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

Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **1845 Lamont Street NW** (x) Permit

Meeting Date: **October 26, 2023** (x) Alteration
Case Number: **23-571**

The applicant, Jordan Saenz, agent and project manager for property owners Michele Ruta and Sara Carlson, requests the Board’s review of a permit application to replace the green roof tiles with faux slate, replace the front gutter, and replace some of the decorative, exposed rafter ends on this 1909 rowhouse.

The subject property is one in a row of 24 designed by prominent Washington architect A.H. Sonnemann for developers Kennedy & Davis Co. At the same time, the same team erected the seventeen-unit row across the street. Less than two years later, they were working on a row of four around the corner, consisting of 1801 Lamont and 3202-3206 18th Street. Together, these extensive projects comprise an unusually cohesive block of similar three-story, brick buildings with eclectic Craftsman, Mediterranean and Flemish elements. One of their most character-defining elements is the use of flat terra cotta tile on front, pent roofs over attics.¹

Roofing

Kennedy & Davis varied dormers, windows, and porches and stoops to add variety to their streetscape. The brick walls and tile roofs are the most prominent unifying features. But to add further visual variety, the tile colors alternated from green to red and back to green from 18th Street toward the west end of the block, with each stretch having a uniform color and type. Most of the houses, on both sides of the street, retain tiles, testifying to their durability, but some have been replaced by alternative materials, presumably prior to the application of preservation review to this neighborhood. Of the green-tiled houses flanking the subject property, only one has been re-roofed with a different material.²

Despite the fact that tile roofs are among the rarest sort in Washington, the 1800 block of Lamont Street is notable for the fact the houses possess such roofs. The roof material is important to defining the character and style of the buildings they cover, and it lends a feeling of substantiality and texture to the block. The architect could have eliminated such roofs or pitched them low enough that the material and color were irrelevant, but it was a conscious choice to feature the roofs as a major design element. As with all rows, the Board has tried to retain original elements, whether they are uniform or express a calculated rhythm. This principle applies to roofs, windows, porches, walks, etc., as expressed in the published design guidelines.

¹ Clay barrel tiles were even employed on the mansards of the adjacent and contemporaneous project at 1800-1806 Lamont, erected by Allard & Appleby.

² If it is any mitigation or consolation, that roof, at 1849 Lamont, is partly obscured by a Flemish gable.

The Board's design guidelines for roofs, in effect for more than a quarter century, acknowledge that "the materials used to cover [steeply] sloping roofs are important to defining the character of a historic building.... Altering roof shapes, materials, elements and details will affect their design. Thus, any alterations must be undertaken with extreme care to ensure that the character of the roof is maintained." The guidelines specifically encourage replacing clay tiles with the same when necessary. While the guidelines consider some substitute materials, they offer none as a suitable substitute for terra cotta.

What is proposed here as the replacement is Ecostar Majestic synthetic slate, made of rubber and plastics. Compared to the tile, it is a thinner and more-reflective material, of a different color and more uniform. It would stand out visually on the row. Although faux slate has been approved on many projects, it has typically replaced slate roofs at detached or individual houses, where the roof may be monolithic in character or not especially prominent, not directly next to real slate, but frequently where the historic material has already been removed and thus constituting a halfway restoration. Imitation slate is strongly discouraged to be inserted into a row that retains genuine slate, because it suffers by the comparison of finish and color and the difficulty of detailing it like traditional slate at corners and over ridges. Another difference is, as in this case, the faux products are often much wider than the slates traditionally applied to such small-scale buildings.

With respect to replacement of historic roofing, the guidelines continue:

In most cases, consideration should first be given to maintaining the existing material, element or detail. If this proves not to be technically or economically feasible, repairing only the deteriorated areas, using in-kind materials should next be considered. If the deterioration is more extensive, replacing the entire roof material, element or detail in kind may then be considered. Only after repair or replacement in kind has been determined not to be technically or economically feasible should the owner consider using a substitute material.

Since tile replacement is not technically infeasible, it is worth considering what might constitute economic infeasibility. The economics are properly a consideration of the Mayor's Agent—on those occasions when an applicant makes a claim of undue economic hardship. There is a Mayor's Agent precedent that relates closely in location and subject. In 2002, the owners of a house down the block—also by Sonnemann and Kennedy & Davis—proposed replacing its green-tile roofing. That house has a much larger roof than at the subject property, so it was a more costly project, at least in inflation-adjusted terms. That project proposed that only a large turret roof be clad in copper instead, which would have saved some of the total cost. The Board could not agree to a substitute material in such a prominent location. The matter went before the Mayor's Agent, whose decision cited the design guidelines and stated the following as conclusions of law:

The Board... was correct when it voted to deny the Applicants' application to use alternative materials in the replacement of the eaves and roof.... The Mayor's Agent, while not unmindful of the financial inconvenience that Applicants might incur, concludes that the governing regulations have a sound basis in law and policy... Applicants are neither without a remedy, nor have they been deprived of

their property by a regulatory taking.... [Moreover, the value of the property had increased over the years]... and will be even more enhanced... [by] the work.

With the present application, there has been no examination of feasibility or of alternatives, including those of re-roofing partially or entirely with tile to match. It may be simply that the contractor is unaccustomed to working with this material. Even old tile can often be salvaged and reused; it is often the anchors that fail, and water works its way in. But it does wear out, and here there are clearly some tiles that are cracked and broken and require replacement, especially at the sides of the dormers. When that is undertaken, a search for tiles of a similar form and size could lead to wholesale replacement, if an exact fit cannot be found for the present tiles' means of interlocking.

The contractor has calculated a need for less than three squares of roofing. If the Board sees a need for some compromise, it may consider the roofing of the dormers, which is the only area that was previously replaced, with a substitute material: green, asphalt-composite shingles. Not very visible from below, the dormer roofing can be seen from across the street, but the color helps it blend.

Rafter ends

Gutter replacement is a minor and more straightforward matter. The decorative rafter tails are also character-defining, carried throughout the original block-long project. Here, the proposal is lacking in specifics, which raises some questions about the potential result and, indeed, what material they might be made of. Because of rot, six are proposed to be replaced with the "closest match to the existing", which does not specify which criteria are to be matched. On the one hand, the "[r]afters may have to be custom made", but "[i]f exact match is not available the closest match will be installed". Given that an exact match for a wood rafter end could be custom-made with a scroll saw, the potential for something less than an exact match raises questions, suggesting the possibility that this aspect has not been thoroughly considered. It is difficult to imagine a stock item that might be a close match, and something that deviates is likely to be conspicuous among the many originals.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board not support clearance of a permit as consistent with the purposes of the preservation law, because the proposed work would not sufficiently retain the character of the subject property, nor is it compatible with character of the historic district as represented by this cohesive and well-preserved block.