one or the other has to be altered.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept, with the condition that the entrance recesses be deeper and wider, with further review delegated to the staff.



1620 U Street