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

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1842-1844 Monroe Street NW	() Consent
Meeting Date:	November 3, 2016	(x) New construction
Case Number:	16-617	(x) Alterations
		(x) Subdivision
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

Property owner Barret Evans, with plans prepared by Cunningham Quill Architects, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct two three-story two-unit rowhouses, along with a subdivision to permit the construction and site work.

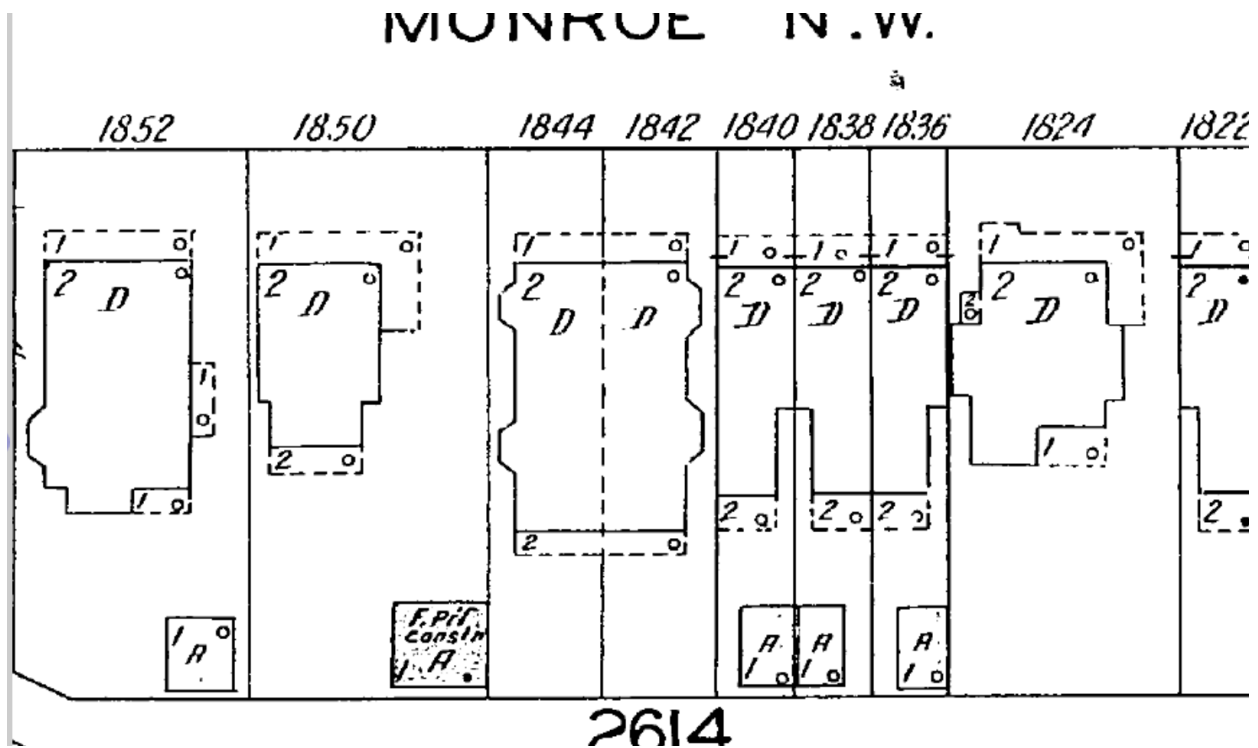
Subdivision

The applicant proposes to subdivide the present 50-foot-wide assessment and taxation (A & T) lot into two 25-foot-wide lots of record. From a strictly legal point of view, the subdivision is probably unnecessary, as there is no evidence to suggest that the underlying record lots 38 and 39 have been erased. The overlay of an A & T lot is for convenience in paying property taxes only, although the law allows A & T lots to be sold. Still, it seems that the Office of the Surveyor requires a re-platting of even old lots, in order to trigger their being taxed again as separate lots of record.

Lots 38 and 39 were created out of Lot 20 of Block 1 of the Ingleside subdivision in 1905. This was in preparation for the construction of semidetached houses, the former 1842 and 1844 Monroe, a double house under a shared, presumably hipped roof designed by Harding & Upman for developers Charles C. and Edward E. Murray (see map detail, next page).¹ It is said that the building was burned, after having been condemned as insanitary in 1968.

