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

Landmark/District:	Georgetown Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	3210 Q Street NW	
Meeting Date:	March 23, 2023	(x) Alteration/additions
Case Number:	22-287	(x) Concept

The applicant, Outerbridge Horsey, architect and agent for property owner Page Robinson, requests the Board’s review and approval of a concept to construct a two-story, brick, vestibule addition on the west side of the building; a contemporary two-story rear addition; and a one-story brick and metal addition atop the two-story main block.

The two-story house was erected by contractor John W. Macpherson for real estate broker Raphael Casilear in 1907. It was intended as a rental home, as Castilear did not sell it until 1925 and, in the meantime, it was occupied in succession by domestic servant Ida Martin; waiter Raymond Brent; and Anne Morgan and her son Jerrold, a butler.

The present concept was recommended by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts on October 20, pursuant to its authority under the Old Georgetown Act to “report as to the exterior architectural features, height, appearance, color, and texture of the materials of exterior construction which is subject to public view from a public highway.” HPO seldom refers to this Board Georgetown projects that have been reviewed by the Commission of Fine Arts, as it is typically not required by law (D.C. Official Code § 6-1105(b)). Occasionally, however, a project raises a novel question or seems to conflict with a Board standard of longstanding.

HPO regularly weighs in by comments on each month’s cases, submitted in writing to the Old Georgetown Board for consideration. In this instance, no objection was offered to the side and rear additions, and HPO does not believe they need be discussed now, although the Board has the authority to do so. The comments have been limited to the idea of an upward addition:

Mansards have been added to some houses in the past, but they alter the rooflines, and tend to create a false impression of history. Their geometry and details are difficult to execute convincingly. Nearly all such attempts in modern times have failed visually. The alternative of carrying up the side wall brings the difficulty of matching the brick. And the [option of] box-like additions just look out of place. We do not support adding a story to this building despite its small size. None of the approaches appears likely to succeed. The Historic Preservation Review Board’s usual standard is that any upward additions should not be visible from the streets upon which a building fronts.

HPO believes that these comments are reflective of and consistent with decades of HPRB practice and with the practice of the Old Georgetown Board in approaching similarly situated

properties. When the 1994 series of historic design guidelines were published, they barely contemplated additions atop contributing buildings, illustrating the subject with a roof deck and stair pop-up. But the text did address upward additions in this fashion: “Any roof-top addition should be located far enough behind the existing cornice so that it is hidden from view by pedestrians on the street.... If this is not possible, the design of the addition or its screening should be compatible with the character of the building.”

It is certainly the case that a third floor here cannot be concealed from public view. The house is low and relatively shallow, and its situation adjacent to a parking lot renders its front, side and nearly all of its roofline prominently visible from Q Street and even across Wisconsin Avenue. The question is if (and if so, how) such an addition might be compatible. To restate the problem, a setback mansard—contemporary or historicist—is odd. A historicist mansard is difficult to get “right”, but even if impeccably done, it would create a false history for the humble building. The addition requires the building up of the side wall, thus changing the understanding of the roofline and creating an odd massing. And to alter the top, the rear, and the exposed side of the modest building leaves only the faced unaltered.

At the time that the above-cited guidelines were drafted, the Board and staff were experimenting with the occasional historicist mansard addition, but that approach was gradually abandoned as a failure, caught between the perils of false history and the reality of frequent poor execution in terms of proportions and details. The Board has since more commonly recommended in favor of taller additions entirely behind the main blocks of houses, especially when these were concealed from public view. Prominently visible upward additions have been more common on larger commercial and industrial buildings.

This proposal is a departure for the National Historic Landmark district of Georgetown, too, where the Commission of Fine Arts has approved an additional story atop a few noncontributing houses and has relatively recently embarked on some taller additions entirely behind contributing buildings within the commercial corridors, plus one instance of a two-story addition set atop a one-story commercial building. These instances are novel in Georgetown, but not inconsistent with HPRB practice in other districts.

The Commission of Fine Arts and the Advisory Neighborhood Commission’s support seems to turn upon the fact of the house’s relatively small size. That is a sufficient rationale to support compatible side and rear additions, but it constitutes the principal reason for this Board to *not* support an additional story. The size, height and overall form define the character of the historic house. And those three characteristics preclude the addition being concealed or even recessive. A taller, wider or deeper base building might offer more opportunity to achieve those ends, as the Board has seen in many previous cases.

The Commission’s staff does not appear to have advocated for this addition, opining only that a dark or sky-gray surface color might help the structure recede from prominence, “lessening the impact on the historic structure,” and that the elimination of side windows from a previous alternative would similarly draw less attention.

While HPRB decisions do not carry the weight of judicial precedent, the Board should be reasonably consistent in its application of its standards across similar cases. It is difficult to

defend the proposed additional story here if it is not to be supported in similar prominent locations in this historic district and others from here on out.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept for side and rear additions but not the third story, which is incompatible with the character of the subject property and the historic district, and that it delegate further review to staff, with the understanding that the project will undergo further review by the Commission of Fine Arts.