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

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Landmark/District: **Anacostia Historic District**  
Address: **1341 W Street SE**

☒ Agenda  
☐ Consent

Meeting Date: **August 4, 2016**  
Case Number: **16-514**

☒ Subdivision  
☒ New construction

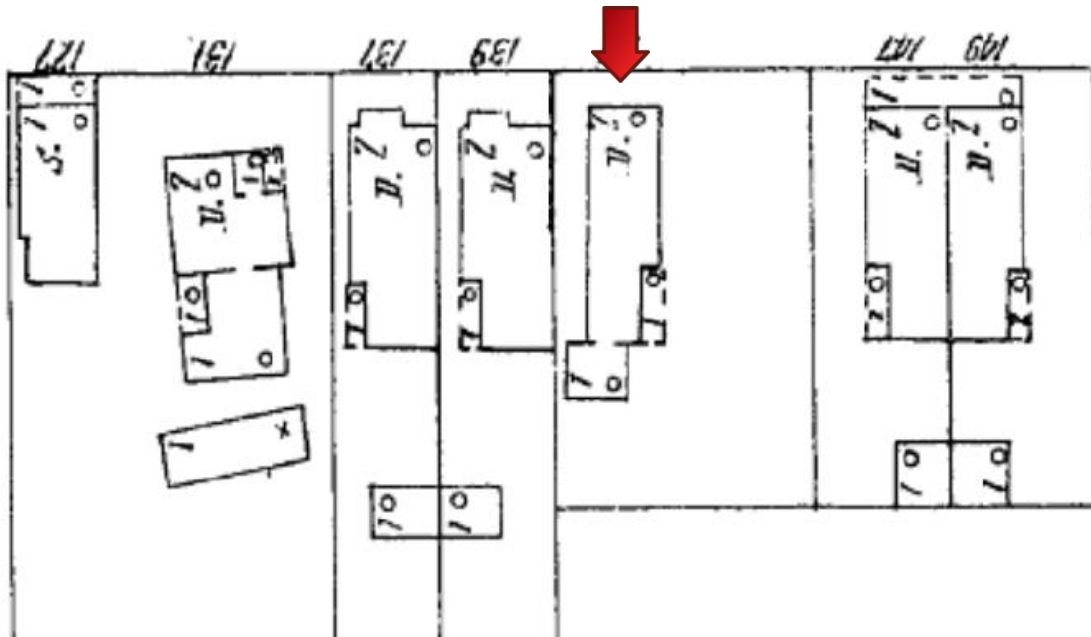
Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

☒ Concept

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The applicant, property owner Sakib Khan (along with Arimse Architects), requests concept review to subdivide into two a lot containing a detached pre-1887 house in order to construct a second, two-story frame house, essentially identical to the historic one.



*A detail from a Sanborn insurance map atlas of 1904.*

On the face of it, it would be hard to argue that an attempt to match a historic and pretty typical house next door is incompatible with the character of the historic district. Yet, the degree of emulation is problematic, as it would tend to blur the distinction between old and new, giving the new house a false provenance and diluting the character of the old one. If the matching effect is carried off, the two would appear to have been erected as twins in the same building campaign. The historic preservation design guidelines for new construction state that:

Compatibility does not mean exactly duplicating the existing buildings... A new building should be seen as a product of its own time.... To reproduce a historic building, or to copy exactly a style from the past, creates a false sense of history. By relating to the existing buildings and their environment, but being of its own time, a new building shows a district's evolution just as the existing buildings show its past.

Still, given the guidelines' encouragement of similar orientation, setback, scale, proportions, massing, height and materials, even a contemporary building is not going to be a wild departure from the character of the historic buildings. Further, the design guidelines specific to the Anacostia Historic District recognize the overwhelming pattern of residential construction in the neighborhood as two-story, frame, detached, and with full-width front porches. And given the narrowness of the proposed new lot, a detached house will probably have to be two bays wide, like its neighbor.

If one were to set out to copy a pre-1887 house, the copy would not match the present house, because of its alterations over time. Tuscan porch columns are not uncommon in Anacostia, but they date to renovations and new construction of the early twentieth century; the Victorian homes were not classical and had turned or chamfered porch posts. Further, the west-side projection at the rear of 1341 W was originally an open porch. There is also no compelling reason to give the new porch a matching access stair at the end of the deck, projecting into the narrow side yard. We do not know that to have been the original location of the present house's stair, and the front yard is deep enough to accommodate a front- or side-loaded stair, especially given flexibility of a couple feet on the issue of setback.

