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

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Landmark/District: **Mount Vernon Square Historic District**    ( ) Agenda  
Address: **1212-1220 4<sup>th</sup> Street, NW**    (x) Consent

Meeting Date: **October 28, 2010**    (x) New construction  
Case Number: **10-428**    (x) Additions  
Date Received: **August 24, 2010**    (x) Subdivision  
Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**    (x) Concept

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The applicant, Augustus Tono (Architecture By Tono, Inc.), agent and architect for owner 1212-1216 4th Street LLC (Dr. Sahr Bockai), requests the Board’s review of a concept to:

1. subdivide into three lots a 9,954-square-foot lot that now contains a two-story apartment building and two sizeable garages;
2. demolish the two-bay, concrete-block garage that stands along Ridge Street and another, three-bay, concrete-block garage that stands along the south property line;
3. erect two three-story rowhouse flats (i.e., two-unit buildings) on the garage portion of the lot; and
4. construct a third-story, set-back addition on the apartment building.

**Subdivision**

The lot is to be subdivided in order to provide the minimum rowhouse-lot size and frontage for each of the two proposed flat buildings, and the remainder would constitute the apartment lot, containing an easement for cars to reach the rear of the flats from Ridge Street. As there were previously commercial buildings at the corner, the subdivision itself does not present significant preservation issues. The greatest drawback of the site plan is the fact that nearly all of the site behind the buildings would be paved. With the exception of some front-yard area that is in public space, the only pervious surface or green space proposed on the entire property is within the small courts described by the dogleg ells, areas that are unlikely to be maintained successfully green.

**Demolition**

The “rock-face” concrete-block garage along Ridge Street is the remnant of a larger office/coal shed/garage dating to 1930 and built for the Amato Coal Company. The large, corner office was demolished many years ago, leaving two garage bays. Thus, what was once a separate primary structure and use has now become accessory to the apartments. An intact accessory structure of that vintage, original purpose and manner of construction could qualify as a building contributing to the character of the historic district. However, this structure has significant integrity issues, the most important of which is the loss of the original office section, near the corner, which left exposed the once-interior east wall of the garage and a jagged east end of the facade. The office’s concrete masonry units were used to fill in one of the garage bays, and there are numerous long, vertical cracks through the façade, especially between the bays. In the 1999

historic district nomination, the garages were not called out as contributing (or noncontributing) structures separate from the apartments. As a consequence of its loss of integrity, it can be considered noncontributing and subject to raze.

The other garage is more conventional, also of concrete block, built after 1937, and similarly in poor condition. Erected late in the historic district's period of significance, it, too, can be considered subject to raze for its lack of historic significance and architectural character.

### **Construction of two flats buildings**

The applicant proposes two new buildings to abut the existing apartments on the north. They would each be 20 feet wide and 50 feet deep, with dogleg ells. They would stand three stories tall over a raised basement, with one unit on the upper two floors and one in the basement and first story. There would be a rear deck at the main floor of each, with parking behind that, taking up the remainder of the lots. The digital perspectives provide a fairly rough idea of the project; they were never as detailed as the elevation drawings, and the drawings have been revised.

The buildings are to be brick, each with a three-story projecting bay in front and detailed in a historicist, late Victorian manner. To the extent that this is the design intent, the multi-light windows are too complicated for such a building, and they are drawn as simply mulled together, without mullions between the frames. They should probably be of one-over-one sash. The windows in the sides of the bays are drawn too wide, leaving almost no masonry at their sides; historic windows in such bays were quite narrow.

This block of 4<sup>th</sup> Street has a variety of building heights, including a few historic, three-story buildings. These will be joined by the three-story "Truxton Row" north of Ridge approved by the Board a few years ago. The proposed height of the flats is compatible.

More thought needs to be given to the material and visual weight of the cornices. And there is no need to introduce to the Ridge Street elevation the diamond-shaped decorative panels that emulate those on the adjacent apartments.

At least as important are the details not yet shown, including rails on the front stoop and locations of electric and gas meters, which could be problematic.

The apparent double entry doors do not, in fact, open into separate units or stairways. They are thus somewhat confusing and a bit unusual. The second "door" appears to be a fixed window, meant to allow more light into the vestibule. The façade composition would be improved by exchanging these for a wide, single door, perhaps with sidelights.

The rear parking areas would be somewhat screened by a roughly five-foot-tall brick wall running along the property line. Given the fact that the rear of the property is proposed to be almost entirely paved, the screening of the back "yards" from adjoining properties is all the more important.

The major difficulty with the flats is the proposed excavation for the front basement entries. The plans (Sheet A4) suggest that the flight of stairs to the basement would have the same run as the stairs up to the main entrance. This conforms with the Board-adopted guidelines for front stairs and areaways and would not project too much into the front yard. The front elevation/section drawing (Sheet A5), however, depicts a much deeper basement, with a much longer stair.

Allowing for the necessary landing at the bottom, such a stair would project too far forward of the homes and would probably require the paving of the entire yard between both stairs and the sidewalk. The architect has resolved the issue by providing an additional section drawing depicting these stairs in a compatible way. To their credit, such stairs do provide a possible location to conceal meters, but the drawings also fail yet to depict the basement door or whether there are light wells at the front basement windows.

### **Addition to the apartments**

The two-story apartment building at 1212-1216 4<sup>th</sup> Street is actually composed of two very similar buildings erected about 1940 for Joseph F. Amato, the owner of the coal company, as he diversified and put his yard to a better use, with the rise of oil and the decline of coal as household fuel. The buildings were later connected internally.

The applicant proposes to add a third-story addition running the full width of the apartments, but set back about 25 feet from the front. The drawings indicate no changes to the façade of the present apartment building(s).

This kind of modestly detailed, flat-fronted, flat-roofed, relatively late building has been the sort of residential property upon which a compatibly scaled, set-back addition has been considered most successful, even if it is somewhat visible from the street. Although some of the addition will be visible from across 4<sup>th</sup> Street, it will be no more prominent than a couple of “pop-up” rear additions that have been approved for nearby single-family homes. And the taller apartments abutting the south of the property and the new flats will screen views of the addition from up and down the street.

Frankly, the façade of the addition need not be so emulative of that of the building below, down to the rhomboid, cast-concrete, bas-relief panels below the parapet. It could read as—and actually be—distinct and lighter, also a practical consideration given the structural challenge of putting what is at least partly a masonry wall over the middle of the building. The addition’s rear elevation, in the same plane as the base building’s rear wall, is appropriately to be of a similar brick expression.

### **Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Board approve the application in concept, with delegation of further review to the staff to ensure that the applicant provides material samples and addresses the points raised regarding the addition and new construction, and with the condition that any front, basement stairs meet the Board’s guidelines.

\*\*The applicant has agreed to the staff recommendation, so the application has been placed on the proposed Consent Calendar.