

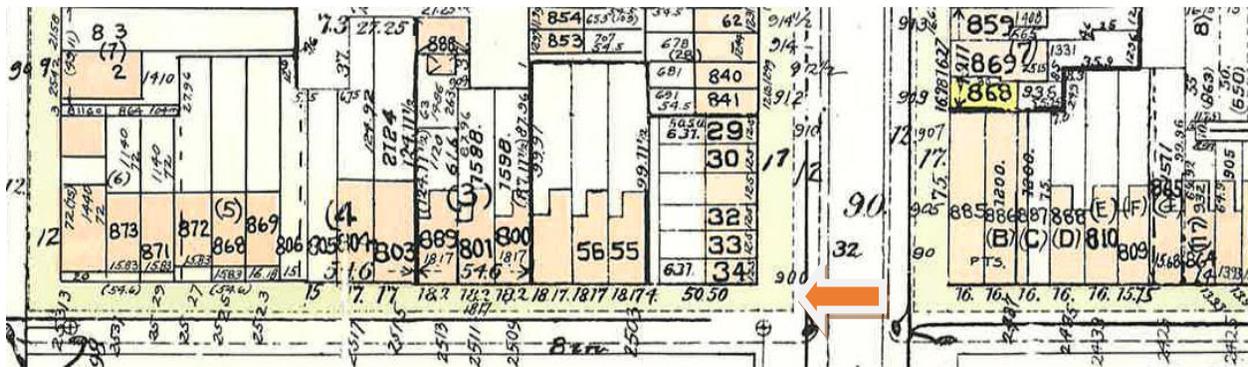
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda
 Address: **900 25th Street NW**

Meeting Date: **December 15, 2022** (x) Alteration
 Case Number: **23-093** (x) Permit

The applicants, property owners Chad Navarrete and Denise Heuchert, request Board review of a concept application to build a basement-entrance stair along the side of a house, in public space.

The property is the south end unit on a six-unit brick row erected in 1880. Its single, shallow side yard is enclosed by a low fence, but it is entirely within the I Street right-of-way. Staff had recommended that the stair be mostly relocated to the rear yard, even if it had to be decked over there and still extend a bit into the right-of-way (on a straight run or in an L configuration), to minimize the projection of such feature into the public space, to minimize the removal of planted areas, and to minimize the exposure of the building’s foundation. This portion of the “parking” strip should be greened up—consistent with the intent of the Parking Act of 1871—rather than permanently excavated and hardscaped. As proposed, it would remove a couple of birch trees and some foundation shrubs. Much of the remaining area would have to be paved: first, for a walk to reach the stairs, and then, presumably another walk around the stairs to the rear yard, neither of which are depicted in the site plan.



A detail from the 1960 Baist map showing the twelve-foot-wide parking strip (in pale green) along I Street.

The *Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows* state, in part:

While not all properties can compatibly accommodate a new exterior basement stair, basing the design of a new basement entrance on original examples on similar properties may provide a good model for this type of alteration....

Alterations that are temporary or easily reversible have less of a lasting impact on the character of historic property, while alterations that permanently change or remove features have a greater impact....

The design of features for historic property should display an awareness of and response to the specific qualities of the historic property and its environment....

New basement entrances should be visually discreet and subordinate to the main entrance....

It may not be possible to provide an exterior stair on properties where the first floor is close to grade, where the building is close to the sidewalk, or where the basement stair would be exposed at eye level from the sidewalk. In such instances, the extent of excavation may alter the relationship of the building to grade, overwhelm the site, or become such a prominent element that it detracts from the property's character....



Such a feature as this areaway cannot be said to be characteristic of the Foggy Bottom Historic District. There are some extensive areaways on properties nearby, beyond the district boundary. Within the district, however, the most similar thing to the proposal is on the I Street side of 842 New Hampshire Avenue, but it is not as extensive, because the basement door is half above grade.

There are more than 135 buildings in the historic district. Many buildings were constructed at, or just above the grade, and they commonly lack full basements. Many were built on plinths or hillocks, some only elevated above the street once the street grade was cut down, as at 830 25th Street. A few properties were built with front basement stairs beneath stoops, but these are generally smaller and shallower, partly concealed by the stoops and again accessing entrances not fully sunk below grade. Of these, we have 941, 943, 945, 949 and 951 25th Street, and 2404, 2406, 2415, 2417, 2419, 2506 and 2508 I Street, a couple of which are noncontributing. And a couple of these have since had the stoops removed in favor of at-grade entrances. The front areaway at 2506 I is unnecessarily large, because it was long ago extended to accommodate an enlarged basement window, and the approach to 830 25th Street is effectively straight-on a ramp to a slightly sunken door, but these are the only anomalies.

The design guidelines further state that “Fences around areaways are discouraged because they are obtrusive and out of character with historic site conditions. Decreasing the depth of an areaway or providing an alternative means of protection can eliminate the need for fences around areaways and window wells.” A stair around a front stoop can typically get away with a single handrail for safety. But the run of a stair parallel to the building wall and sinking a full story requires a railing or fence nearly all around—here redundant to the site fence.

The design guidelines principally contemplate the introduction of entrances from public space into the proper front of a house. “Individually, these public space front yards are for the use and enjoyment of owners whose property abuts them; collectively, they form a linear, park-like green space that runs through the city’s residential neighborhoods.” Yet, while this is not the location of the front door, it is still a street front, one segment of the continuous front-yard parking strip through the two blocks of I Street within the historic district. It is not equivalent to a side-yard areaway sandwiched between two houses. The proposal is more extensive than what is entertained in front yards, where the guidelines strongly discourage stairways at houses nearly on grade because of their necessary run.

Board decisions do not carry the weight of judicial precedent, but the Board is relied upon to render decisions that are reasonably consistent from project to project that are similarly situated. It would be difficult hereafter to distinguish this case from the many other instances of “parking” strips at the street corners of Foggy Bottom. Indeed, it is conceivable that there ultimately could be four such stairs at this intersection alone.

HPO would recommend further consideration of a stair that is located at least mostly within the small rear yard, even if it must extend partially into public space, to an extent comparable to historic examples. Such a compromise is consistent with the design guidelines’ advice that “Adapting old buildings requires a thoughtful consideration of practical needs and the civic benefits of protecting architectural and historical characteristics valued by the community.”

Whatever the position of the stair, additional thought must be given to the materials of the walls surrounding it. The elevation depicts an unspecified block in the plane of the house wall. While the retaining walls may be poured concrete, this wall, prominently visible from the street, should be brick-faced.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board not approve the concept as proposed, because it is not compatible with the character of the historic district, but request revisions along the lines suggested above.