There is nothing incompatible about restoring—or rather, merely recognizing—the 1905 lots of record. Considering the variety of lot widths on the street, compatible new construction could surely occur on the more-than-century-old 25-foot-wide lots. While other 50-foot-wide lots were developed with single-family detached houses, others were subdivided into two, and some three, as was the one immediately to the east of the subject property, at 1836, 1838 and 1840 Monroe. The zoning-prescribed minimum lot widths would prevent a tripartite division today, so the alternatives are a single lot or two, although two lots would not necessarily have to be of equal widths.

¹ In 1907, each of the homes was advertised as a holding two apartments or flats, suggesting that they had been internally divided originally or very early. They were each described as holding a total six rooms (later counted as nine), bath and attic. From 1918 to 1937, the resident owners of 1842 rented out a couple of rooms. Portions of 1844 were let until the late 1960s.



A 1927 Sanborn map detail depicting 1842-1844 Monroe Street and its immediate neighbors.

New construction

The present proposal was in some sense inspired by the design and even historic use of the former building on the lots, with the same front-yard setback and approximate depth. But it is both taller and wider and expressed not as a double house, but as a pair of flat-roofed three-story rowhouses stretching lot line to lot line.

At a full three stories, the buildings are imposing relative to their neighbors. A grade slightly depressed relative to its neighbors' and a lower first-floor height mitigates the height somewhat, but the standardization of the ceiling heights at over nine feet pushes the total higher. A lack of hierarchy and differentiation contribute to the impression of a big building. Other buildings are lower or seem so by decreasing the ceiling heights with each story and expressing a third level as an attic story, with the cornice or eave height dropped below.

It is not the height per se, or at least the height alone, that is the issue—there are, after all, three-story rowhouses across the street and others elsewhere in the district—but it is the height taken together with the width and depth of each building that make the new construction stand out relative to its immediate neighbors. At 25 feet, these are near the maximum width of D.C. rowhouses. The historic rowhouses on Monroe Street are generally around seventeen feet wide, although there are some at 20 and 23 feet, but with more pronounced bay projections. The remaining twenty-five-foot-wide lots on Park Road hold semidetached homes. The proposed houses are comparable only to the broadest rowhouses within the historic district, down on Lamont and Kilbourne near 17th Street.

So, the proposed widths are not unheard of in the historic district, but in this spot, one cannot help but compare the dimensions and proportions of each of the proposed buildings with those of the not especially modest, detached house at 1850 Monroe. In the pattern of this street, and of most streets, it is the detached houses are the larger, or at least the wider, homes. Going somewhat higher than 1850 is not itself a problem, but that house does seem somewhat overwhelmed by the proximity of such a large block. It would be well to revise the massing of the project to sculpt and modulate it, to give it more internal hierarchy and a better relationship to the neighbors. In short, approaching this project more like the double house that once stood there would be more compatible, although it would have the problem of conforming with side-yard zoning requirements.

If one were to stick with the present approach, however, more can be done to distinguish the two houses—without using the forced device of using different colors of brick, which seems inappropriate for mirror-twin houses sharing a cornice. Smaller devices, such as reveals in the brick at the corners of each house and further separating the porch roofs might distinguish them further. The two-foot bay projections should be deeper, and the double-ganged windows over the front entrances should be narrowed to a single large window each, both to avoid a relentless fenestration pattern across the façade and to give more solidity to the main mass as distinct from the bays.

Site work

The lead walks and steps would be reconstructed in matching concrete. The failing front retaining wall would be demolished, with the original sloping berm restored, similar to the slope in front of 1836-1840 Monroe.

The applicant proposes a total of four parking spaces at rear on (permeable?) pavers. This would first require the re-grading of the rear of the lots down to the alley level. Enclosing the parking area from the alley is probably preferable, but such an approach would run into practical problems. Other garages and fences in the vicinity have been set inboard from the alley line in order to facilitate turns from the alley. The limited rear-yard space does not allow for gates to be set in (and an earlier iteration suggested roll-up gates, which may be problematic in this context). Under the circumstances, an open parking area can be compatible, especially using an attractive pavement.

Unanticipated items

The drawings do not depict the locations of utility meters; the cabinets for multiple electric meters are large and certainly conspicuous if placed in front of a house. The Historic Preservation Office requires that meters be concealed, and not by something as ephemeral as plantings. Lacking basements and side yards, it is unclear where utility meters would be located.

The present plan maxes out the lots' zoning envelope, and the limited outdoor space suggests that we can expect requests for roof decks soon after the units sell.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the subdivision in concept and support the concept of two “flats” buildings, but that it request revisions to address the issues raised above.