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

Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **2407-2409 I Street NW**

Meeting Date: **May 25, 2023** (x) Alteration
Case Number: **23-325** (x) Permit

The applicant, Anjali Bedi, one of the property owners, requests the Board’s review of an after-the-fact permit application to install a 30” x 48” awning over the entrance to a two-story 1909 rowhouse designed by Albert H. Beers for owner-builder Simon Oppenheimer. The awning was installed in January and does not appear in the Google Streetview photos of November of last year. It is made of clear polycarbonate supported by cast-aluminum brackets. The brackets are secured into the masonry façade of what has been known as 2409 I Street, but that building was combined with 2407 I in 2003; 2409 no longer exists for tax purposes.

There are historic preservation regulations for awnings.

An awning shall relate to and fit within the masonry opening or frame of the storefront, window, or door where it is located. (10C DCMR § 2515.4(c))

An awning shall be covered only with canvas, woven acrylic or similar fabric materials. Metal and shiny or glossy materials like vinyl and plastic are not permitted. (10C DCMR 2515.7(a))

An awning shall be attached to a building in a manner that causes the minimum permanent damage. Typically, an awning should be attached to a window frame or storefront surround.... Attachment of awning frames through masonry is prohibited except in unusual circumstances where it is unavoidable due to specific characteristics of the building. (10C DCMR § 2515.10)

Awning design, placement, and type shall respect, take advantage of, and be compatible with the particular composition, design features, and architectural style of the historic property where it is installed. (10C DCMR § 2515.1)

It is not unknown to have had awnings added to single-family homes, but these were fitted to the window openings, to control light before air-conditioning was widely available. Shutters were the more common means of preventing heat gain. Awnings, canopies and marquees over entrances were typical of larger and more intensively visited buildings such as large apartments, hotels, stores and theaters. But Foggy Bottom is characterized by relatively modest rows that were often rental worker housing, and these lacked such features. The Board has rarely recommended approval of awnings at the entrances of houses; there was one such approval

several years ago at a home in Dupont Circle that stood in a commercial zone and had been converted to commercial use.

Still, there might be an argument in favor of awnings at the entrances of Foggy Bottom's rowhouses if they were a common enough alteration to be considered already characteristic. The applicant states that "[t]here are several awnings in the neighborhood," implying as much. The accuracy of that statement depends on definitions of "awnings," "neighborhood," and even "several." The regulations distinguish canopies and marquees from awnings; canopies project farther, being supported by poles at their outer extent, marquees being rigid and usually flat, cantilevered roofs, such as are often found over theater entrances. An awning is an "architectural projection that provides weather protection, identity or decoration and is wholly supported by the building to which it is attached. An awning is comprised of a lightweight, rigid skeleton structure over which a covering is attached." (10C DCMR § 2599)

However one might define the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, one's cognitive map is probably broader than the extent of the little Foggy Bottom Historic District, which takes in parts of only four squares. The Board's purview does not extend farther. In the vicinity, there are several apartment buildings and hotels that have marquees or canopies, but these are the larger building types at which such features are traditional and most useful, as well as being compatible, at least according to the regulations. Further, most of these buildings are either outside the district boundary or are noncontributing buildings within it.¹ The 1960 (and noncontributing former apartment and) hotel at 824 New Hampshire Avenue is the only example of a marquee within the district. The 1975 apartment building at 2405 I has the only canopy. But entrances to such later, and typically Modernist, buildings are as often recessed instead of having a canopy, marquee or awning.

If we seek true comparables, they would be among the houses for which the district was designated to protect. The district contains well over 200 buildings, about 135 of which are contributing, and these are overwhelmingly rowhouses. The alley dwellings, of course, were never permitted such projections. If we take the universe of front-entrance awnings at houses, we find five, including the subject one.² The other four are:

- 2417 I Street, which is a noncontributing building, because it was reconstructed, as was the abutting 2415, possibly after a late 1950s fire. But we find that this awning was not permitted, appearing after a 2018 renovation and addition permit, but not depicted in those drawings.³

¹ The following apartment and hotel buildings with marquees or canopies stand on squares that are partly within the historic district but the buildings themselves stand *outside* the boundary, not subject to the preservation law: 2416 K Street, 940 25th Street and 950 25th Street. The noncontributing 939 26th Street has an apparently original Regency Revival *porch*.

² The house at 2505 I Street has a deep cornice which has been clumsily rebuilt, and a metal roof was added to it, presumably to protect the feature from water.

³ There is no awning permit, which the Department of Buildings requires for such projections. The Department of Transportation also requires public space permits for those that project over the street right-of-way. But the owner and the architect-applicant had contacted HPO in July 2019 about an awning to replace an older canvas one. Given that it is a noncontributing property, our response was, "The unanimous opinion [of the staff] was that that type of [contemporary metal] canopy is incompatible with this modest rowhouse. Canvas awnings, while not ideal, are nonetheless traditional. You could do, say, an open-ended canvas one, that might suit the client's contemporary preference."

- 936 24th Street, dating to 1884, which has an aluminum awning dating to the postwar period and predating the historic district.
- 822 25th Street, dating to 1878, which has a dilapidated wood awning (that at least fits the door opening) that predates an early 1980s survey of Foggy Bottom and West End.
- 2407 I Street, a twin of the subject property—in fact, now combined with the subject property. Its vaulted awning was installed before 2004, although we cannot say exactly when, other than after a 1983 photographic survey. The cover was removed from the frame after being torn about 2014. As the two houses have been joined by subdivision and interior connection and are now classified in the tax rolls as one single-family home, it raises the question of both the utility and compatibility of awnings (and *unmatched* awnings) over *two* entrances, when the historic character of the district strongly indicates that zero awnings is the historic pattern.

We cannot enforce against the three old awnings mentioned, as two are grandfathered and, in the case of the other, the ownership has changed since the undetermined date of its installation. But we can take appropriate action on new applications.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board recommend against issuance of a permit for the canopy as incompatible with the character of the historic district. As an alternative, the older awning on the building may be recovered.