There are a score of elements that need not be matched, while still attaining compatibility. These include the details of the cornice and window hoods, the fenestration of the side elevations, and the side projection at rear. Interestingly, the new siding is not proposed to match, but rather to be of fiber cement, a material that has been commonly approved by the Board for new, frame construction in Anacostia and elsewhere and is permitted by the Anacostia historic district design guidelines. But it is a simple enough matter to revise the details of the proposed house, even to make it obviously contemporary. Therefore, the Board should presently concentrate on the question of whether the massing and proportions are acceptable, which they seem to be.

A more essential question is whether the house ought to be constructed at all, that is, whether the property is suited to a subdivision that would permit another house at this location.

### **Subdivision**

Historic maps indicate that the present side yard is original to the house. Of course, it is hardly unusual that new construction would occur where no building had stood before. The issue is one of how serious would be the effects upon the character of the subject property and the historic district.

The property's immediate context offers numerous examples of closely spaced and even semidetached and row homes, including those immediately to the east, west, down the block and around the corner. The original Uniontown subdivision into mostly 28-wide lots is not inconsistent with the pattern that developed on this square, but old maps are not too instructive for suggesting what should be the extent of this particular lot, which was developed perpendicularly across the originally platted lot lines (see 1887 Hopkins map detail below). Clearly, close spacing, a rapid but varied "rhythm" is not, in itself, incompatible. But does the

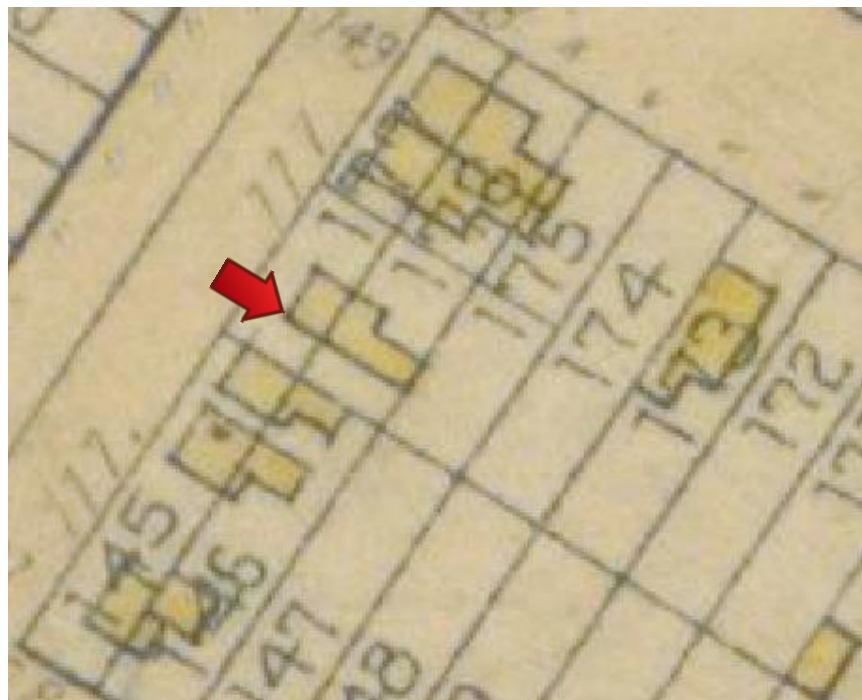
occupation of the side yard too adversely affect the setting of the historic subject house? Yes and no.

The yard lacks any character-defining elements but the green space itself. A makeshift, two-track driveway ran up the berm to a shed-like garage in recent decades, before a gravel construction entrance was laid for access to perform rehab work on 1341. But a wider spacing between the existing and proposed houses would better retain a sense of the historic condition. The proposal calls for a space of ten feet between the main side-wall planes of the two houses, but projecting into that space would be the eaves and the porch stairs and rear bump-out of 1341.

In fact, the site plan calls for a west side yard of only 4'6" wide for 1341, with a slightly wider, adjoining, east side yard for the new house. This is a practical problem, because while there are many narrow side yards in Anacostia, neither of the proposed side yards meets the zoning requirements of eight-foot width.

The applicant states that he is seeking zoning relief, but such side-yard relief could only apply to the new construction<sup>1</sup>; one cannot subdivide a property if the subdivision creates a nonconformity such as the 4'6" west side yard for 1341.

It appears that the only likely solution is to shift both the new lot and new house westward, closer to 1347 W, which has its own twelve-foot-wide side yard. The zoning regulations have been interpreted to allow detached houses to be built abutting a side property line. This would retain a larger side yard for 1341 and make the spacing between 1347, the new house, and 1341 more similar. This may affect the fenestration of the side walls, however, which is not very generous to begin with.

