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

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1656 Hobart Street NW	
Meeting Date:	September 23, 2021	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	21-497	(x) Permit

The applicant, Michelle Clancy, agent for property owner Nancy Patel, requests the Board’s review of a permit application¹ to construct a carport/deck over the alley parking pad behind this 1914 rowhouse. The deck surface would be about at, and would effectively extend, the rear yard grade, which is now retained by a parged CMU wall.

Such decks are questionable in terms of compatibility, as the Board’s design guidelines view them as a low landscape feature. Still, there are others that function as carports, and the Board and staff have been supportive of many sorts of compatible one-story garages and decks at the rear of rowhouses, even when the historic property originally had no garage or similar structure. Although a deck itself may then be seen as sufficiently compatible, this specific proposal raises an unusual issue, that of a six-foot-tall solid wood fence surrounding its top.

In addition to functioning as a carport, the proposal is something of a cross between a rear deck and a roof deck. Standing so tall above the alley grade, it would be particularly conspicuous. It is quite large, at about ten feet tall and 304 square feet to shelter two automobiles. The current comment from the Office of the Zoning Administrator staff is that the “applicant must demonstrate that the proposed deck does not cover more than 50 percent of the required rear yard.” It is not clear this is possible, as the parking pad occupies nearly all of that required-open area within 20 feet of the rear property line. If the structure requires zoning relief, the fence that makes it bulkier may contribute to these zoning concerns regarding light and air.

Arguably, the feature that detracts most from the historic character of the Mount Pleasant Historic District is its profusion of decks. Mostly a legacy of the two decades preceding historic designation, they are still added or modified today, commonly without permit, sometimes creating a chaotic alleyscape of weathering wood framing, railings, privacy screens, pergolas, and jutting stairs at all levels.

To bring some order to this situation and to accommodate decks while reducing their profile, review during at least the past two decades has followed a straightforward principle based on a simple distinction: *fences belong on the ground, and railings belong on porches, decks and, when necessary, roofs*, for the purpose of safety. The universal code requirement of a 42-inch-

¹ The HPRB referral does not indicate which sort of application it is, and the drawings are not dimensioned or scaled as one would expect for a permit, but the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs does have a pending permit application, which prompted the present case.

tall safety rail can be met for the accommodation and enjoyment of residents without creating an expectation of complete concealment atop a roof or other elevated platform.

The only gray area this rule leaves is instances of garage roofs built into the same grade as the abutting rear yards, but fences atop such garages is almost always an existing condition of long standing. Happily, the old garage next door to the subject property has only a 42-inch-tall open fence (seen in the background of the photo).

The Board almost certainly would find incompatible a new one-story garage topped by a privacy fence. In 2018, the Board approved a 42-inch-tall open steel railing atop an existing, freestanding Mount Pleasant garage, in lieu of an initially proposed 56-inch-tall wood “picket” fence. Although not officially adopted, the Board has been supportive of Historic Mount Pleasant’s 1991 guidelines for this neighborhood—commonly referred to as the “Green Book”—which state that “[t]he construction of rear decks is permissible. Owners are encouraged to use traditional detailing of handrails, balustrades, columns and brackets on rear decks.”

In addition to the general principle, there are the particulars of this context. The houses on the opposite side of the alley (Harvard Street) are set much lower than the Hobart Street houses, and their yards are even shallower than those on Hobart. Structures on Hobart then tend to loom over the Harvard ones, a relationship exacerbated by proximity. The deck fence would be nearly opposite the second-story windows across the alley.

Can an applicant have an elevated deck? A carport? Sure. There does not appear to be a compelling historic, practical or safety argument, however, for extending an elevated privacy fence to the rear of this lot. Lowering the railing and opening it up can provide views and, more important, can minimize its visual impact while retaining its functionality.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board recommend approval of a permit for a rear deck/carport only if it complies with the zoning regulations and if the proposed fence is eliminated in favor of a 42-inch-tall open rail.

