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

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Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda  
Address: **2431 I Street NW**

Meeting Date: **December 4, 2014** (x) Addition  
Case Number: **14-625**

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

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The applicant, owner Steve Charnovitz (with architect Paul Wilson), requests review of a concept to erect a three-story rear and roof addition to a two-story, attached, brick house constructed in 1881. The addition would be clad with stucco.

Foggy Bottom is a very small historic district, and when designated, had only 135 contributing buildings out of 226 total.<sup>1</sup> The heights of the historic buildings are remarkably consistent at two stories. Only four contributing buildings were erected at three stories originally; most of those at three stories or taller today are noncontributing, plus there is a handful whose grades have been cut down to enter at the basement, and several with partial or full third-story additions, some built before designation and some after. The implication of the photographs submitted with the application is that there are three-story buildings in the historic district, so a two-story building should be permitted to be converted to three stories. Such a conclusion does not necessarily follow. Indeed, it was incompatible alterations that encouraged residents of Foggy Bottom to seek historic designation in the 1980s. And it is the respect for the character of each property that adds up to the preservation of the whole neighborhood's character.

In addition to being of two stories as a rule, the majority of the modest, working-class houses in the district were built low to the ground, that is, not on elevated basements. As a consequence, one can frequently see over much of the roof from the street, especially as the homes are also not very deep. These characteristics are particularly true of those houses on the north side of I Street. They make it very difficult, if not impossible, to construct an additional story or partial story without it being seen from the street on which the building fronts. And invisibility from the street has been the Board's first consideration and principle for most residential properties.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The number remains very close to that today. A couple of new buildings have been erected on Hughes Mews since designation. The visual impact of the noncontributing buildings is disproportionate, as they are larger than the historic buildings on average, sometimes much, much larger.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the many discussions of the subject in staff reports and at HPRB hearings, the published guidance to applicants for roof additions states that "Adding vertically to a historic building is generally discouraged as such additions typically alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass. Additions on top of a building can sometimes be achieved when they are not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context.... Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate..."

Those houses that can accept a sufficiently compatible roof addition are the exception. According to the published guidance to applicants on such projects,

Additions on top of a building can sometimes be achieved when they are not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context. If conditions allow, this approach typically requires a substantial setback, the extent of which depends on the height of the addition, the height of the building, the height of adjacent buildings, the topography of the area, the width of the street, the relationship of the subject building to its surroundings, and views from public vantage points surrounding the building.

For that reason, the Board has applied another general principle, that in order to be set back sufficiently, a roof addition should be entirely behind the main block.<sup>3</sup> In the present instance, the proposed addition would stand not only on the little rear ell, but would come forward a dozen feet onto the main block. There, because of its height, it would be seen from the street, if only over the gable-roofed houses to the west.



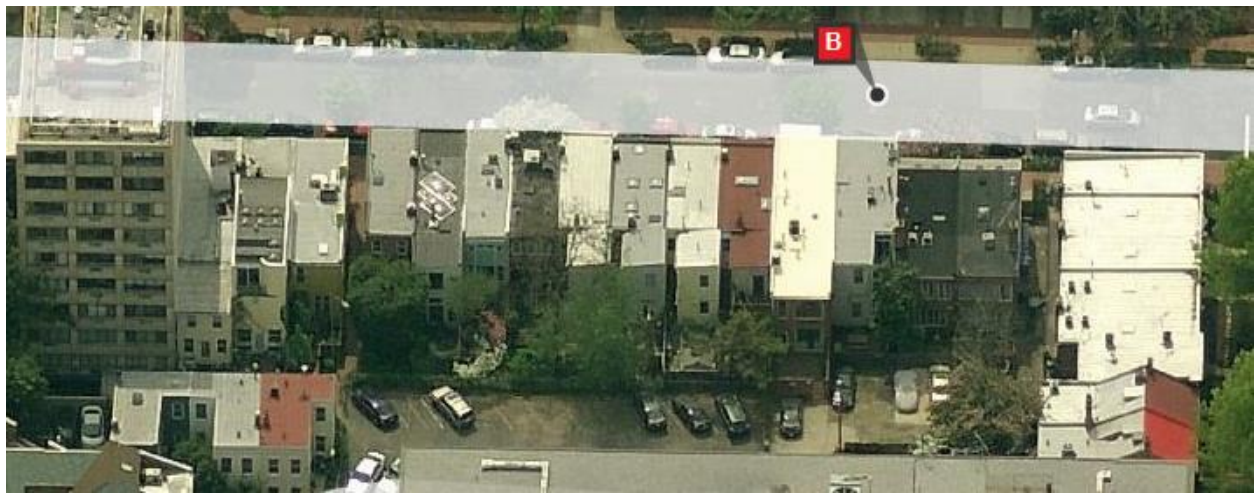
While there are some taller buildings in the neighborhood, the streetscapes do not have the variety of heights that create the sort of broken roofline (such as one might find in parts of Dupont Circle, for instance) that allow additional floors to be sneaked in, obscured from oblique views by taller buildings on either side. Nor is there a mansard or parapet for an addition to hide

