
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-15

3020 Albemarle Street NW

Square 2042, Lot 0001

Meeting Date: July 23, 2015
Applicant: Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance

Affected ANC: 3F
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the house at 3020 Albemarle Street, NW as a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1924.

The property merits designation under District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) as an expression of urban planning, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia; and it merits designation under D.C. Designation Criterion F (Creative Masters) as the work of architect Horace Peaslee, Jr., whose architecture and landscape work and professional and civic activism in the realm of urban planning, historic preservation, and architectural design review has significantly shaped the development of the District of Columbia. For these same reasons, the property meets National Register Criterion C.

History and Architecture

The house at 3020 Albemarle Street was constructed in 1924 for Colonel William Robert Davis and his wife Irene Nesbit Davis who commissioned architect Horace Peaslee to design their home on the edge of Soapstone Creek Valley in Forest Hills. Forest Hills, a residential neighborhood between Connecticut Avenue and Rock Creek Park was primarily developed between the 1920s and 1940s and consists of sizeable single-family dwellings designed in a variety of 20th-century, architect-designed Revival styles occupying gracious wooded lots and hilly terrain. The Davises built their house (one of the first houses to be constructed in the neighborhood) on a sloped and wooded pie-shaped lot which fronted on Albemarle Street and had its rear oriented towards Audubon Terrace, located well below the elevation of Albemarle Street. Shortly after construction of the house, this section of Audubon Terrace was closed as part of the federal government’s purchase of land in the Soapstone Creek Valley (Reservation 402) that was part of a larger program to acquire land in the stream valleys to protect the watershed and natural resources of Rock Creek and to create an extension of Rock Creek Park. Today, the Soapstone Valley Trail runs along the route of the former road below the house, down to the creek providing a strikingly scenic trail leading directly to the park. The house at 3020 Albemarle Street towers above the trail, impressively rising out of its wooded site.

The nomination describes the house as an “avant-garde” interpretation of the Mediterranean style, distinguished by its verticality, block-like massing, and planar surfaces. The house is indeed difficult to classify stylistically. It has stucco-clad walls and a red tile roof typically associated with the Mediterranean Revival style, and a tower-like massing that recalls the towers of Italian hill towns. Similarly, its solid wood entry door with its small window is Medieval in appearance. However, its stuccoed wall surfaces, its punched vertical window openings uninterrupted by surrounds, its solid-to-void ratio and its austere geometric massing, especially as seen from the rear of the house, are similar to approaches seen in contemporaneous European Modernism. This simplicity of form and spare use of ornament are also similar, even if they originated independently, to the work of Viennese architect Adolf Loos, especially as seen in his Rufer House (1922).¹ While the combination of styles and historic references is not uncommon in domestic design of the early 20th-century and can be referred to as Academic Eclecticism, the introduction of an emerging Modern aesthetic in this house is unusual in Washington and sets it apart from other Academic Eclectic examples from the period.

The house at 3020 Albemarle Street remains essentially intact to its original condition, though some changes have occurred. The stucco-clad wall enclosing the house from Albemarle Street is a later addition, as is the glazing on the second floor of the two-story porch at the rear of the house. The one-story porch on the west side of the house appears also to have been added.

Horace Whittier Peaslee, Jr., FAIA

Throughout his career in Washington, D.C. from 1911 until his death in 1959, Horace Peaslee made significant contributions in architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, and preservation that have greatly contributed to the appearance and development of Washington, D.C. Peaslee’s position and work as landscape designer and architect with the U.S. Office of Public Buildings and Grounds in the public realm; his private architecture practice which focused on residential buildings; his active participation in a variety of professional and civic affairs, including holding office in the American Institute of Architects (national and local chapter), and the Committee of 100; his numerous publications; and awards on and for his work, establish him as a master in his field. During his lifetime, and at his death, Peaslee was highly regarded and respected by his colleagues and peers in the field.

Born and raised in upstate New York, Horace Peaslee attended and received his Bachelor’s degree in architecture with a minor in landscape architecture from Cornell University in 1910, winning awards along the way. The following year, Peaslee moved to Washington, D.C., where he followed his former professor of landscape architecture George Burnap and took a position as a landscape designer and later as an architect with the U.S. Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Together Peaslee and Burnap would design Meridian Hill Park, an early and crowning achievement of Peaslee’s career and one of the country’s most artistically notable urban parks. In 1914, for this project, Peaslee and a group of officials from his office and the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), traveled to Europe (Italy, France and Switzerland) to study garden and park design. In addition to overseeing the design and construction of Meridian Hill Park, Peaslee designed other parks and park structures in the city, including the Potomac Park Bathhouse and Field House (circa 1919-1920). Between 1920 and 1922, Peaslee wrote eight articles on park

¹ Peaslee may not have known Loos or his work, but based on Peaslee’s own writings from the period, he was familiar with contemporary design trends nationally and internationally.

building design that were published as a series in the journal *The Park International*. Peaslee's illustrated writings show that Peaslee studied and was familiar with contemporary design trends nationally and internationally.

