
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-08

7 Grant Circle NW

Square 3243, Lot 44

Meeting Date: April 23, 2015
Applicant: Off Boundary Preservation Brigade

Affected ANC: 4C
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board deny the designation of 7 Grant Circle NW as a District of Columbia landmark. The HPO further recommends that the nomination not be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The property does not appear to merit designation under any of the District of Columbia or National Register criteria, although it is a good representative example of a certain type of architecture and construction, an early-twentieth-century porch-fronted brick rowhouse typical of the Petworth neighborhood.

Background

The two row or semidetached houses at 6 and 7 Grant Circle NW were permitted in July 1915 and completed shortly thereafter. They were preceded on the circle by the 1913 frame house at No. 16, and they were erected contemporaneously with the row at 29-32 Grant Circle and the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Petworth. They were followed by the rows at Nos. 8-10 and 11-15 in 1919. With the completion of St. Gabriel's Catholic Church at the end of 1930, Grant Circle had been built out more or less as it stands today.

The two houses at Nos. 6 and 7 were designed by local architect Merrill T. Vaughn and built by contractor Martin L. Gottwals for the property owner, his wife, Charlotte. As a builder, Gottwals received permits for 106 total buildings, more than half of which he built as speculative investments. At least three projects were developed with the assistance of Charlotte as the title holder to the lots. At two stories and a total expenditure estimated at \$5,000, the two Grant Circle houses were relatively modest.

The Petworth subdivision, carved out of a 387-acre tract of land that constituted the merging of two former estates, was platted in 1888, with later additions. It was the city's first subdivision to be planned pursuant to the 1888 Subdivision Act, which required new subdivisions to conform to the established pattern of the L'Enfant Plan, to ensure more cohesiveness, order and connectivity in the suburbs. The same year, the Brightwood Railroad Company—owned by the Petworth real estate syndicate—received a charter to construct a horse-drawn streetcar, setting the stage for the area's development. Largely because of the Panic of 1893, for a time, growth remained slow away from the Georgia Avenue streetcar line.

The first rows in Petworth were erected in the 1890s near Georgia Avenue, and they coexisted with more numerous detached and semidetached homes. But the real boom in rowhouse construction began in the period 1905 to 1910. It was this development phase, which continued into the 1930s, that was characterized by the typically two-story-tall porch-fronted brick rows that are commonly referred to as “the Washington rowhouse” type. They have also been called “daylight” rowhouses, as they are wider than similarly sized Victorian houses in order to provide more windows in the exposed walls. Built in the hundreds by large developers such as Wardman, Cafritz and W.C. and A.N. Miller, they were emulated by many smaller builders. Nearly all of Grant Circle’s houses are cut from the same cloth, as could be said of much of Petworth.

Evaluation

The nomination contains much information about the history of Petworth and Grant Circle, and relatively little about that of the subject property. It is difficult for a single building to claim to represent the significance of the entire neighborhood, when the neighborhood contains a variety of building types, uses, forms and dates, and when the establishment of the neighborhood predates that particular building by a quarter century. A recent nomination for 16 Grant Circle made the argument that *that* house is particularly significant for representing an earlier phase of the neighborhood’s evolution, distinct from the nearby and nearly contemporaneous rowhouse development. The National Register’s Bulletin 16A defines “period of significance” as “the length of time when a property was associated with important events, activities, or persons, or attained the characteristics which qualify it for National Register listing. Period of significance usually begins with the date when significant activities or events began giving the property its historic significance; this is often a date of construction.” Unless a site also has archaeological potential, its period of significance customarily does not precede a property’s existence. But accepting a narrower *period* of significance for the property does not resolve whether it possesses sufficient historical significance to merit landmark designation.

7 Grant Circle is indeed representative of Petworth as a whole, because this type of two-story porch-fronted rowhouse is ubiquitous. But it is very difficult to single out one or more of them when their essential character is as one of several. In this neighborhood, each is one of many. The landmark application claims too great an architectural significance for this single building—oddly without nominating its attached twin, 6 Grant Circle, which shares much of its history and character. The nomination’s most fitting characterization of the subject property’s significance is captured by the following statement: “No. 7 Grant Circle is one of two nearly identical buildings. In a row of seven complimentary [sic] houses.” The houses are perfectly nice, undoubtedly solidly built and comfortable, as well as relatively modest; one need not look far for similar homes or for similar ones with slightly more architectural pretension, such as the row across the circle at Nos. 29 through 32.

While the subject property is said to illustrate white flight and the arrival of a black middle class to the neighborhood, the stories the nomination tells on this subject relate to two other neighboring homes. That does not mean that 7 Grant Circle did not participate in that history, only that that fact remains to be demonstrated, and that perhaps there are more illustrative examples of those trends in the immediate vicinity.

Some of the significance of the property has been ascribed to the involvement of Merrill T. Vaughn as architect. Vaughn was a fairly prolific designer of Washington buildings, having

designed mostly residences, some single units and some rows, as well as a couple of churches and several stores. As the nomination points out, he also designed several apartment buildings, a few that the *D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites* calls out as significant contributing buildings in historic districts. Vaughn's work may deserve more study, but the Board has never had the opportunity to consider his relative importance, and the nomination only hints at it. Even if Vaughn were found to be a "creative master," it is unlikely that the present house would be found to be a master work. Given his larger and more important commissions, 6 and 7 Grant Circle would only seem to help illustrate Vaughn's range. He consistently designed buildings that were compatible with the character of the neighborhood, sometimes grand and sometimes quite modest and ordinary. But there is nothing to suggest that his entire oeuvre is eligible for landmark designation.

The very notion of a landmark is a property that stands out, in history or appearance, from its peers and neighbors. Landmark designation is inherently a matter of comparison. Most properties form the warp and weft of the fabric of a neighborhood; the landmarks may be said to be the highlights. When it comes to building types and architectural styles, D.C. Designation Criterion D requires that an eligible property "embody" the distinguishing characteristics of its type or style. The Board has held this to mean more than simply being an example of a style or type, as any building could then qualify. In recent years, the Board has denied applications to designate 1224 13th Street NW, 3530 Springland Lane NW, 1349 Kenyon Street NW, 1305-1311 H Street NE, 3637 Patterson Street NW, 819-821 7th Street NE, 5136 Sherier Place NW, 136-152 U Street NW and, most recently, 16 Grant Circle NW on the grounds that, as architecture, they were not important enough examples or of special distinction within their neighborhoods. An architectural landmark must be a particularly noteworthy example and must be significant to the District of Columbia even if it represents the development of a particular neighborhood. The same may be said for a property of historic, rather than architectural, importance.

The Board has occasionally honored certain modest properties for exemplifying the formative development phase of a neighborhood (a handful in American University Park, for instance). Generally, such designated properties are distinctive and represent an important first phase of a neighborhood's growth and one that was indicative of the intent of the developer, and thus met D.C. Criterion B (and National Register Criterion A) for association with patterns of growth that contributed to the character of the District of Columbia.

The house at 7 Grant Circle contributes to a collective understanding, along with its many similar neighbors, of the development of Grant Circle and the larger Petworth neighborhood. While not eligible for listing as a historic landmark, it is already appropriately deemed contributing to the character of the new Grant Circle Historic District.