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

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Landmark/District:	<b>Mount Pleasant Historic District</b>	(x) Agenda
Address:	<b>1745 Park Road NW</b>	
Meeting Date:	<b>October 22, 2020</b>	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	<b>20-516</b>	(x) Permit

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The applicant, Alan Pooner, agent and contractor for property owners Sezin Paydas and Christopher Keally, requests the Board's review of a permit application to construct a freestanding vehicle gate at the line of the alley behind the subject property, a 1904 rowhouse designed by D.C. architect Frederic B. Pyle. As historic maps confirm, the row was too early and probably too modest to have been built with automobile garages; the earliest frame garages, sheds or stables were not erected there until about 1910, but there were many in the 1920s.

The project drawings indicate that the gate and its framing would be nine feet tall. The plat indicates that the width would be twelve feet. The framing and the housing for the door and motor are steel. The housing would project into the property.

**Roll-up gates in general**

This applicant, doing business as N. Pooner and Sons, Inc., installs the greatest number of roll-up gates in the historic districts, with Mr. Doors, Inc. coming in a close second, at least in Mount Pleasant.<sup>1</sup> Those gates that now stand in Mount Pleasant tend to be nearer ten feet tall, often exclusive of the upward extension of the posts or parts of housing (see Photo 6 below). Such gates may be taller when installed across a sloping grade, as in Photos 1 and 6 below. They are occasionally considerably wider, too, extending as much as twenty feet to accommodate the passage of two cars.

Under its delegated authority, the Historic Preservation Office has cleared numerous permit applications for such gates, particularly in the city's rowhouse districts. Yet, they raise questions of compatibility, especially in areas where they are not yet common. A recent installation in Cleveland Park, for instance, was the cause of some complaint and seen by some as incongruent with the open yards of that neighborhood (see Photo 1). They stick out visually out for being substantially taller than surrounding fences, which are limited in height by code. The metal housing at the top—to accommodate the door in the open position<sup>2</sup>—and the metal framing, facing, and typically bare galvanized doors are all departures from the traditional materials of fences and accessory structures found in the historic districts. They have an industrial character that is somewhat mitigated by painting.

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<sup>1</sup> The gates typically bear the installer's identifying sticker.

<sup>2</sup> Worse still would be a more traditional garage door, sans garage, where the door rolls up on tracks which extend back from the door and must be supported by some kind of framing.

Such gates are not yet ubiquitous in Mount Pleasant, and it is opportune to consider guidelines as to when they may be acceptable, and to seek input from the community. It is not a matter of choosing a path for Mount Pleasant alone, but a consideration of principles that may be applied generally, in the context of pending permit applications. Below is a survey of roll-up vehicle gates in Mount Pleasant. HPO has previously undertaken similar studies of particular elements in some historic districts, such as driveways in Cleveland Park and basement entrances in Mount Pleasant, as a way of defining their compatibility and informing design guidelines.

Technically, these freestanding vehicle gates do not comply with the construction code. As they are not part of a primary or accessory building, they constitute gates within the fence line. The code limits the heights of fences along alleys in residential zones to seven feet (12A DCMR § 3112.3.2). The code also limits to seven-foot height those fences located within ten feet of a “party line,” i.e., a lot line shared with an abutting property (12A DCMR § 3112.3.3). In a rowhouse context, most of the length of rear fences fall within this radius. Finally, the code prohibits a gate from exceeding the height of its fence (12A DCMR § 3112.3.3). A sliding gate, a folding gate or a swing gate must not exceed seven feet high. There is no reason, beyond the fact that roll-up gates *are* taller, that they have been permitted to be taller. The Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs could simply fail to issue permits for all such gates. It is only the latitude the code affords the code official to make exceptions that has allowed many to be erected.

Such gates have been installed for decades, but most properties have managed without them over a century of common automobile ownership. Many such gates predate the designation of the historic districts in which they are located, and in some places, they are already so common as to be considered characteristic. Based upon a walking survey of all Mount Pleasant alleys, HPO does not consider this to be the case, yet.

Of the 31 squares within the Mount Pleasant Historic District, most (18) have no such gates. Totalling 36, the gates are only slightly more numerous than one per square (see Table 1 below).<sup>3</sup> This compares to a count of more than 1,600 buildings in the neighborhood, a quarter of which are garages and accessory structures. The only place where the gates could be considered numerous is within the very large squares at the south end of the historic district, whose alleys are a hodgepodge of little garages, parking pads, and all manner of fences and decks. Indeed, this condition has been the rationale for clearances of roll-up gates there.

Based upon observations in Mount Pleasant and elsewhere, HPO suggests the following design review principles be applied for this type of installation:

1. Swinging, sliding or folding gates are preferred over roll-up gates as more compatible in all cases, because of their lower heights and more-traditional fencing materials.
2. Roll-up gates are strongly discouraged at historic landmarks and generally discouraged in areas where they have not been introduced.
3. Double-width gates should be discouraged.
4. Roll-up gates should not abut or face a street; they should be located only on alleys. Garages and vehicle gates are already discouraged on streets, and fences and gates in public space or

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<sup>3</sup> There are some garages that have been retrofitted with similar steel doors and, worse, similar gates that have been tacked onto the fronts of garages, which unfortunately flips the housing out into the alley.

in front yards are limited to 42 inches in height and must be open. Roll-up gates are inconsistent with these standards.

