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

| | | |
|--------------------|---|----------------|
| Landmark/District: | Mount Pleasant Historic District | (x) Agenda |
| Address: | 1800 Kenyon Street NW | (x) Alteration |
| Meeting Date: | March 22, 2018 | (x) Concept |
| Case Number: | 18-252 | |

The applicant, Erik Hoffland, architect and agent for property owners Eric Goldstein and Kate Douglass, requests the Board’s review of a concept to erect a deck atop the garage behind this 1915 house. The deck would occupy the roof surface and be surrounded by a 56-inch-tall “wood picket” fence. A stair would be added to the rear of the garage’s exterior for access from the yard (and a second new stair would replace the present rear egress from the house).

The garage was erected before 1928, and this house was one of 35 of the 48 homes on the square to have garages or similar accessory structures at that date. Although garages are generally of less architectural significance than are residences and carriage houses, they typically contribute to the character of a historic district, at least as a group, when they fall within the district’s period of significance. This one has fairly good integrity, with the exception of door and window replacements.

Background

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 sometimes create a chaotic alleyscape of weathering wood structures and jutting stairs at all levels.

Since designation of the district, many new decks have been permitted, but there has been more care applied to their design by applicants, the Board and the staff. The Board’s earliest design guidelines on the subject of decks state that “a deck... should be located so that it cannot be seen from a public street or sidewalk” and that “[i]f a new deck... is to be added it should be located in the rear yard and designed to be compatible with the building and landscaping if it can be seen from the public street or alley.” With regard to rear porches, these guidelines stress that they usually may be added or enclosed if they maintain a sense of openness and “if the scale, proportions, materials, details” are compatible.

Historic Mount Pleasant addressed the character of ground-mounted decks in its 1991 guidelines, commonly referred to as the “Green Book”:

The construction of rear decks is permissible. Owners are encouraged to use traditional detailing of handrails, balustrades, columns and brackets on rear decks.

Decks which are visible from the street should be constructed with materials and in a design which is compatible with the original character of the house.

The Board has developed the following guidance for roof decks, generally requiring that they

not be visible from surrounding streets or public sidewalks so as not to alter the character or appearance of the building or its streetscape. This typically requires a substantial set back, the extent of which depends on the height of the proposed deck and its framing, the height of the building and its parapets, the height of adjacent buildings, the topography of the area, the width of the street, and views from public vantage points surrounding the building.

As suggested above, the degree of visibility of decks over a facade has not been the sole measure of compatibility with an underlying building. Reasonable consideration has been given to their appearance even from the rear. Decks atop new additions have been incorporated into the roofs of those additions, and decks on existing roofs have been set away from the roof edges so that the supporting posts and beams are concealed from view from below. Decks on the rear of upper stories have been expected to be detailed more like traditional porches. Elevated decks have been permitted with low and open railings, not privacy fences. Still, the incremental expansion and repair/replacement of old decks continues, generally without permits, as evidenced by the manner of their construction.

There are several dozen garage-top decks in the Mount Pleasant Historic District. But there are hundreds of accessory structures, meaning that the former remain in the minority. Staff can find no HPRB cases proposing a garage deck in Mount Pleasant. And, in an HPO permit-clearance log maintained since 1997, only repair applications for a garage deck at 1864 Monroe Street can be found.

While such decks pop up in many locations, they cluster at sites where a couple of conditions apply. One of these is where the garage has been built into a falling rear-yard grade, in such a way that its roof ends up on the same level as the yard. This is the condition on the north side of the alley between the 1700 blocks of Kenyon and Kilbourne, and one can imagine that those garage roofs always had to be bounded by some low fence for safety. Another cluster is in the alley between the 1600 and 1700 blocks of Harvard and Hobart Streets. For some of these, the condition is similar: the grade at the rear door is roughly equal to that of the garage roof. But for others in this vicinity, the use of the garage roof comes from the fact that the garage occupies nearly all the rear yard, something that zoning regulations—or the lack of them—permitted at the time. At those homes, a bridge was built spanning the distance from the rear door to the garage. Again, these represent a minority of the alley conditions, and garages with decks—new, old, legal or illegal—represent a distinct minority of total properties or properties with garages. This is not unique to Mount Pleasant; garage decks have been strongly discouraged in Capitol Hill, Georgetown and other districts.

As a principle, garage decks should not be promoted¹, because they add to the proliferation of structures that are not compatible with the character of individual historic buildings or the historic district as a whole.

¹ The rules for separate accessory dwellings, for instance, prohibit roof decks.

Where such decks *are* permitted, they should observe rules similar to those applicable to decks atop houses:

- They should not be prominent from the public street.
- They should be built so that they conceal their supporting structure as much as feasible, whether this means incorporation into the roof structure, concealment behind an existing parapet, or setting in from the roof edges.
- Unless bounded by a sufficiently tall parapet, they should have low and open railings. Atop buildings, it is better to have a visually light rail; on brick buildings, a solid-steel rail is most compatible. Such a rail also does not show the signs of weathering that wood so soon does.

The alternative to observing these principles is the promotion or permission of incongruous masses springing out buildings that possess their own characteristic form and their own character-defining height demarcated by elements such as cornices. The principles of compatibility and subordination to the design of the historic building should apply to any addition or alteration, as should the principle of general compatibility to character of the broader context, including the entire district.

Evaluation of the present proposal

This context is not suited to a garage deck. A first reason is that this property is located at a street corner, prominently visible. In fact, the garage abuts the west line of the 18th Street right-of-way. There is no opportunity to tuck away the structure deep in an alley.

A second reason is that character of the alley must also be considered, and not just the three streets from which the deck would be visible. The surrounding garages support no decks.² A Board action supporting one here would initiate the idea and could be expected to set a standard for at least the remainder of this alley.

A third reason is that this deck comes with a privacy fence around it. By definition, fences stand on the ground. A fence atop a building is an incongruous and historically incompatible element. There should be less of an expectation of privacy when occupying a roof adjacent to public space. In this instance, the fence appears intended as much to incorporate and conceal additional appurtenances such as storage and a planter, and possibly seating. And this fence is proposed to match the design of the “stockade” fence around the rear yard, a type that is discouraged in favor of less-rustic plank fences. Any wood fence is going to weather fairly rapidly, even when treated with a stain.

The preservation law balances preservation and adaptability interests. Here there is not a strong claim for the deck over the preservation of the character of the property (and of the block and district), because this particular property does not lack yard space. While the lot is of the same dimensions as its neighbors, this corner property has sequestered an eighteen-foot-deep strip of the 18th Street right-of-way behind a privacy fence.

² Of the thirty garages on this square, only two have decks, both invisible from this property. One of these is not a real deck, but just the roof bounded by some shaky lattice panels.

The positive aspect of this proposal is the fact that the drawings suggest that the deck joists and beams might be concealable behind the garage's low parapet on three sides. If the Board were to find some deck possible on this garage, then the least incompatible approach would be to sink the deck structure and add to it only a simple, 42-inch-tall, solid-steel railing.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board deny the concept—with the exception of the replacement stair from the house—as incompatible with the character of the property and the historic district and therefore inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law.

