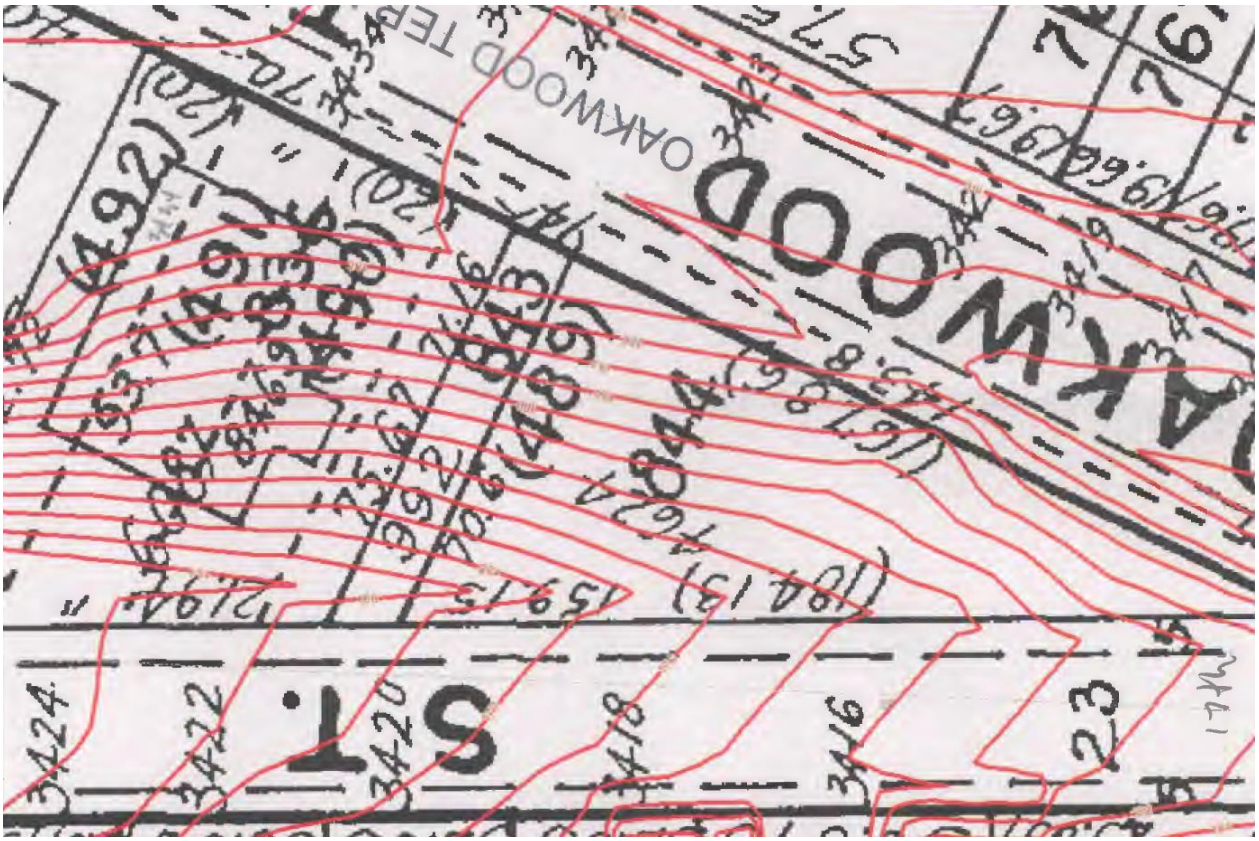
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Mount Pleasant Historic District**	(**x**) Agenda
Address:	**3430 and 3432 Oakwood Terrace NW**	
Meeting Date:	**TBD**	(**x**) New construction
Case Number:	**19-278**	(**x**) Concept

The applicant, District Design, architect and agent for property owner Carmel Greer, requests the Board's review of a concept to construct two abutting three-story, two-unit residential buildings on two vacant lots.

The land is part of 1902 residential subdivision that created the Oakwood Terrace cul-de-sac, but it was never built upon presumably because of a topography that slopes steeply down to 17th Street. The narrowness of the triangular site is exacerbated by the fact that a 1902 covenant set a building-restriction line fifteen feet in from each street right-of-way.[1]



[1] Oakwood also has a seven-foot strip of public "parking" inward of the roadway and the six-foot sidewalk zone.

The Board approved concepts for new construction in 2010 and 2013. Those concepts have lapsed, of course, and responding to the building-restriction line has brought revisions that shrink the footprint significantly and that eliminate previous parking proposals. The elevations have been modified in turn. The total frontage on Oakwood is proposed to be about 64 feet and on 17th Street nearly 70 feet. Because of the irregular shape of the parcel, one end of the building(s) would measure little more than ten feet deep, while the northern end would be about 40 feet. The same irregularity makes for very different floor plans and related but varying elevations.

The properties' landscape has been partly cleared, but it is mostly a stand of bamboo. There is a mature oak on the 17th Street side that would be affected by construction. This is not directly a historic preservation issue, but efforts to save the tree could affect the layout of the construction. DDOT's Urban Forestry Administration staff reports that the owner has a permit to remove the tree, "extended… since her designs were not finalized in the hopes of reaching a solution that allows her to develop the sites while also preserving the tree." The tree's roots likely extend nearly as far as its canopy. Although it would stand downhill from the construction, its roots surely reach uphill as well, and at least the areaways would encroach, even if the earthmoving for the building foundations could somehow avoid it.

