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

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1900 Lamont Street NW	
Meeting Date:	July 26, 2018	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	18-501	(x) Permit

The applicant, Matt Weaver, agent and construction manager for property owner DARO Realty, Inc., request the Board’s review of a permit to upgrade the electrical service to a multi-family residence, including the installation of a large cabinet on the face of the building.

Background

The five-story apartment building, sometimes referred to as Randall Mansions, was erected in 1923 for Mrs. Joseph Randall—likely Anna W. Randall, a resident-owner of 3146 19th Street, three doors away.

The building is unusually sited, as it does not face a paved street. It turns one end to 19th Street, but its primary façade abuts a Lamont Street right-of-way that consists of a public sidewalk and green space, commonly called 19th Street Park. The District and the developers of the subdivision found the topography too steep for carriages and automobiles, so did not provide a cartway. The building’s areaway is within the public space.

Project

HPO has already cleared several permits related to the electrical upgrade of the building. The present permit application, however, includes exterior work in the form of a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall, three-foot wide, and more than two-foot-deep current-transformer (“CT”) cabinet against the face of the building within the areaway near its west end.¹ The cabinet would replace a single meter and conduit that can be seen in the photo on page 3 of this report. It would contain the switch gear for the distribution of high-amperage service to multiple separate meters and living units within the building. The cabinet would be mounted a few inches above the floor of the areaway, so its total height above that floor is more than 8’7”. The most recent drawings show four conduits would rise from the top of the cabinet and penetrate the masonry base of the building.

It is possible that the cabinet would be mounted higher than shown, as PEPCO requires that the “point of service”—the point where its service conduit ends and is attached to the private

¹ The June 18, 2018 elevation and plan drawings submitted for this review seem to differ as to the dimensions and/or orientation of the cabinet. The elevation depicts it as three feet wide, while the plan suggests that it is slightly more than *two* feet wide, but five feet deep. A piece of equipment projecting that much into public space would obstruct the areaway and likely have more difficulty in obtaining a public space permit. It appears that the elevation drawing is the more accurate.

equipment—be at least 36 inches above grade, a point which is well above the base of this cabinet.² The point of service would then be well up within the cabinet, rather than at its bottom. But there is a constraint on the height of the installation, as the conduit would be run through the ceiling of an occupied basement unit to the building's electrical room.

To better screen the cabinet, the applicant proposes to build up the areaway retaining wall and to backfill against it, and to lower the areaway floor to just above the alley grade, removing the present steps (also shown in the photograph on page 3).

Design guidelines

Most exterior electrical equipment found at private properties is single meters; most apartment buildings and commercial buildings of all types manage to locate cabinets and meters on their interiors. The appearance of exterior electrical cabinets has nonetheless been a recurring issue in Mount Pleasant and elsewhere. Most often, such cabinets hold multiple meters at properties that have been converted from single-family to multi-family use. Consequently, in 2012 the Board adopted design guidelines for meters, cabinets and the other appurtenances of utilities. These guidelines state, in part, that:

Alterations that are visible to the public are more likely to affect a property's character. As a general rule, alterations on primary elevations prominently visible from a street should be more carefully considered, while greater flexibility is warranted for changes that are minimally or not visible....

Alterations that are temporary or easily reversible have less of a lasting impact on the character of historic property than changes that permanently change, damage, or remove important features....

Where feasible, utility meters should be located inside the property....

If located on the exterior of [a] property, utility meters should be located where they are not prominently visible from public view. Appropriate exterior locations may include a basement areaway or window well, under stairs, on the side of solid masonry stairs, on a flat unadorned wall surface located on or behind the building line, or at the side or rear of the property....

Meters mounted on historic property should be installed below a pedestrian's line of sight as seen from the public sidewalk to minimize their visual impact. Installation within basement areaways and below a building's water table or belt course is encouraged....

Utility meters should not be installed in front yards unless they are located substantially below a pedestrian's line of sight and established fence lines, and don't obstruct views across adjoining front yards. Utility meters installed in a public space front or side yard require approval from the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT)....

² PEPCO will occasionally allow less clearance if the site conditions require it.

Installations resulting in three or more utility meters can rarely be compatibly accommodated on primary elevations of historic property. Where alternative exterior locations are not feasible, installations of three or more utility meters may be required to be located inside....

Appurtenances other than utility meters, such as telecommunications equipment, satellite dishes, and heating and cooling equipment, should not be located on primary elevations or in front yards of historic property....

Utility meters should be installed without altering distinguishing exterior features of historic property. Installations should not result in alterations to window openings, lintels, sills, window surrounds, decorative stone or patterned brick work....