After World War I and his public service career, Peaslee established a private architectural practice in the city, which he maintained for the next 40 years. His private commissions were diverse, ranging from residences for wealthy professionals, to private schools, and some commercial projects. The house at 3020 Albemarle Street, dating from 1924 when Peaslee was 40 years old, is one of his earliest private commissions. In 1931, Peaslee designed a collection of houses in Colony Hill, a residential enclave planned and built by Boss & Phelps, developer and builder of nearby Foxhall Village. The designs of Peaslee's Colony Hill houses received significant praise at the time of construction, were published and received at least one award. Stylistically, Peaslee's residential work also ran the gamut, from the Tudor Revival to English Arts and Crafts, to Art Deco and Colonial Revival. By the 1930s, an era when Colonial Williamsburg and similar efforts began to influence the inclination of architects and the tastes of clients in the mid-Atlantic region, Peaslee seemed most comfortable designing in the Colonial Revival-style, albeit with stripped sensibilities. Indeed, in much of his design work, a modern aesthetic and modern treatment of surfaces and elements is apparent. While this is most pronounced in his design for the Moorings Apartments at 1909 Q Street (1927)—a smooth limestone-clad stripped Art Deco building—the building's cubist form, plain walls and undecorated window openings similarly define the character of many of his houses including 3020 Albemarle Street (1924), the Sherrill House at 2440 Kalorama Road, NW (1927) and his later Colonial Revival-style houses such as at 416 6th Street, SE (1937) and 3000 Garrison Street NW (1941).

In addition to his own design work, Peaslee was an outspoken proponent of and actively engaged in the preservation and restoration of historic buildings including the restoration of Dumbarton House (2715 Q Street NW); the Maryland State House in St. Mary's City; the restoration of Belle Grove Plantation in Middletown, Virginia; the restoration of The Maples at 619 D Street SE (1936); the restoration of two of Benjamin Henry Latrobe's churches; and the restoration of the Bowie-Sevier House (3124 Q Street NW) to name a few. In some cases, Peaslee salvaged architectural elements of demolished buildings and incorporated them into his new designs; in particular, in 1927, he reused elements of the John Hay and Henry Adams houses (built in 1884 and demolished in 1927) and incorporated them into the entryways to two houses he designed on 31st Street. At the end of his life, Peaslee waged an unsuccessful campaign to preserve the east front of the U.S. Capitol when the 1958 extension was planned, but he succeeded in salvaging the portico's columns which were eventually re-erected as garden sculpture in the U.S. National Arboretum.

Horace Peaslee was most influential among his peers and had the greatest impact on the city's built environment, however, through his civic and public activism. Peaslee advocated for good design in the city, and pushed for the preservation of Washington's natural, historic and architectural heritage. Peaslee served four terms as vice president of the national organization of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and as president of the D.C. Chapter. In the 1920s and 1930s, Peaslee organized and led many committees, including the AIA Committee on the National Capital and the Committee on the Cooperation with the Commission of Fine Arts. He was a founding member of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, and he led successful

legislative campaigns that led to the establishment of the D.C. City Planning Commission and the 1930 adoption of the Shipstead-Luce Act, which gave the Commission of Fine Arts authority to review the design of private buildings abutting public land.

In 1922, Peaslee established the Architects Advisory Committee (AAC), made up of a rotating group of three volunteer architects drawn from the Washington chapter of the AIA, to review the design of buildings for which building permits were being sought. The AAC operated for 10 years, and became a model for similar design review bodies established in other cities.

In his application for Fellow in the AIA in 1935, Peaslee's fellow architect sponsors wrote, "Peaslee's work in the field of design is generally recognized as an extremely distinctive combination of originality and scholarly character which renders it particularly attractive both to the professionally trained eye and to the layman." Similarly after his death from a heart attack in 1959, Peaslee's many obituaries attest to his quality of character, his strong reputation among his peers, and his many accomplishments towards the preservation and development of Washington, D.C.

Evaluation

The nomination argues that the house at 3020 Albemarle Street is eligible for designation as a D.C. Landmark and for listing in the National Register as the work of master architect and landscape architect Horace Peaslee. The nomination notes that the house was conceived early in Peaslee's career, and that it stands out as a unique and sophisticated example of his body of work. The assertion that Horace Peaslee is a master is unequivocal. His biography, provided in the nomination and summarized in this report, establishes that Peaslee's work, on many levels, influenced the evolution of design and urban planning in the city, and was significant to the development of the District of Columbia.

The house at 3020 Albemarle Street, although designed early in Peaslee's career, is a notable example of his work; it illustrates Peaslee's experimentation with contemporary approaches to design and his creativity as a designer, and the sensitivity that he placed on his buildings and their landscape. This Modern aesthetic of unornamented wall surfaces, punched window openings and geometric massing at 3020 Albemarle Street shows up in Peaslee's future work, most overtly in the Moorings Apartment building (1927), and in the Sherrill House in Kalorama (1925), but also in his later Colonial Revival-style designs. Many of Peaslee's houses of the 1930s and 1940s, especially those of Colony Hill may be readily classified as Colonial Revival in style, but a close examination of these buildings reveals strong geometries, reduced ornamentation and paired down details that align them more closely with the same Modern aesthetics that inspired his design of 3020 Albemarle Street. Two particularly good examples of his Modern Colonial Revival style can be found in Forest Hills—at 3000 Garrison Street (1938) and 5020 Linnean Avenue (1941)—and one on Capitol Hill at 417 6th Street SE (1937). The Garrison Street house, in particular, has severe geometries with openings and trimwork paired down to a minimum. Peaslee's early expression of the Modern aesthetic found at 3020 Albemarle Street seems to have persisted into his later design work.

