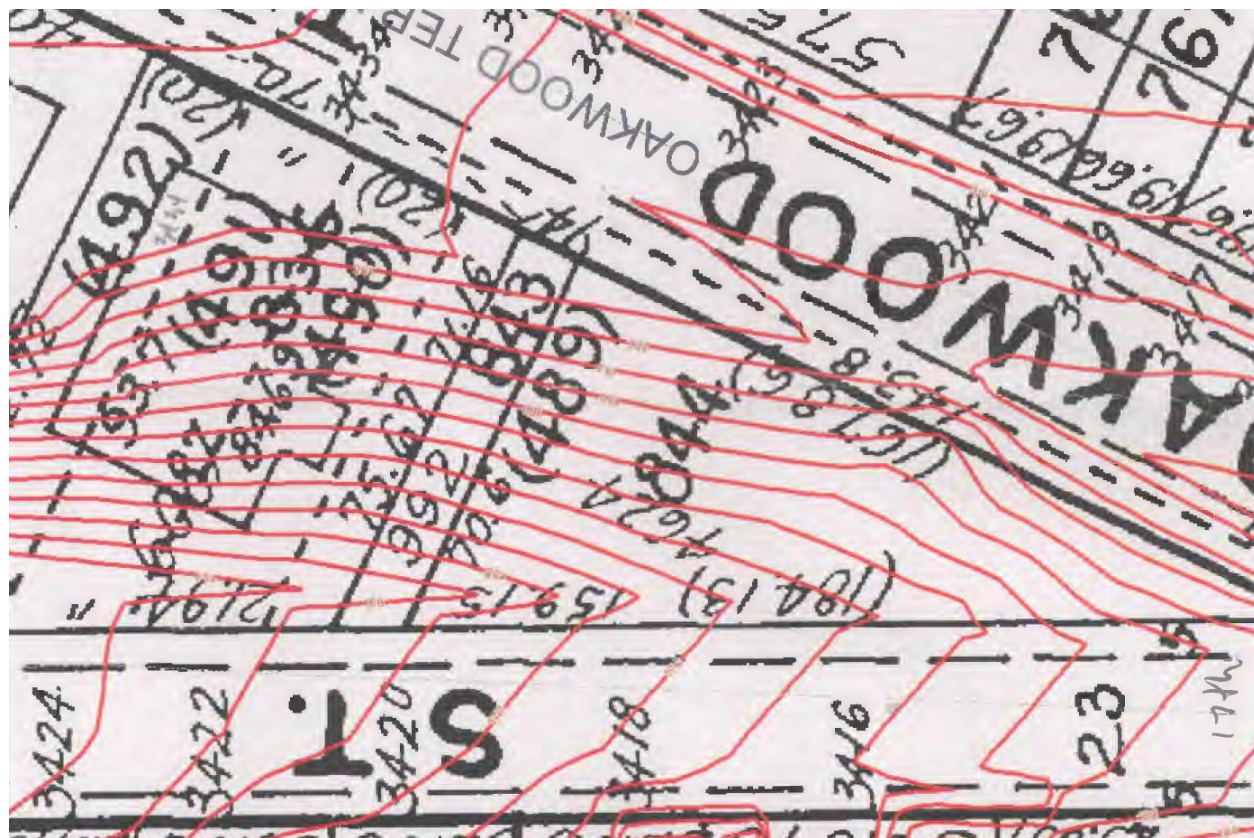

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	3428, 3430 and 3432 Oakwood Terrace NW	(x) Concept
Meeting Date:	May 28, 2020	(x) New construction
Case Number:	20-118	(x) Subdivision

The applicant, District Design, architect and agent for property owner Carmel Greer, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct two abutting three-story, two-unit residential buildings on two vacant lots.

The land is part of 1902 residential subdivision that created the Oakwood Terrace cul-de-sac, but it was never built upon, presumably because of a topography that slopes steeply down to 17th Street. The narrowness of the triangular site is exacerbated by the fact that a 1902 covenant set a building-restriction line fifteen feet in from each street right-of-way.¹



¹ Within this setback, Oakwood has a seven-foot strip of public "parking" inboard of the six-foot sidewalk zone.

The Board approved the applicant's concepts for new construction on this site in 2010 and 2013. The concept approvals have lapsed, of course, and responding to the building-restriction line has brought revisions that shrink the footprint significantly; reduce the number of buildings/units; eliminate previous parking proposals; better avoid a mature oak tree on the 17th Street side; and resubdivide to create two lots with buildings roughly equal in area.

