

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

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Property Address:	<b>1818 Vernon Street NW</b>	<b>X</b>	Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Washington Heights Historic District</b>		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	<b>July 26, 2018</b>	<b>X</b>	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	<b>18-443</b>	<b>X</b>	New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Anne Brockett</b>		

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Architect Bruno Reich, representing owner Hanna Association, Inc., seeks concept review for the creation of two basement entrances on a 3-story brick apartment building constructed in 1924. Lacking distinctive ornamentation, the building’s primary feature is its symmetry of form and detail. The central door is flanked by three windows per side on the first floor with evenly spaced paired windows on the second and third floors.

The building is elevated above a berm along Vernon Street. A wide concrete stair leads up to the front door and a stone retaining wall abuts the sidewalk.

**Project Description**

The project calls for adding a leadwalk, basement door, and windows with window wells to each end of the façade for access and light to two new basement units. Sections of the stone retaining wall would be removed and new retaining walls built along the sides of the leadwalks. The new doors are positioned tight to the lot lines and are proposed to be half-light wood and glass while the windows would be paired multi-pane sashes.

**Evaluation**

Two of the overarching principles of the Board’s adopted *Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows* are to provide a contextual and compatible design for new basement entrances and to achieve a reasonable balance of practical needs and the civic benefits of protecting architectural and historical characteristics. With adjustments, HPO has determined that basement access that meets the principles in the Guidelines is possible for this building.

It should be noted that, while the Guidelines are directed primarily at rowhouses, the information they contain can be applied to other building types. In fact, a larger building such as an apartment may provide a better context for adding entrances because there is a broader expanse of façade and front yard to absorb the proportionally small amount of change. In addition, no demolition of significant materials is necessary since the subject building was constructed of the same brick down to grade (i.e. with no differentiated base material) and is devoid of decorative detailing below the first floor.

Following the Guidelines, the proposal is “visually discreet and subordinate to the main entrance.” It also has the preservation benefit of not altering the monumental stair. While branching off from an existing leadwalk is preferred for most basement areaways, that option is not possible here given the lack of a landing and the height of the stair above grade.

Also in line with the Guidelines, the design retains the maximum amount of green space in the front yard but does somewhat disrupt the existing topography, which is generally discouraged. However, the

retention of the original stair and preservation of the overall relationship of the building to its site outweigh the amount of change proposed.

The HPO recommends revisions to the proposed placement of the doors and windows. It is unclear if doors located so close to the property lines are permissible; regardless, new openings should align with openings above. The Guidelines state that new doors should be placed beneath existing doors, where possible, and new basement windows “may be appropriate if they are unobtrusive and aligned with fenestration of upper stories.” They “should remain smaller than and subordinate to upper story windows.” Thus, if the proposed windows and doors were sized to match and shifted to align with the floor directly above, the design would be compatible. This shift would also avoid doors too close to party walls and provide passersby with a view of the historic base of the building, rather than new door openings.

It should be noted that to remain consistent with the Guidelines, window wells should be kept to the minimum dimensions required by code and railings around leadwalks and window wells be avoided, if possible.

As mentioned, the primary feature of this building is its symmetry of form and fenestration. If amended as described above, the proposal would retain the building’s symmetrical design. Further, the project preserves the original stair, provides accessible units, and does not significantly remove landscaping given the overall scale of the building.

### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept as consistent with the preservation act with the provision that new basement doors and windows align with the fenestration of the first floor and be sized to match.*