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

Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **1656-1658 Park Road NW**

Meeting Date: **March 28, 2019** (x) Alteration
Case Number: **19-208** (x) Permit/Concept

The applicant, property owner 1656-58 Park LLC, requests the Board’s review of a permit to construct a second story atop a detached garage, as well as a concept to subdivide to consolidate two house lots. There have also been recent alterations to the property that lack permits.

Background

These properties contain two three-story semidetached houses that were originally single-family dwellings. They were two of a dozen—1644 to 1662 Park Road—erected in 1906 by Osterman and Butler to designs by prominent D.C. architect Appleton P. Clark, Jr. The Colonial Revival/Free-Classic Revival homes were collectively designated a historic landmark in 1984 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Housing demand during the Great Depression and World War II induced the houses on the entire row to convert to two or more units each before 1960.¹ Much of the block is now zoned for apartments. The present owner purchased the two subject properties in January 2018 and has converted both to six condominium units each.

Garage addition

An additional condo unit is proposed as an accessory apartment at a circa 1930 brick garage in the rear of 1658 Park. A frame second story would be added atop the one-story garage. At about 424 square feet, it is of a size that requires Board review—too large to be reviewed administratively by staff. The application states that the work would not be visible from the street, but that is not the case. The existing first floor is seen both on the alley and along the alley, from Mount Pleasant Street. The second floor, although proposed to be set forward from the alley as discussed below, will be partly visible from Mount Pleasant over the storefront of Heller’s Bakery. In any case, while the standards for work at the rear of properties is generally less rigorous, we review carefully the compatibility of work that can be seen from any vantage point.

Oddly, the second-story addition would be offset from the footprint of the garage, cantilevered in two directions, like loosely stacked boxes. The upper story would be set forward from the rear wall of the garage about eight feet, to meet a rear yard requirement, and it would project northward slightly more than that dimension. And despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the garage abuts a building to the west, the addition would be set five feet in from the side

¹ 1656 Park then contained two units, and 1658 had at least three.

property line to meet a building code requirement—and would project as much on the opposite side.

While a zoning variance might well be available in such circumstances, the building code requirement is a bit of a puzzle, suggesting potential perverse consequences in a range of projects involving abutting buildings. The proposed side-yard setback is meant to address a requirement of the International Building Code that refers to Chapter 7 of ASCE 7: Minimum Design Loads for Buildings and Other Structures. It addresses, among other things, the loads upon roof structures, and in particular, that of drifting snow. The idea is that, if two structures of different heights abut, then snow on the lower roof may pile up as it blows against the wall of the higher building, with the resultant load causing a failure of the roof framing. This garage abuts the Samber Market, a one-story 1922 brick commercial building with a nearly flat roof. In proposing to build taller than the market, the owner of the garage must either calculate the potential loads on the market and *then intervene somehow to reinforce the neighbor's roof as necessary*, or simply build several feet away from the adjoining building.

This rule has the potential for some unusual outcomes, such as the present proposal. For the sake of concerns about a portion of the roof next door, a portion of the second floor is to be supported by narrow full-story piers, the remainder to be supported by beams. The exposed portion of the garage's first-floor roof must be heavied up to support the load of snow that will fall into the gap created. In an instance of rowhouses sharing party walls, one may typically guess that the roof framing of each would be the same, so that one might inspect one's own roofing to estimate the ability of an adjoining house to handle drifting incident to, say, a roof addition.² In the present instance, however, we have two quite different buildings, and it seems that only some guesstimate has been offered for the market roof's unknown bearing capacity, and that is driving much of this project. In light of the zoning and code constraints, the applicant has compensated by projecting the addition in the other directions. This raises other practical issues, such as needing to insulate very well the cantilevered floor, as the apartment has a fair amount of plumbing just above it.

As for other aspects of the redesign of the garage, it should be improved upon. The garage door, the most prominent element, is proposed to be filled with siding and clerestory windows. Instead, something that looks more like a door—but fixed in place—should fill the opening.³ Such a feature can have integral glazing, as many vehicular doors do. Especially with the same siding as on the addition, it will look somewhat jerry-built. The addition's fiber-cement siding should be specified as to its exposure, and that should not exceed six inches, to give the thin material has a little more texture, and a scale more similar to that of pre-1930s lap siding.⁴

Subdivision

The existing lot of 1658 Park has insufficient available unoccupied lot area to allow the cantilevered garage addition. To obtain sufficient space, this lot is to be joined with that of the attached 1656 Park. For zoning and code reasons, the combination of the two lots means that the primary structures on both must be connected, even if the interior program does not necessitate

² Of course, such an estimate would not necessarily take into consideration any unseen conditions.

³ The renderings seem to depict all the siding as brick.

⁴ It is not clear where the second-story bathroom's waste pipes would run, from the shower at least, given that they would have to cross the direction of the proposed floor joists.

it. No plat has yet been submitted, but the approval of the subdivision must precede approval of a permit for the project.

The historic preservation law gives the Board the authority to review subdivisions for their potential implications. By regulation, HPO staff may clear subdivisions of historic property only if said subdivisions are “minor or insignificant lot changes compatible with the character of the property...” or are “required to implement a rehabilitation or construction project approved by the Board.”

