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

Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **2532 I Street NW**

Meeting Date: **April 30, 2015**
Case Number: **15-293** (x) Addition

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

The applicants, property owners Pilar Jimenez de Arechaga and Brian Muraresku (with architect Paul Wilson), request the Board's review of a concept to add a three-story addition with a rooftop deck to this two-story brick 1889 end-unit rowhouse or semidetached house.

The addition would sit atop a one-story rear wing and extend somewhat rearward of that. Although there is no demolition plan, the amount of demolition necessary to build such an addition appears acceptable as an alteration that does not constitute demolition as defined in the Board's regulations. The wall material would be stucco and the windows, metal. The roof deck would occupy the addition's entire roof, surrounded by a metal railing.

Evaluation

Foggy Bottom is a very small historic district, and when designated, had only 135 contributing buildings out of 226 total.¹ 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 (more about these below). The point is that both the district and its buildings are small, and thus especially vulnerable to alterations changing their character. The district lacks the variability that sometimes hides and sometimes excuses less than ideal preservation solutions; the context calls for a more careful balancing of the preservation interest with the adaptability interest. It may well be that what was built as two-story worker housing cannot always accommodate three bedrooms and as many bathrooms.

Rooftop additions are seldom ideal from a preservation perspective, as they are almost always visible from the ground and often create an incompatible massing. They are most successful on very large buildings, where they have occurred most often, because such contexts often contain penthouses anyway and allow for substantial setbacks that reduce visibility. Such additions are often quite small relative to the mass of the underlying building.

¹ 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.

Invisibility from the street has been the Board's first principle for most residential properties, so that additions do not "alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass."² Those houses that can accept a 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.... Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate...

But penthouses do not work well on small houses as a rule. Stair penthouses have been held to the "invisible-from-the-street" rule. The Board has sometimes supported taller rear additions to two-story buildings, applying another general principle, that in order to be set back sufficiently to be invisible, a roof addition should be entirely behind the main block.³ Of course, this rule typically applies to interior rowhouses. A decade ago, the Board did apply it to 2512 I Street, despite the fact that that is an end unit, because the house was deeper, set back farther and with more limited views than the present property. Yet, that project was unsuccessful, as the addition is still too visible from the side, and it was built differently from the drawings so that it is somewhat visible straight on (see photograph on next page).

The present addition would be more prominent as there are no buildings to its west and the side of the building is in plain as one comes south on 26th Street (see photograph below). Almost as if to intensify the problem, the roof deck would surmount it and be visible from directly in front of the building.

The prominence of the addition raises the question of its compatibility of its massing with 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. If the house needs to be deeper to accommodate the preferred program, so be it, even if that means a zoning variance (it appears that the project would already require a special exception for lot occupancy). Given the variety of depths on the block, that alone would not render the addition incompatible.

Unfortunately, experiments with roof additions or taller rear additions in Foggy Bottom have all failed to differing degrees. 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. In 2012 and 2014, for instance, the Board recommended against roof additions at 916 25th Street and 2431 I Street. To repeat the mistakes

² "Roof Decks and Roof Additions Design Considerations and Submission Requirements."

³ Such projects still raise issues of compatibility to neighbors, continuity of rooflines, subordination of the addition to the main block, and awkward massing. But not being able to see front and back at the same time relieves some of the concern about subordination of the addition.



of ten or twenty or thirty years ago (the latter prior to the designation of the district) would demonstrate a foolish consistency, although the variety of the structures already seen could hardly be characterized as consistent. It is more than a question of the effect of such alterations on the character of each building; the greater risk is the cumulative effect on these rowhouse blocks; they become the base for a random jumble of stuff.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept to add a partial third story and a deck on top of that to be incompatible with the character of the historic district, but that the Board support the idea of an addition similar to that proposed at the height of two stories. If a deck is sought atop a two story rear addition, it should include a modest setback for the railing and not result in visibility of a stair penthouse from street views.



2512 I Street NW