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

Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **3428, 3430 and 3432 Oakwood Terrace, NW**

Meeting Date: **November 20, 2014** (x) New construction
Case Number: **13-335**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Revised concept

The applicant, owner and architect Carmel Greer (District Design LLC), requests the Board's review of a revised concept drawings for the construction of two two-unit semidetached flats on vacant lots north of the intersection of Oakwood Terrace with 17th Street.

Background

The Board approved a concept in 2010 and 2013. The project returned for design development in September 2013, with the Board's support and several more recommendations. The Board approved the design development of the project—which was then expressed as four rowhouses—on condition that the applicant: further refine the bay at the south end of the building; compose the rear elevation more formally, making the windows more consistent with those of the front and bringing the precast cornice/parapet and belt course around the building; better balance the proportion of solid to void on the rear elevation, with wider windows and smaller door openings (i.e., transoms reduced in height); conceal the electric meters; use either red or buff brick on the whole, but with the shades varied between the end units and the center of the façade; and submit to the staff, prior to permitting, an arborist's report on the likely impacts of the construction on oak tree at 17th Street.

The applicant was previously unaware that a 1902 covenant ran with the property, requiring that a building be set back fifteen feet from the streets. The applicant has thus revised the project to a greater degree than the Board has requested. The setbacks make the depth of the building much shallower and render the southernmost of the three lots essentially unbuildable, making the whole not nearly as long. The height has also been reduced.

The reduction in the floor plan dimensions has obviously resulted in considerable redesign of the elevations. The previous iteration was not historicist, but the vocabulary of the present revision is more overtly contemporary, with a looser approach to fenestration.

Evaluation

Overall expression

The central question is probably the identity of the building. That is, detached single-family houses, rowhouses, and even small apartments are common in this tier of Mount Pleasant, and none of those approaches would be inherently incompatible with the site. But the building should appear to be distinctly and consistently one of those building types, rather than a combination. The concept approval was for a building that expressed itself clearly as rowhouses fronting on Oakwood Terrace, and this clarity and how to achieve it were important points of discussion.

The intention is to create two rowhouses facing Oakwood Terrace, but the building's essential "rowhouse-ness" needs to be strengthened, as it also has aspects of an apartment building, including the numerous balconies. The main idea should be to express two similar houses by creating a rhythm between them with repeating elements. The entrance canopies, as a contemporary analog of the traditional front porch,¹ is a good start, but a rhythm of openings would be most helpful. The central location of the southern entrance, for instance, now might suggest an apartment, with the northern entrance as secondary, instead of equal. The chimney stack on the Oakwood side divides the two rowhouses, which may be appropriate, but the organization of the southern house breaks down, divided in the center by the vertical trellis. This leaves something like half a house on the side opposite the entrance—and that portion is unduly emphasized by the step up of the masonry at the south corner.

The rear elevation is more successful at looking like two houses, although the south end could again be better integrated with the rest of the south unit.

Trellises

Trellises and green walls require certain conditions, including maintenance, to be successful. Because they are not always successful, the lattice should be designed to look good even if not obscured by vegetation. And it might be wise for a building design that incorporates them to not rely upon them, in case they are ever removed. The rear trellis arises from a balcony and not from the ground, because the ground below it is paved. That suggests that any vegetation would have to grow from a planter on the projecting slab, which is probably less likely to be successful in the long run.

Trellises might be used on either side, front or back, to "re-green" the hillside, but if they cannot work on the rear, then the rear one might be relocated to the front, to create is a rhythm of one per house.

Fenestration and siding

The plans call for expanses of glass windows. Elevations that rely more on punched openings would be more specific to and compatible with Mount Pleasant. This is probably most important on Oakwood Terrace, which is the proper front (and facing rowhouses) than in the rear, where the building would face detached homes, a modern apartment building, and the park.

Different treatments of front and rear—but applied similarly on both houses—may also be appropriate for the horizontal cedar siding, with the siding probably more appropriate on the rear.

¹ Not unlike the smaller canopies at the Modernist row just downhill on 17th Street.

South wall

The expression of the south corner of the building has previously been an issue, as this apex faced the intersection of Oakwood with 17th and used to be much closer to it. The Board's last motion had requested refinement of a bay that had been proposed to address this corner. But the shrinking of the building has withdrawn that end of the building farther from the intersection and reduced the width of wall at the south end of the building to less than eleven feet, meaning that a gesture to relieve the blank wall is no longer necessary.

Garages

The zoning regulations require new construction of this sort to have an off-street parking space for each of the rowhouses. The concept the Board approved previously had had a driveway on the 17th Street side, as does this revised concept.² The present design contains a small driveway and two garage bays within the basement of the building. While garage doors are generally not easy to design around and not found in most buildings (although some historic Mount Pleasant rowhouses and apartments do have parking bays at the basement level), they make some sense here on the rear of the building, facing the driveways and garages in front of the buildings on the opposite side of 17th. They would probably be preferable if they could replace surface parking. However, these garages are very narrow, and their openings are at awkward angles to their interior walls and to the irregular driveway. So, even if the occupants had very small cars, there's a good chance that the garages would not be used for parking much of the time. Given the choice between surface parking *only* and surface parking *plus* garage doors, we think that the former is preferable and more compatible in this context. Alternatively, the garages could be widened and separated further in order to more easily accommodate cars, but moving the south garage door farther south would put the driveway more on top of the roots of the large oak tree that the applicant intends to retain.

Other practical issues

Part of the building's height reduction has been achieved through the elimination of parapets. This would make the rooftop air-conditioning units more visible from some vantage points, even if their placement in the center of the roof (see Sheet A100) makes them invisible from most points on the ground.

Based on an earlier drawing, electric meters will presumably be located inside the basement level on the 17th Street side.

The concept drawing also does not depict the drainage system, but gutters will probably have to be added to the rear elevation.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board support the smaller dimensions of the building and the overall site plan but that it request further revision along the lines suggested above.

² A wall to screen the parking along 17th Street was deleted from the approved version of the concept, because there appeared to be little community support for it and some opposition.



The site as seen from 17th Street.