5. Roll-up gates should not be prominently visible from a street (see Photo 3), and they should not be allowed on at least the first two lots in from a 90-degree intersection of an alley with a street. The setback may have to be more at locations where neighboring buildings are themselves set back, exposing the alley further. The gates should be kept still farther from a street intersection whose angle exposes the backs of several lots. This condition occurs frequently with the avenues of Capitol Hill, for instance, but also on some Mount Pleasant squares near Rock Creek Park (see Photo 4).
6. The gates are more compatible where there are already many of them. These areas are mostly at residential rows, where they are arguably more compatible, because the spacing of detached houses allows rear gates to be seen from more vantage points.
7. The gates are most compatible where they reinforce the alleyscape by being sandwiched between garages, structures of similar height with their own vehicle doors. Likely still compatible, but less so, are locations in which they do not abut garages but are found among many of them.
8. The gates should be discouraged where there are few or no garages nearby and only lower fences or none.
9. The historic and visual qualities of the subject alley and historic district must also be considered. Such gates should not be added, for example, in the alley north of the 1800 block of Park Road in Mount Pleasant, the location of important turn-of-the-twentieth-century carriage houses. The alley south of the 1700 block of Park also has some very nice garages. Restriction of roll up gates in historic districts characterized by detached buildings in open landscapes, such as Cleveland Park and Takoma Park, may also be appropriate.
10. Freestanding vehicle gates should not have garage-like overhead tracks. Roll-up gates should have the housing project into the property, and not into the alley.
11. Concealing the steel housing and motor behind a fascia or entablature is encouraged.
12. Pre-finished doors—like most replacement garage doors—should be encouraged over bare galvanized doors. Open-work doors should also be considered in place of solid ones.
13. Special consideration may be given to situations where other types of gates prove infeasible. In such cases, however, consideration must also be given to whether such a roll-up gate is functionally necessary.

The application of the above principles requires the exercise of judgment. Proceeding from the building code's presumption against such gates, their approval has always been an exercise of the discretion of the code official following a positive recommendation from HPO or HPRB. Applicants always have recourse to a Board review when HPO has reservations about clearing an application as compatible.

If the Board is comfortable with above principles, HPO could formalize brief design guidelines for the Board's adoption at a later date.

### **Evaluation of the present proposal**

There are no freestanding roll-up vehicle gates on Square 2613. As the submitted photos indicate, the immediate context is one of plank swing gates, slide gates and fences, plus open concrete pads, indicating that parking has long been accommodated here without taller gates. While these wood gates manage to conceal vehicles, it is at least arguable that the present open

parking less affects the historic character of the square than would the enclosure of such spaces with tall steel gates. These are strikes against the proposal.

The fact that the property at the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> Street has a frame carriage house dating to 1905 is more of a neutral condition. It is really the first in a row of carriage houses that carries on down the 1800 block of Park, a row that should be protected from additional steel gates, but it is far enough away from the subject property that there is little visual relationship.

Until recently, there was another historic carriage house behind 3305-3307 18<sup>th</sup> Street, but it was demolished and is being replaced by a new, slightly larger building. It joins eleven small, frame garages on the north-south alley through the block, and three circa-1920 brick garages to the west. It is a close call in this case, but the number of garages, the distance of the subject property from the street (see Photo 7), and the fact that one nearby fence rises to eight feet may be sufficient justification for the proposed gate—if it can be prefinished.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board support clearance of the permit application for a roll-up vehicle gate as sufficiently retentive of the character of the property and compatible with the character of the historic district generally, with the condition that the gate itself be prefinished in a color rather than leaving it bare metal.*

### Freestanding vehicle gates in Mount Pleasant

Square	Number	Addresses
2588	6	1709 Hobart Street
		1725 Hobart Street
		1743 Hobart Street
		1748 Hobart Street
		1830 Irving Street
		1836 Irving Street
2591	8	1601 Hobart Street
		1615 Hobart Street
		1619 Hobart Street
		1620 Hobart Street
		1626 Hobart Street
		1647 Hobart Street
		1649 Hobart Street
		1651 (or 1653) Hobart Street
2595	0	
2596	1	1619 Irving Street
2597	3	1703 Irving Street
		1743 Irving Street
		1702 Kenyon Street
2598	1	1810 Kenyon Street
2599	0	
2600	3	1715 Kenyon Street
		1721 Kenyon Street
		1741 Kenyon Street
2601	0	
2602	1	1731 Kilbourne Place
2603	2	1813 Kilbourne Place
		1831 Kilbourne Place
2604	0	
2605	0	
2606	0	
2607	2	1742 Park Road
		1752 Park Road
2608	0	
2609	0	
2610	0	
2611	0	
2612	0	
2613	0	
2614	2	1816 Monroe Street
		1840 Monroe Street
2615	2	1837 Monroe Street
		1859 Monroe Street

2616	1	1851 Newton Street
2617	0	
2618	0	
2619	0	
2620	0	
2621	4	1655 Newton Street
		3421 Oakwood Terrace
		3429 Oakwood Terrace
		3426 Brown Street
2622	0	
2623	0	



**Photo 1: A roll-up gate in Cleveland Park towers over wood fences.**



**Photo 2: A roll-up gate in Cleveland Park fits in better among (even if slightly taller than) garages.**



**Photo 3: A gate at a corner property projects forward of the buildings on the cross street. At least it is not solid.**



**Photo 4: The rear of an Adams Mill Road row prominently visible from Walbridge Place.**



**Photo 5: Old steel gate neither pre-finished nor subsequently protected against corrosion.**



**Photo 6: A gate as tall as the adjacent fence-on-retaining wall, but it blends better painted.**



**Photo 7: Viewed from Mount Pleasant Street, the location of the subject property is indicated by an arrow.**