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<sup>3</sup> Such projects still raise issues of compatibility to neighbors, subordination of the addition to the main block, and massing.

behind, as one might see in Mount Pleasant, for example. A roof addition would require the side chimney to be extended as well.

This project is not a matter of just performing a flag test to evaluate and minimize visibility from the street. Foggy Bottom is characterized by important alleyscapes consisting of dwellings and even an industrial building. The public view from the alley is nearly as important as that from the street, while allowing that alterations to the rear walls are more appropriate on this less-formal side. As the applicant's drawings suggest, the upward projection of the addition—and its upswept roof—would be a stark contrast to the pretty uniform roofline along the back of this block. The prominence of the addition from the back and its visibility of the front raise questions of the compatibility of its massing with, and proper subordination to, the underlying building. A *two*-story addition would be perfectly compatible and consistent with the idea that additions should be subordinate to the main block.



Experiments with roof additions or taller rear additions in Foggy Bottom have all failed, to differing degrees. Several of these predate the designation of the historic district and had little regard for compatibility. Even those taller rear additions on the south side of the 2500 block of I Street—meant to be invisible from the street by being set behind the main block and principally viewed not from a historic alley but from outside the historic district—failed in being at least somewhat visible.<sup>4</sup> With this experience, the Board has lately concluded that it is too difficult to construct roof additions on two-story buildings in Foggy Bottom; despite the best of intentions, they prove visible from the street. Most recently (2012), the Board recommended against a roof addition at 916 25<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>5</sup> It is not a radical idea to conclude that, in some places at least, two-story buildings should remain two stories, and three stories three, that their heights and proportions are important to their historic character. Even a relatively small addition can have a disproportionately large impact on a small house or a small historic district.

The greatest strength of the proposal is that it minimizes demolition by retaining some of the rear wall of the ell as well as incorporating the exterior court alongside the ell as a pantry.

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<sup>4</sup> These properties are also deeper and elevated relative to the passer-by.

<sup>5</sup> The Board has recommended against partial stories on many two-story attached buildings in other districts, too, for instance at 1436 T Street NW, 1745 Swann Street NW, 516 Groff Court NE, 1242 U Street SE, 438 Ridge Street NW and 816-818 Rhode Island Avenue NW.

A contemporary vocabulary employed at the rear of these houses is not unwelcome, despite some sensitivity of the historic alleyscape. The Board and the preservation law balance the strict preservation interest with the adaptability of properties, including suiting the tastes of property owners. The scale of the glazed openings at the rear is very different from that of the traditional openings around it, but this incongruity is not as pronounced or problematic when the glazing is understood as analogous to an enclosed porch—which makes a lot more sense at two stories than three, because of the consistency of building heights along the street and the fact that three-story porches are rare throughout the city.

### **Windows**

The other alteration proposed is the replacement of the front windows. Four six-over-six double-hung windows would be replaced with two-over-two windows, the latter configuration being more typical of the style and period of the subject building. A fifth window, a fixed sixteen-light window in the face of the bay projection, would apparently be replaced with a single-light picture window. While the bay has been reconstructed over the years, the front windows should be consistent throughout, of two-over-two double-hung sash.



### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept to add a partial third story to be incompatible with the character of the historic district but support the idea of an addition similar to that proposed, but at the height of two stories, with the conditions that its cladding be a true stucco and that the façade's replacement windows be appropriate two-over-twos.*