What is especially noteworthy about Peaslee's experimentation with a modern aesthetic sensibility is how early it came in a city that was strongly associated with architectural conservatism through most of the 20th century. Commonly cited examples of the earliest

modernism in Washington include Eliel Saarinen's competition design for the Smithsonian Gallery of Art (1939) and William Lescaze's Longfellow Building (1941), but these International Style examples arrived a decade and a half after 3020 Albemarle Street. A stronger claim as the city's first International Style buildings can be made for Hilyard Robinson's Langston Terrace Dwellings (1935-38).

Modernist-influenced Classicism was common in Washington's federal public buildings of the New Deal era, but those also appeared in the decade after the house at 3020 Albemarle Street. A good residential example of that 1930s Modernist-influenced Classicism is the Waldron Faulkner House at 3415 36th Street NW (1936) in Cleveland Park.

Peaslee's Albemarle Street house reflects ideas about modernism that are characteristic of an earlier era, when Progressive ideals influenced many professions including architecture. New theories of efficiency, scientific management, and modern innovation were accompanied by new approaches to design as well. Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style and the Craftsman movement promoted by Gustav Stickley, Elbert Hubbard and others are notable examples of these new trends in architecture. Peaslee's series of articles on park planning, design, and construction also lies squarely within this Progressive context, discussing "best practices" in a rigorous, almost scientific way. It should be no surprise that he also experimented with new architectural ideas that reflected a simpler and more "rational" approach to design.

A similar local example of the stirrings of modernism from this era is Waddy B. Wood's Commercial National Bank of 1917, which Peaslee would certainly have known. Wood also wrote journal articles, including one in which he recounts what he learned from designing many temporary buildings in Washington for World War I:

I early learned that the best method of securing a satisfactory result was . . . in the careful selection of a logical unit, and its duplication throughout the entire design. The economy lies in this repetition of the simple unit, and the entrance, done but once, can be made more elaborate, and in its construction receive the personal touch of hand work . . .²

Observing further that "[o]rganized architecture might well be remodeled along the lines of efficiency shown by our army and navy," in his own work Wood indeed went on to employ this modern approach to repeating a plain modular punched window in the block of the building, with all decoration limited to a fine entrance and cornice. Thus, the Commercial National Bank was designated as a historic landmark as one of the first major buildings in Washington to exhibit this modern "stripped" approach to Classicism, by one of Washington's foremost early 20th century architects. The same argument can be made for the significance of Peaslee's 3020 Albemarle Street, with its similar plain modularity, blocky massing, and selectively applied decoration, as another very early example of the beginnings of modernism in residential design, by yet another of the city's foremost architects.

As an architect and landscape architect who had worked in the public realm designing public buildings and places, Peaslee was equally committed to promoting high quality private design.

² Waddy B. Wood, FAIA, "The Architect in War Work," in *The American Architect*, Vol CXIV, Number 2240, November 27, 1918.

In 1922, he established the Architects Advisory Committee that reviewed the design of private buildings throughout the city. In 1924, when Peaslee was designing the house at 3020 Albemarle Street on a site overlooking Soapstone Valley, the federal government had begun the process of acquiring land in the Rock Creek stream valleys in an effort to protect the natural and scenic heritage of Rock Creek and Rock Creek Park. Two years later, Peaslee, as Chairman of the Committee on Plans of Washington for the American Institute of Architects, was actively lobbying for architectural control of private buildings that fronted public land—an effort that was rewarded in 1930 in the Shipstead-Luce Act. Although the many letters and testimony from Peaslee, on file at the Commission of Fine Arts primarily focused on the effects of private building on public monuments and the need for design review, he was similarly adamant about the effect of private building on Rock Creek Park. As enacted, jurisdiction of Shipstead-Luce included areas adjacent to the monumental core, as well those abutting the waterfront and Rock Creek Park. Shortly after passage of the bill, in a June 1930 letter to Charles Moore, Peaslee wrote that “It seems to me that one of the most important problems with which we will have to deal is the back porch problem along Rock Creek Park...” Surely his own experience in designing 3020 Albemarle Street overlooking the Soapstone Valley opened his eyes to that necessity.

The property at 3020 Albemarle Street merits designation under District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) as an expression of urban planning, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia; and it merits designation under D.C. Designation Criterion F (Creative Masters) as the work of architect Horace Peaslee, Jr., whose architecture and landscape work and civic activism in the realm of urban planning, historic preservation, and architectural design review has significantly shaped the development of the District of Columbia. For these same reasons, the property meets National Register Criterion C. The Period of Significance of the property would be limited to 1924, its date of construction.