The elevations have been modified accordingly. The total frontage on Oakwood is proposed to be about 80 feet, and on 17th Street nearly 90 feet. Because of the parcel's varying narrowness, the south end of the project would measure little more than three feet wide, while the northern end would be about 40 feet. The wedge shape and a significant change in grade along both frontages makes for very different floor plans and related but varying elevations. The building on the southern lot would be expressed as two houses, allowing for a second door on Oakwood to serve its second unit. The second unit in the northern building would be accessed solely off 17th Street.

The absolute height has been lowered from the earlier concepts, and the design, still of brick, has taken a more historicist turn, with a mansard that relates to the attics of some nearby rowhouses and that lowers the buildings' visual center of gravity. They read as three stories on both frontages, but as seen in the 17th Street elevation, a basement level and a portion of the main floor would be below the Oakwood grade. The minimum height on Oakwood would be about 32 feet. From its grade on 17th Street, the maximum height would be about 42 feet, although the section on Sheet A0203 indicates that the height of the roof at that façade would be lower than that on Oakwood (more on that below). The north building's attic facing Oakwood appears to be for show and for consistency, as the windows do not open onto occupiable space.

Evaluation

A subdivision to reduce from three to two lots seems an appropriate response to the building-restriction line, allowing for a rough balance of the masses on either side of the common lot line, and leaving a significant yard at the southern apex of the parcel.

Attached buildings are a reasonable approach to the compact parcel and are consistent with the numerous rowhouses on Oakwood and elsewhere in the historic district. The height is compatible with heights of buildings in the area. The buildings themselves cannot be an identical row, because of their differing depths, but there has been a rough tripartite balance achieved, especially along Oakwood, and there are consistent materials and elements. The mansard has added some relief to the elevations, but they would be improved by some patterning in the brickwork to counteract the flatness and simplicity of what is presumably running bond and simple soldier courses atop steel lintels.

The line drawings leave to the imagination the character of the exterior brick, but it should be of the textured reds and browns found nearby, not only compatible with surrounding historic houses but also blending well with the backdrop of woods to the north. Brick and roofing samples should be provided at a future review, and the cornice material should be specified. The roof material should also be specified. Slate is characteristic of mansard roofs. A faux slate might be considered on new construction—if the product is not shiny and has narrow dimensions like traditional real slate—but real slate would enhance the compatibility of the project.

Framing the roof is going to be complicated, no matter how it is approached, but the slope depicted on the north elevation (Sheet A0203) raises issues for the 17th Street elevation especially. Water must drain in that direction, yet it is unclear how it would be carried off. Surely, it is not intended simply to wash over that ridge, and no built-in or attached gutters are depicted. The projection of the eave could be transformed into a built-in gutter, but there is still the matter of the roof ridge as a physical obstacle and the visual problem of trying to adapt it to allow drainage.²

Indeed, the items not shown may pose the greatest challenges. The roof is shallow enough that the roofing itself will not be visible from the ground, but the slope, the lack of depth, and a lack of parapets would expose rooftop appurtenances, such as mechanical and solar equipment which presumably cannot be placed on the ground.³ Neither are utility meter locations depicted. In earlier concepts, the meters were to be placed inside the basement level on the 17th Street side, or within areaways, but the smaller building footprints than previously may push the electric meters outside. Two-unit buildings would have large double-meter cabinets that should never be exposed in front of buildings.

In a pure elevation, the narrow southern corner of the project looks odd. It will not be viewed quite this way in real life, of course, as one will see the widening mass of the building stretching away behind. But it could use some device to make this thin end of the wedge a more logical focal point. The placement of bathrooms inside the corner raises another issue of essential items not yet shown: plumbing waste vent stacks. In most attached houses, the plumbing is run up the party wall. In this exposed corner, however, there are bathrooms proposed above and below an entry hall and a bedroom. That puts a plumbing vent stack right at the apex of this project, either right atop the mansard or punching through it. There's another bathroom at the third floor of the north building that may present a similar unfortunate condition facing Oakwood.

The windows should be revised somewhat. Rather than relying on transoms of differing heights on the 17th Street elevation, taller double-hung units should be used. It is neither incompatible nor ahistoric to have upper-story windows be shorter than those below. On the Oakwood elevation of the north building, it appears that the second-story windows are actually taller than the first-floor ones. They should be shortened so as not to reverse the typical hierarchy and to create more space between those windows and the cornice above and openings below.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the subdivision, and that the Board approve the footprint, height, massing and general materials of the concept to be compatible with the character of the historic district, with the condition that the project returns to the Board with revisions to address adequately all the comments in the above evaluation.

² This has been a challenge when applicants have proposed attic additions on mansarded rowhouses and have had to somehow drain their roofs over the historic ridge.

³ Even if ground-mounted air-conditioning units could somehow be concealed in front yards, which is difficult to imagine, areas forward of building-restriction lines are treated the same as public space, where mechanical equipment is seldom approved.