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

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Landmark/District: **Woodley Park Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **2852 Connecticut Avenue, NW**

Meeting Date: **October 25, 2012** (x) Alterations  
Case Number: **12-570** (x) Addition

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

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The applicant, Cunningham Quill Architects, agent for owner Stephen M. Rabinowitz, requests concept review of a proposal to construct a four-and-a-half-story rear addition behind a three-story rowhouse and to demolish a garage, shed, and the house's enclosed sleeping porches in order to make space for it. The rear of the lot would remain dedicated to open-air parking. The intent is to convert the property into a multi-family residence.

The subject building is one of a row of four designed by the prolific local architect George Santmyers and erected by developers Middaugh & Shannon in 1922-1923. Half of the row was later demolished to construct the apartment building to the south.

### **Demolition**

The demolition of the one-story garage and shed is not a preservation issue, as the nondescript structures can be considered not contributing to the historic district's character, despite the apparent age of the former. The sleeping porches appear to be original, but have been altered by their enclosure, and the removal of such back-of-house features has often been approved by the Board as necessary to construct an addition and thus adapt a property to contemporary use.

With the porches removed, however, alterations to the original rear wall should be carefully considered, even if it would largely be obscured by the addition. The elevation drawings indicate that it would be removed and reconstructed, something that is unnecessary, strictly speaking, if the addition would not actually touch the main block. But the proposal also calls for excavation of the court area behind the house, exposing the foundation there. If the wall has already been demolished behind the porches, then it is not an issue, but neither the drawings nor photos reveal the wall's degree of intactness. Clearly, the applicant seeks to maximize the glazed area and make the wall consistent with the surrounding new construction, but minimizing the loss of original fabric, as feasible, should be the first priority.

### **Addition**

The proposed addition is not traditional in the sense that the 24-foot-wide and 42-foot-deep block is not attached directly to the rear of the existing building, but is set behind a nearly nineteen-foot-deep court and attached to the main block by a hyphen. This makes the whole deeper than

the volume would be if more compactly laid out. The obvious functional drawback to a more compact arrangement would be the loss of light to the interior rooms.

There have been large additions behind street-facing houses approved by the Board for successfully carrying off the illusion that they were separate buildings incidentally standing beyond. In this instance, the Connecticut Avenue streetscape is such that there is a variety of building sizes, including many large, contributing structures. On the other hand, the immediate context of this square is such that, while it contains some small accessory structures, the interior of the block does not contain very large buildings. There are, however, buildings that stretch from street to alley, as well as tall ones. Thus, the addition should be regarded principally in its relationship to the base building—as clearly an addition rather than as something separate—and in the broader context of a development pattern and variations along Connecticut Avenue.

The Board has approved large additions behind series of rowhouses further south on this block, on both sides of Connecticut. In those instances, the back buildings are actually visible from the street. That fact is not, in itself, sufficient cause to support the present proposal, but the underlying argument for the compatibility those projects, was that the avenue historically has been punctuated by taller and deeper buildings because of its greater width and more dense zoning classification. Further, a number of formerly single-family buildings had long been converted to multi-family or commercial use. Indeed, it becomes increasingly unlikely that rowhouses on this portion of the avenue will remain in a single-family residential use. The preservation law requires the Board to weigh the strict preservation interest against the adaptability interest—even taking into consideration the tension between existing buildings and the zoning regulations that often permit a great deal more intensity. The central consideration is the specific context into which new construction is introduced.

The addition is not problematic inserted among larger apartment buildings and an alleyscape that has unfortunately been largely given over to surface parking. The more sensitive relationship is with the rowhouse next door.

The problematic aspect of the design is the odd massing of the addition—with its penthouse and rearward cantilever—which have been combined and emphasized by a change in the exterior material. The island of siding cladding them creates a large-scale element of a material likely inferior to that of the remainder of the construction, turned to the neighbors. Especially given its size and location, the addition should strive to be a quieter, background building, without such contrasts or focal points. The irregular massing accentuates the fact that the addition is taller and deeper than the main block of the present building and invites comparison to the lower and less-altered fellow rowhouse at 2850 Connecticut. While the proposed height of the addition may keep it invisible from Connecticut Avenue (especially considering the flanking apartment buildings cutting off oblique views), it can still be seen in relation to the historic main block; the court makes this possible, as the space prevents the addition concealing the old house.

The mass should be more regularized, to relate better to the rectilinearity of the surrounding buildings, including on the subject property. The removal of the small loft story would constitute a small loss of area but would markedly improve the relationship with the entire neighborhood, including the properties west of the alley. It would also remove any chance that the building could be seen from Connecticut. Just as important is the improvement of the proportions; while, as previously mentioned, there are additions as tall down the block, these are

stretched behind multiple rowhouses and have an overall horizontal emphasis. A five-story-tall rear addition at only 24-foot rowhouse width is an unusual proportion in this and most contexts.

If the six-foot overhang at the rear is programmatically necessary, it should be expressed as a bay, secondary to and projecting from the remainder of a regularized, brick addition.

### **Other alterations**

The elevations seem to suggest that there are no alterations proposed for the front of the house. Yet, with this kind of project, such as window replacement, porch balustrade repair/replacement, and other repairs or alterations are likely. As the concept is further developed, a complete scope of preservation and replacement work should be included.

It is possible that proposals for roof decks could conceivably follow, and the usual standards would apply, with particular emphasis on the degree to which decks might make the building appear taller.

The front elevations also appear to contain an inaccuracy, as they depict a door to the basement beside the porch, in the location of what is now a small window. If the applicant intends to pursue such an alteration, a subsequent application, or a revision of the present one, should detail such a proposal, so that it may be properly evaluated.

### **Recommendation**

*The staff recommends that the Board support the concept of the demolition of the rear structures and the construction of the addition as compatible with the character of the historic district, with the conditions that:*

- *the uppermost, partial story be removed from the addition;*
- *the siding be removed from the addition and replaced by brick to match the remainder of the structure;*
- *the rearward projection or cantilever from the addition, if maintained, be redesigned as a bay;*
- *the project minimize demolition of the house's rear wall;*
- *any alterations or repairs to the front of the building be detailed and reviewed at a later date, along with any proposed structural demolition within the building; and*
- *the plans be further revised to provide more information on materials and details.*