The Board reviews consolidations of lots in part to anticipate whether such a combination may add to the development pressure on the properties. Another important consideration is how much demolition is proposed to effect the connection of the buildings and to carry out the anticipated project. For these reasons, the Board typically reviews subdivision applications simultaneously with the projects that necessitate the subdivisions. Drawings have been requested to depict any intended demolition of the houses’ structure, particularly related to connecting the buildings. These have not yet been received. If they depict a minimal connection between the buildings and not too much structural demolition, then that aspect of the project is compatible.

Alterations

The arguments for landmark designation of this row included the recognition of its architectural qualities “essentially unaltered.” In fact, even recently, there had been few exterior alterations, beyond some twentieth-century window replacements and the construction of rear decks. Alterations must be determined to be compatible with and to retain the character of the landmark. The preservation law also encourages the restoration of historic landmarks.

The current ownership has been responsible for some worthy window replacements and porch repairs, and some paving and fencing in the rear yards. With the exception of an electrical permit for 1658, there are no permits or permit applications for interior work related to the condo conversion or connection of the buildings.

There has, however, been some exterior work undertaken without permit. First, the front doors have been replaced, one of which was an original door. Both were in rough shape and likely needed replacement. Although the style of their false lead comes are not consistent with, say, the neoclassical transoms above, the overall configuration is correct.

More important, the slates on the mansard roofs were replaced with fake slate, front and rear (see photo, page 5). On the front, this is something HPO would not have supported or cleared, because the roofing is so prominent, and the faux slates can be easily picked out in comparison to the real ones next door, for differences in color, finish and dimension. There is not so much roof surface at the front of the building that the use of real slate would have been cost-prohibitive in comparison.

The third significant item is the paving of the front yard. It had had straight-run concrete lead walks and steps, consistent with the rest of the row, bisecting grassed yards.⁵ Nearly the entire

⁵ The previous owners, rather than repairing or replacing the century-old walks, had stuck flagstones over them and had installed stepping stones as a walk around the property. The latter is consistent with the design guidelines, the former is not, in this instance.

surface has now been covered with flagstones, limiting the green areas to planters bounded by the paving and the curb at the public sidewalk (see photo, page 5). This requires a public-space permit and would not have been supported by HPO, because the Board’s policy has long been to minimize front-yard paving, consistent with the published preservation design guidelines, the planning history of the District of Columbia, and recent comprehensive plans.⁶

Evaluation and recommendation

The central issue is the garage addition, and the subdivision necessary to carry it out. It is difficult to determine the addition compatible given its odd massing, which also frustrates a unified design. It may set a strange standard for the construction of upward additions everywhere. In its decision, the Board may find it to be incompatible, with the subdivision thus also incompatible. The applicant could then explore a variance and code waiver, or the possibility of building a detached accessory dwelling from scratch.

Alternatively, the Board might conclude that the garage addition, because it is at least not prominent, is sufficiently compatible if improved in design. The Board may consider incorporating a permit condition that the front-yard and front-roof work be corrected as part of the project, to render the whole more compatible.

HPO recommends that the Board not recommend approval of a permit for the garage addition as proposed, as it does not constitute an alteration compatible with the character of the landmark or the historic district.

However, if the Board does approve the garage addition as compatible, HPO recommends that it be with the following conditions:

- 1. that the infill of the garage’s vehicular opening be done with what looks like a vehicular door compatible with a circa 1930 garage, but with integral glazing as necessary;*
- 2. that the fiber-cement siding be smooth-faced, with an exposure not to exceed six inches;*
- 3. that the removal of the new paving from the front yard be included in the project drawings and be a condition of the permit;*
- 4. that the restoration of true slate to the front roof--to match the color, cut, dimensions and coursing/exposure of the original slates—be included in the project drawings and be a condition of the permit; and*
- 5. that the subdivision be cleared by HPO staff only if the connection between the buildings is minimal, and the total demolition of structure within the buildings is less than what constitutes “demolition in significant part” of each.*

⁶ L’Enfant’s plan for the federal city envisioned broad streets flanked by trees, monuments and greenswards. This idea was enshrined in the 1870 Parking Act, which allowed the city government to set aside parts of the street rights-of-way as parkland “to be adorned with shade-trees, walks, and enclosed with curbstones.” After the consolidation of the District of Columbia government, these green “parking” areas were partly given over to private maintenance and even enclosure, as long as fences were low and open in character. Such “parking” was extended to the inner-ring suburbs and later promoted in the farther ones by the establishment of building-restriction lines. The *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital* (Policy HP-2.5.4) addresses landscaped yards in part, by promoting the preservation “of the continuous and open green quality of landscaped front and side yards in public space. Take special care at historic landmarks and in historic districts to protect this public environment from intrusions, whether from excess paving, vehicular access and parking, high walls and fencing, or undue disruption of the natural contours or bermed terraces.”



*Above: The roof of 1658 Park, left, and 1660 Park, right.
Below: The altered front yard of 1656 and 1658 Park.*

