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

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Landmark/District: **Capitol Hill Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **621 Maryland Avenue NE**  
ANC: **6C** (x) Concept

Meeting Date: **September 28, 2023** (x) Alteration  
Case Number: **23-500**

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Property owner Terrence Collingsworth, with drawings by designer Olivia Akinsan, seeks concept review for a roof deck with its own roofed pergola. The request has been filed as a concept, although the work has already been performed.

**Property Description**

No. 621 Maryland Avenue NE is a three-story brick rowhouse with a raised basement and a projecting bay. It was created by architect-builder Diller B. Groff as one of a row of six in 1891.

The property was in the same ownership as presently in 2006, when a stop-work order was issued for a rooftop structure partly visible from Maryland Avenue over the house's roof ridge. A January 2007 permit was approved for "Installation [of] roof decks on 2nd & 3rd story roofs, with spiral staircase and railings, on sfd, and decks, supported on brick exterior walls, repair/replace existing metal railing on 3rd story roof to exactly match existing". The permit was approved with the condition that a railing be removed or pulled rearward to render it invisible from the public space.

In April 2023, HPO received a report of a visible roof deck. In addition to what appears to be a built-up platform, various planters and railings and a pergola on the deck are now visible from points along Maryland Avenue. Two permit applications for retroactive approval of the work completed are pending.

**Proposal**

The deck covers much of the roof. Forward of the deck, close to the roof's front edge, are planters shown at three feet in height. Railings of about four feet in height enclose the deck's perimeter. A roofed pergola structure with a maximum height of over ten feet above the decking stands at the rear of the main block but it is partly visible from Maryland Avenue.

**Evaluation**

What the submitted photos reveal of the deck and its appurtenances is lumber that is recent. An examination of recent aerial photos indicates that the pergola/roof is new. Even the replacement of a previously approved deck requires a permit, first arising from the need to ensure that decks are not especially combustible, do not overload the underlying structure, are sound in themselves, and allow for sufficient emergency egress. Roofed structures are also subject to zoning review.

And, of course, exterior work in a historic district that requires a permit is subject to preservation review. Other than a 2017 electrical permit, we have no record of any permit issued at this property since 2007.

The Board's earliest design guidelines on the subject of decks did not even contemplate them being built atop homes. But they state that "a deck... should be located so that it cannot be seen from a public street or sidewalk" and that "[i]f a new deck... is to be added it should be located in the rear yard and designed to be compatible with the building and landscaping if it can be seen from the public street or alley." The Board has since developed the following guidance for roof decks, generally requiring that they

not be visible from surrounding streets or public sidewalks so as not to alter the character or appearance of the building or its streetscape. This typically requires a substantial set back, the extent of which depends on the height of the proposed deck and its framing, the height of the building and its parapets, the height of adjacent buildings, the topography of the area, the width of the street, and views from public vantage points surrounding the building.

The Board has consistently applied these principles—as it does with other rooftop appurtenances such as stair penthouses, solar installations, skylights, etc.—finding that elements of roof decks visible over the fronts of residential properties in Capitol Hill are incompatible with the character of the neighborhood and the underlying historic buildings, as they alter the character-defining height, massing, and roofline of the structures.

As with the 2007 review of a deck at this property, HPO has been clear that visible roof deck components built without permit are not considered compatible or subject to administrative clearance. The scope of the roof deck should be reduced to eliminate the planters and forward stairs accessing the front of the roof, as well as eliminating the roofed structure. Once the planters have been removed, a lumber mockup should be erected, and visibility test conducted to establish the outer points at which the deck railings would not be visible from the street. Once reduced to not being visible, the roof deck would be compatible with the Capitol Hill historic district and could be cleared administratively by HPO.

The applicant has been encouraged to revise the scope as recommended above, but instead seeks HPRB concept approval for the deck and its roof as built, with authority then delegated to HPO for permit clearance.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends the Board find the visible portions of the roof deck and covered structure incompatible with the character of the Capitol Hill Historic District and insufficiently retentive of the character of the subject property and, thus, the concept as presented inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law.*

*Staff contact: Moira Nadal*



*6-5-06 Inspector Photo*



*4-5-23 Inspector Photo*



*2015 Aerial View of 621 Maryland Ave NE*



*2017 Aerial View of 621 Maryland Ave NE*



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*2021 Aerial View of 621 Maryland Ave NE*