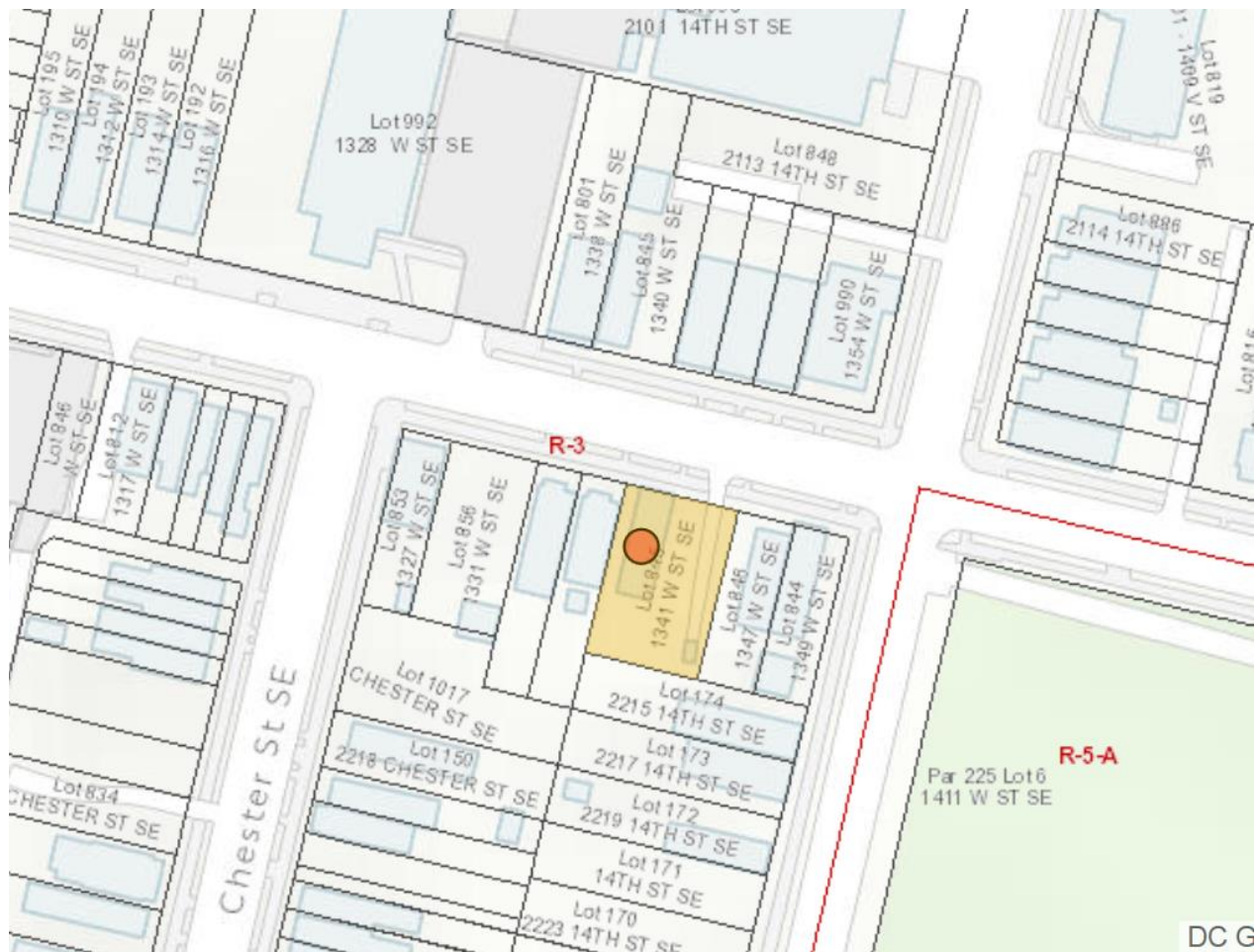


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<sup>1</sup> Which also seems unlikely, as there is no apparent hardship inherent in the characteristics of the property, only some practical difficulty about pursuing the program the applicant seeks. The project would also need a variance to the off-street parking requirement.

### Recommendation

*HPO recommends that the Board not approve the present concept for new construction and subdivision, because it is incompatible with the character of the subject property and of the historic district and therefore inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation act. While the size, massing, materials and proportions of the proposed house are not incompatible with the character of the historic district, it is recommended that the applicant revise the house design to differentiate it from 1341 W Street. But first, it is recommended that the applicant explore a subdivision that would shift both new lot and new house farther from 1341, retaining more of a sense of the existing side yard and possibly obviating the need for side-yard variances.*



*A DC Property Quest map detail provides a sense of the varied, but often crowded spacing of historic buildings in the vicinity.*