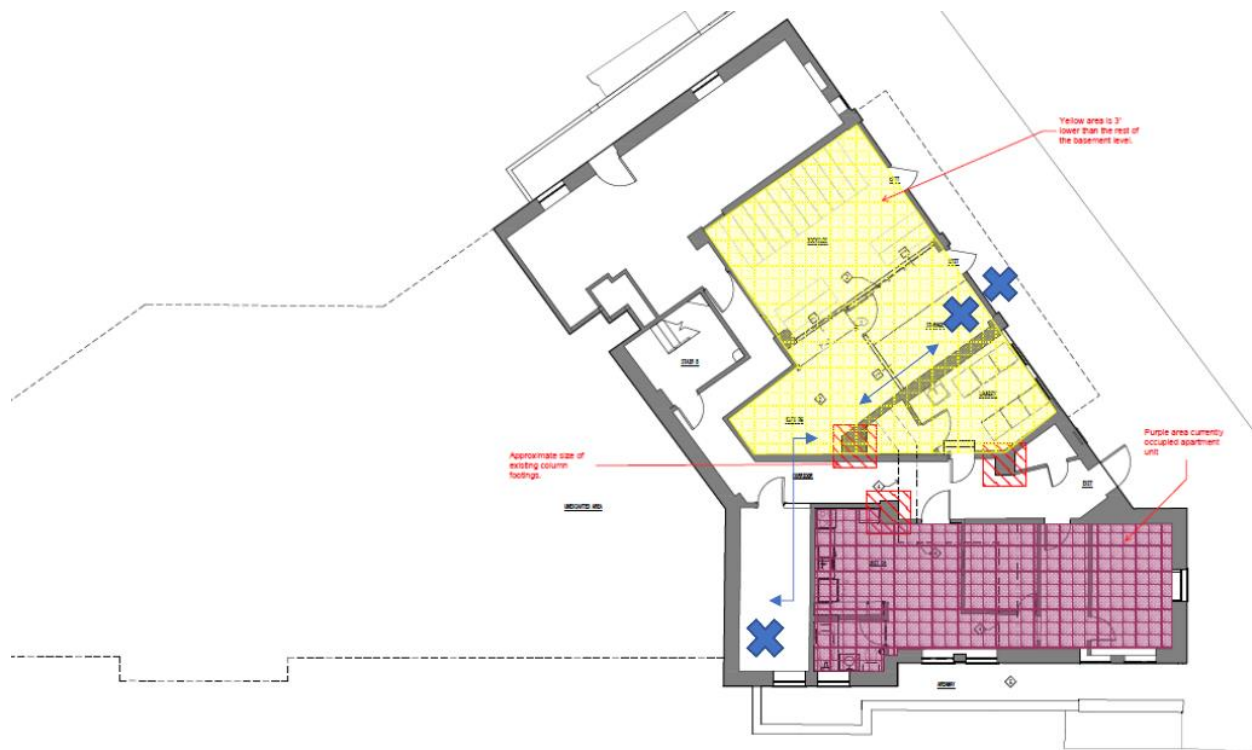
The cabinet would be located in the space between the two sets of basement windows seen here. The four conduits into the building would penetrate the masonry at about the height of the single existing one, seen at the inside corner of the building's projecting pavilion at the end of the areaway.

Evaluation

From the east, the upper part of the site, the cabinet would not be an issue; there are enough objects to obscure it or distract from it. It is from the public space opposite the cabinet and downhill west of it—at the lower end of Lamont—that it will be most obtrusive.

Considering the guidelines, and the fact that the proposed CT cabinet is significantly larger than even a three-meter cabinet, HPO concluded that it would have to refer at least the cabinet and its exterior conduit to the Board. The preservation law directs that projects be compatible with the character of historic districts, and the regulations, in their delegation of minor work to staff review, expressly require that the work cleared be compatible and not have a significant effect on the historic character of designated properties (10A DCMR §§ 319.1 and 319.2). Applying the Board's written guidelines above, the staff could not clear the permit as compatible. The specific reasons are that the cabinet is a type of equipment that is typically located on the interior of a building; it is an unusually large piece of equipment to be on the face of a building; it cannot be fully concealed in that location; and it would damage the building's masonry by its attachment and the conduit penetrations. The applicant's present proposal to better obscure it would affect the landscape in public space.

Without alternatives forthcoming at the time, HPO suggested that the cabinet be placed either in the alley or inside the building, locations indicated by the Xs on the basement plan below. The alley is at right. The yellow area is a utility area that includes the electrical room. The reddish area is an apartment, and the white area to the left of that is another utility space.



There are serious challenges to the cabinet being located along the alley, inside or out. While PEPCO has adequate service on the lower end of Lamont Street, extending that service across the alley would be costly and disruptive. PEPCO also has a rule that the service line cannot be

bent more than a total of 180 degrees, because of the physical stress on the copper cable. This would presumably rule out running the service around the end of the building and into the alley because it would require an acute angle—plus entail costs only somewhat less than that of running service across the alley.

On the other hand, the 180-degree rule does not regulate on which side of the wall—interior or exterior—the cabinet can be located. As PEPCO acknowledges, most such equipment is installed inside. There is the possibility of putting it in a basement utility space, assuming that room is made for it, requiring a single penetration of the masonry at a point lower on the façade. This would be a more compatible solution for this installation.

The applicant instead proposes to build up the retaining wall—which now measures about four and a half feet tall in the vicinity of the proposed equipment—to the height at its uppermost extent. The areaway floor would also be lowered so that the cabinet itself, but not its conduit, would reach no higher than the heightened areaway wall. The elevation submitted represents the proposed finished condition, roughly what one would see of the cabinet if one’s eye level were at grade on the opposite side of the areaway wall. Of course, a passerby would have a higher vantage point over the wall, and an observer on the lower end of Lamont could see the entire cabinet.

The proposal also raises other issues, in addition to the multiple penetrations of the masonry. If the wall is built up, soil should *not* be backfilled against it, because that would disrupt the terracing of the hill that occurs between the building and the public sidewalk. The taller wall also cuts off any views from the two apartment windows behind it.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board not recommend approval of the permit application as proposed and instead encourage the applicant to place the CT cabinet inside the building as the compatible solution to the problem.

However, if the Board finds the present proposal to be generally compatible, the following conditions should apply:

- 1. the retaining wall should be parged and the whole wall repaired;*
- 2. the cabinet product information submitted should be uploaded to the application in ProjectDox;*
- 3. the cabinet should be a matte color to roughly match that of the building’s base;*
- 4. soil should not be mounded up against the wall, but there should be plants to screen it; and*
- 5. the existing hole for the conduit shall be properly patched.*