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

Property Address:	448 Ridge Street NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	Mount Vernon Square Historic District	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	6E	<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept Review
Meeting Date:	December 18, 2014	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	#15-061	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Brendan Meyer	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision
		<input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology

The applicant, Suzanne Reatig Architecture on behalf of owner Ridge Lofts, LLC, seeks concept review for four new three-story brick and metal rowhouses with a total of 8 residential units at 448 Ridge St NW currently a vacant lot in the Mount Vernon Square Historic District. Drawings were prepared by the applicant.

Property Description and Context

The street is characterized by modest, two-story flat-fronted frame and brick houses, rare survivors of what were once typical and fairly common 19th century working class alley dwellings. The street contains houses built from 1855 to 1911, generally individually or in small groups of two or three. They have a notable consistency of simple block forms, punched windows, and spare detailing. Some pairs of frame houses still exhibit a shared passage through to their rear yards, a not uncommon feature of pre-1870 residential houses. One T-shaped alley on the south side of the street is in the middle of the block. The vacant lot at 448 Ridge Street was until recently occupied by a non-contributing building used as a day care facility and playground. Based on historic maps, the site had been divided into four 20 foot and 18 foot wide lots containing individual frame and brick dwellings, attached and semi-detached, with side yards.

Proposal

A contemporary row of houses, four at the front and four behind, is proposed. The houses at the rear will be connected to the front houses by trellises through a common interior open court shared by all units. The trellis connection between front and back houses allows each combination to be considered a single building for zoning purposes. Each house would contain one 3-story unit. The street facing houses would be entered directly from the street through the doors demarcated in the glass panel sections of the elevation. The rear houses would be accessed from the street via a covered through passage that is shown with a pair of gates in the corrugated metal sections of the elevation.

The front elevation of the row spans the full width of the 80 foot wide lot and is articulated to emphasize four 13 foot wide façades clad in horizontal red cedar siding. Each façade is two bays wide and two stories tall—aligning in height with the historic row to the east—and separated from each other with sections of glass or corrugated metal panels with the ribs oriented vertically. While the metal panels are flush with the wood clad front facades, the glass panels are

setback slightly allowing the wood siding to turn the slight reveal. Windows are punched openings containing untrimmed fixed panes over a hopper window.

A third floor spans the entire width and is setback from the front property line less than three feet. The narrow setback would be used as balconies and have horizontal metal railings aligning with the wood facades below. The full width of the balcony would consist of four sliding full-light doors and the surrounding wall area of the third floor will be corrugated metal to match the metal panels in the lower floors.

Evaluation

The concept is an inventive design that attempts to follow in the footsteps of another contemporary Ridge Street project by the same architecture firm and approved by the Board in 2002.¹ The resemblance between the two projects is quickly apparent in how they both emphasize a two-story character while articulating a third floor in a contrasting material. The proposal for 448 Ridge Street also embraces some specific architectural details particular to this block in a substantially compatible overall result.

Like its contemporary predecessor at 413-419 Ridge, this design identifies in the surrounding historic houses a generally consistent proportion of façade width to height and repeats it. The two-story height of the wood facades successfully simulates the two-story character of Ridge Street. The horizontal railings of the balconies, while setback, reflect the horizontal emphasis of the adjacent historic wood cornices. Articulating the third story in a contrasting material emphasizes the cornice line of the street while taking advantage of the greater flexibility the Board typically offers to new construction versus when adding on top of a historic building is the primary question.

Interspersing the wood sections with glass or metal panels both defines the vertical edges of the recycled historic proportion and fills out the width of the project to keep it flush and continuous with the street edge. The effect of semi-detached facades is not foreign to Ridge Street with some examples of the building type scattered on the block.

Another historic detail from Ridge Street reused here are through passages. Through passages were often built into pre-Victorian houses in order to provide direct access to rear yards from the street. This was necessary when houses weren't served by an alley and the homeowner did not want routemen to pass through the living quarters of the house. 448 Ridge utilizes this device in order to provide access to the interior court and the rear units. The through passages are six feet wide (3 feet on either side of the property line) and have gates of horizontal metal bars.

The rear buildings—three stories tall at a line setback from the rear property line 20 feet—will introduce an unusual, but insignificant building height to this part of the historic district. They will face the backs of M Street rowhouses that either have two-story wings or no wings at all. They will also almost align with a row of two-story garages across the bottom of the T-shaped alley off of Ridge Street. While tall and not precisely aligned with existing ancillary buildings, the rear buildings of 448 Ridge are distant enough from 5th Street that their mass should not be

¹ 413-419 Ridge Street NW, HPA #02-496, September 2002.

apparent to the public and they would reach a height commonly achieved when the Board approves adding a floor to a two-story rear wing.

While the design is largely successful, reconsideration of some of the details could benefit the overall compatibility of the project. While evocative, the large gated openings for the through-passages are too prominent compared to the entrances for the street units. The doors for the street units should be treated hierarchically as the primary door and the through passage doors should be secondary. Historically passage entries were smaller, less ornamented, or placed without consideration for the rhythm of the rest of the openings. The relationship between front door and passage would be improved here if the passage entries were lowered down to grade and their head height aligned with the adjacent windows. The scale and proportion of the front windows would better match the historic context by eliminating the hoppers and using a window configuration that replicates a one-over-one sash window. The front wood siding specified as western red cedar—while an attractive, rot-resistant species—should be painted in order to be consistent with the historic treatment of wood cladding. Elevation renderings for the courtyard elevations should be added to the concept design for evaluation.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept for four three-story rowhouses 448 Ridge Street NW to be compatible with the character of the historic district, consistent with the purpose of the preservation act, and that it return to the Board for final approval.