The finished 17th Street frontage would retain a slope, or largely reconstruct it. In fact, the north and south elevations on Sheets A0203 and A0204 show the slope being filled, so that the finished grade would be higher on 17th, retained between upper and lower retaining walls. These elevations do not fully illustrate the proposed areaways on the 17th Street side (or the projecting porches there). The 17th Street entrances access separate basement units that have only window openings on 17th. The entrances on Oakwood serve the main and upper stories. Filling is required on the Oakwood side, because the grade drops from the level of the street.

The utility meters and the HVAC equipment are not depicted. Based on earlier concepts, meters will presumably be located inside the basement level on the 17th Street side, or within the areaways. It is probable that the HVAC units would be mounted on the roof.

The concept drawings do not depict the drainage system. Gutters would probably have to be built into the cornice, but it is unclear where the leaders would run down. Given that the mansard runs around the entire building and is topped with a projecting ridge mold, it is not clear how the uppermost roof would drain.

Typically, one cannot have any portion of a building project onto neighboring lots. In this case, the cornice and roof extend over the north and south property lines. It happens that the property owner also owns the lots to the north and south and could execute easements for the encroachments—or could combine 3430 Oakwood with the vacant lot to the south.

Evaluation

Attached buildings are consistent with the numerous rowhouses on Oakwood and elsewhere. The height is compatible with heights of buildings in the area. The applicant has tried to keep the height low, with modest ceiling heights and no base. Attention to proportions is especially important. The proposed building footprints are reasonable in area, but the wedge shape stretches out the elevations, especially those of the south building. The primary elevations need some relief, to balance the horizontals with verticals. The devices of the double-ganged windows (especially with double keystones) on 17th Street and the chimney on Oakwood are not

very successful in breaking up the length. There needs to be a vertical break, like some reveal or recess.

While filling is necessary on the Oakwood side, to level the entrance with the street, it is unclear why the 17th Street side needs to be filled. It is likely that the grade has eroded somewhat over the years, but there are advantages to leaving it as it is, not the least of which is avoiding filling against the oak tree. A higher grade needs to be retained, necessitating walls, especially because new fill would be relatively loose.[2] The purpose of the filling seems to be to obscure must of the basement level as seen from 17th Street.

Much of the work on the 17th Street side relates to the basement units: the steps, areaways, and lowest window openings. Even as the floor plans are now, there seems to be an opportunity to shrink the basement window wells on the 17th Street side to pull them farther from the oak tree. Entry stairs to 3432 could be shifted north, too. And if the grade is not built up, wells and areaways may be unnecessary. It is worth considering alternatives to the entrances proposed. For instance, if 3430 were combined with the unbuildable lot at 3428 Oakwood, the basement entrance might be placed at the southern end of the building. Another alternative would be to put another door on 17th Street—where the chimney is now shown—to enter the basement. This would mean putting the main internal stair to the upper floors against the party wall, too. But such a third entrance might help break up the long elevation in a manner similar to the chimney.

The chimney looks odd coming to the ground at a point elevated above 3430's porch. And it suggests a larger issue. In this context, a traditional approach seems appropriate; the brick walls and mansard roof echoes the mansards and pent roofs across Oakwood. But there is a stylistic mixture: Second Empire mansards, Colonial Revival jack arches, and an English cottage exterior front chimney. Despite the fact that it functions to terminate the cornices, it is recommended that the chimney be eliminated or relocated within the building mass. The window lintels should be simplified.

The plans do not depict openings in the south end of the building, but the south elevation does. As the plans depict a stair there, it seems that the plans are probably the more reliable. Still, the floor plans might be reworked, as suggested above, leaving the opportunity for openings.

The proposed balconies and porches provide valuable relief to the primary elevations. Although projections over lot lines and building restriction lines are a privilege and not a right, the building code sets standards for their approval. It appears that balconies projecting no more than three feet would be permissible on 17th Street, meaning that the proposed balconies would probably have to be reduced six inches.[3] The building code allows a five-foot projection of one-story, open porches on streets that have public parking, as does Oakwood.[4] As drawn, the Oakwood-facing porches are too shallow; a front porch should not be less than five feet deep, unless it is

[2] If retaining walls do become necessary, then they should look like the neighborhood's historic granite walls.

[3] 12 DCMR § 3202.10.2.2 provides for three-foot balcony projections on 60-foot-wide streets and four feet on a 70-foot-wide street. When it comes to building restriction lines, DCRA calculates the street width as the distance between those lines on opposite side of the street, rather than the distance between the actual property lines. DDOT records a building restriction line on the west side of 17th Street, too, so the total street width would be considered to be 63 feet.

[4] 12 DCMR § 3202.11.2.3. As 17th Street has no public parking, it could not have a porch of more than three-foot projection, unless DCRA treats the building restriction area as equivalent to public parking.

merely a portico. The height of the porches should be decreased a bit and the roof pitch raised a little, with the beams set at about the height of the window lintels, which are high here.

Brick and roofing samples should be provided at a future review, the cornice material should be specified, and the porch columns should be detailed. The brick should be similar to the module, colors and textures found in the immediate area.

The roof material should also be specified. Slate is characteristic of mansard roofs. A faux slate might be considered on new construction, if the product is not shiny and has narrow dimensions like traditional real slate. Real slate would enhance the compatibility of the project.

A revised concept should depict meter and HVAC-unit locations and should address drainage.

It would be helpful to show more context in the drawings, such as the elevations in relation to those of 3434 Oakwood, as well as across Oakwood and 17th.

Recommendation
HPO finds the footprint, height and massing of the concept to be compatible with the character of the historic district, but encourages the applicant to revise the plans to address the comments above.