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

Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **3054 Mount Pleasant Street NW**

Meeting Date: **July 9, 2015** (x) Addition
Case Number: **15-421** (x) Alteration

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée** (x) Permit

The applicant, Frank Economides, agent for property owner Vasili Katopothis, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct a four-story addition behind and atop a 1920¹ service station and to enclose much of the under-canopy area in front of the building. The expanded building would be converted to apartments above ground-floor retail.

The station's original operator was George W. Gould. Subsequent tenants included W.W. Dexter, Henry C. Saylor, Samuel Shankman, Harry G. Eubank, Bill Riddle and a Mr. Goldstein. In the 1950s, it was flagged as an Esso station, and in the 1970s as an Amoco. The shop appears to have shifted entirely from fuel sales to auto service in the late 1970s. It is now occupied by Mount Pleasant Auto Repair.



A detail from a 1928 Sanborn insurance map.

¹ The building is alternatively said to date to 1927. But while a 1919 map shows a vacant lot, the local newspapers mention a filling station on the site in 1920.

Evaluation

In 2003 the Board reviewed a concept for the construction of four stories atop the one-story garage but the applicant withdrew the application before the Board could discuss it. The HPO expressed concern about how a structure above would relate to that below. Its report had supported a multi-story addition only if it stood entirely behind the gas station, arguing that,

While not architecturally distinguished, it appears to be a quite intact example of an early gas station, the only commercial building of its kind in the historic district. For that reason, it should be considered not only a structure contributing to the character of the district, but also at least as historically significant as most individual houses or commercial buildings in the district. The most distinctive feature of the building is the broad roof extending from the face of the building to the public right-of-way...

Reconsidering the idea a dozen years later, it seems possible to add an addition atop this particular building because, *and only because*, it is a set-back, nondescript building that holds the street line with its prominent canopy. The gas station is a remarkably shallow commercial building, possessing sizeable front and rear yards. Both the recess of the utilitarian brick structure and the prominence of its canopy have always de-emphasized the building's plain facade. The canopy also offers a degree of separation of the original from any new construction above while being a powerful enough element to stand up as the building's principal gesture and focal point in spite of added mass. These characteristics distinguish this building from the other one-story retail buildings on Mount Pleasant Street that have more architectural pretension and presence on the street. While it might be possible to add a light, set-back, one-story addition atop a couple of the street's other one-story commercial buildings, there is no context comparable to that presented by the character of this particular property.

Adding to the building could succeed in retaining it, adapting it to modern use, and even enhancing it, but only if a few principles are observed.

- **Height:** At a width of 37 feet, considerably more than a rowhouse, and cut horizontally by the canopy, the present building would look better proportioned with three stories placed on top, for a total of four. Such a height would also better cut off public views to any rooftop penthouse and mechanical equipment. Yet, this context seems to call for a total of three stories, principally because of the three-story row to the south. The adjacent one-story buildings do not provide an argument for more height, nor does the huge, 16th-Street-oriented apartment building across the street. The three-story building at the northwest corner of Mount Pleasant and Irving instead suggests something of a model for the end of a row, despite not standing on a corner. Comparison with the conventional four-story apartment at 1630 Irving would suggest that this project should land somewhere between that height and that of a typical rowhouse.²
- **Setback:** The best setback would be behind the existing building entirely, but that would obviously constrain the floor area, limit parking, and occupy a required rear yard. But a tall building behind a one-story one is an odd type for Mount Pleasant. If an addition is to sit atop the old gas station, it should come forward even with, and probably align in

² 1630 Irving does not loom especially large on the Mount Pleasant streetscape, because its entrance is right at grade, and it stands downhill from the commercial buildings.

plan with, the present brick façade, rather than being slightly set off the southeast corner (best pictured at “Aerial View From Southeast,” Option 1). This would make for a better composition of the masonry building as a single mass, but with the projecting canopy remaining the focal point and point of distinction of the construction episodes. The alignment of the facades may not be exact if there are plane changes necessary to articulate the façade to emphasize verticality.

- **Distinction:** Even if read as a single masonry mass, the building and its additions should nonetheless be differentiated. An addition need not be wildly different from the materials and punched openings of the existing building. Yet, it should not swallow up the building so as to obscure its original character and extent. In the south elevation, the handling of materials should not completely blend the original base of the building into the new rear portion or the upper stories. Nor should the fenestration of the upper stories simply be continued into the historic base. If windows are to be punched into the base, they should be as few as necessary, compatible with the character of the historic building, and not necessarily aligned with a column of windows above (Sheet A-201), nor marched indistinguishably from the gas station into the new construction behind.³
- **Retention of ground floor:** Whatever alterations occur at the ground level, the building’s plain façade and open under-canopy space should be retained. The glassy enclosure of only a portion of the under-canopy area can preserve both the sense of this void and the public visibility of the original façade. The glazing should have framing as light as possible to maintain this openness, with the storefront system located at the back of the piers. Demolition should be kept to an absolute minimum. The rear wall is gone in the proposed plans. Rear walls of rowhouses are not infrequently sacrificed when a small addition would otherwise cause the wall to land in the middle of a room but in this case, the original building is so small and consists of nothing more than the four walls (one abutting and invisible) and roof, that there should be more effort to save the rear wall.
- **Restoration:** The paint should be stripped from the exterior walls of the existing building in order to expose the original brick. Exposing some should be done before all the materials are selected for the new construction. The canopy needs some repair and repainting.

The applicant has included a couple of options for the project, both topping out at four stories.

One option seems an attempt at a half story, glassy, slightly set-back and lower in front. But the idea of a glass attic story is belied by the higher masonry mass behind, and its setback gives the façade squatter proportions more that it ameliorates the building’s total height.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board support two stories on top and three stories behind the former gas station as consistent with the purposes of the preservation law, with the applicant to make revisions and refinements along the lines suggested above, including reducing demolition of the rear wall.

³ The westernmost of four similar windows appears west of the joint between the old building and the new.