



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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February 23, 2022

To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Eric Hill, Survey Director
Re: Case D-1609: Blackman House/Eduardo Catalano Office, 18 Pleasant Street (1864)

An application to demolish the house at 18 Pleasant Street was received on January 18, 2022. The applicant, Ryan Wittig of Kinvarra Capital, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for March 3, 2022.



Left: Pleasant Street façade of 18 Pleasant Street; Right: Assessing Map of 18 Pleasant Street and surrounding area.

General Description and Current Conditions

The building at 18 Pleasant Street occupies a 4,260 square-foot lot (105/56) on the east side of Pleasant Street at the intersection of Franklin Street. The house is a two-story frame building with a gable roof that is connected at the rear to a one-story stable with mansard roof. The zoning is Business BA, a neighborhood business district that allows most types of housing. The property is also located within the Central Square Overlay District. The FAR and height limits in this district are 2.0 and 55 feet. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the FY22 Assessing Database, was \$1,147,800; \$508,200 for the building, and \$639,600 for the land.

The applicant is proposing to raze the house and attached stable and erect a four-story residential building containing six units. According to the applicant submittal, the project is as-of-right and will not require a variance or zoning relief.



18 Pleasant Street, northeast side facade.

The house is a relatively modest example of a transitional Greek Revival-Italianate house constructed in 1864. The house is two-and-a-half stories with the gable oriented to Pleasant Street. 18 Pleasant Street is side hall in plan and sits atop a slightly raised brick basement. A classical Greek entry surrounds the front entrance and corner boards serve as pilasters that terminate at returning eaves, resembling a pediment, all showcasing the Greek Revival style. The broad overhanging eaves and bay window veer more Italianate. The entire complex is covered in vinyl siding, and many original details were likely covered or removed entirely. All windows are replacements.



18 Pleasant Street viewed from intersection of Pleasant and Franklin streets.

A two-story addition with flat roof runs along the southwest façade of the 1864 house. The second floor of the addition slightly overhangs the first and sits above the horizontal band of fixed windows. A more traditional double-hung window configuration exists at the second floor. A deep projecting eave projects off the addition toward Franklin Street.



Franklin Street side and rear elevations of 18 Pleasant Street.

The stable at the rear of the property is square in footprint and oriented toward Franklin Street. The one-story building is capped by a Mansard roof with a dormer at the southwest-facing façade. The original entry was enclosed in 1922 with a 5' deep brick wall extension on the front of the building. The facade is now filled with a horizontal band of windows. The stable is connected to the main house by a one-story addition with a commercial entrance and fire stair to the second floor of the house.



Rear stable viewed from Franklin Street.

Description and History

The neighborhood around Pleasant Street and Western Ave was largely developed in the 1860s on lands originally held by the Dana family, with the earliest development on higher ground adjacent to Central Square. The River Street bridge was opened in 1811 and the Western Avenue bridge in

1824, but residential development of the area did not begin until the 1840s.

By the mid-19th century, Cambridgeport settled into the role as a Boston-oriented suburb, with the neighborhood's economy and residents directly tied to business in the city. The West Boston Bridge and related street transportation made commuting easier, with many building homes in Cambridgeport for more space and relatively clean air.

The house at 18 Pleasant Street and a detached stable were built in 1864 by Albert Norris and James Richardson, who were listed in city directories as carpenters. Albert Norris was born in Portsmouth, N.H., and was trained in carpentry before settling in Cambridge in 1843. Norris worked as a journeyman before opening his own firm in Cambridge in 1848. Norris lived and worked in Cambridgeport, building mostly houses and tenements on Western Avenue and the adjacent streets. Norris built a workshop in 1864 at 19 Western Avenue (razed in 1934) at the same time he built the house at 18 Pleasant Street, its direct neighbor, on speculation. Norris worked as a builder from his workshop until his death in 1889.

18 Pleasant Street was first purchased by Horace P. Blackman, an organ maker hired by Mason & Hamlin Organ & Piano Co. in 1862. Blackman worked his way up the company and did well for himself, moving to Arlington Street on Avon Hill by the 1870s and eventually building a grand Queen Anne style mansion at 33 Agassiz Street in 1890.

By the early 1880s, 18 Pleasant Street was owned by Calvin and Matilda Ball. Calvin worked as a provisioner with a store in downtown Boston. Calvin died in 1909, and Matilda sold the property to Herbert Hapgood not long after. Mr. Hapgood worked as a chauffeur and in 1912 was granted a petition to store gasoline in a sunken tank on the premises, most likely in the converted stable.



Pleasant Street, facing north (1918), CHC Collections. 18 Pleasant Street at far right.

In 1921 the property was owned by Ellen and Stephen Tobin, who worked as an auto dealer in town. After Stephen's death, Ellen resided at the home until it was sold to Clark & Reid, Inc. a

packing and moving company with a garage on the block at 380 Green Street. In 1959, Clark & Reid, Inc., petitioned for a zoning change on the property from C-2 residential to Business-B. Opponents spoke passionately at the hearing as they were afraid that if approved, the change in zoning would permit the demolition of the structures for surface parking. Clark & Reid were granted the petition and likely used the side yard of the property for truck storage.

The property was listed as vacant until 1963, when it was purchased by architect Eduardo Catalano. Catalano converted the complex for occupancy by his architectural office by constructing the two-story addition and connecting link to the stable and ran his small yet busy firm from the property (which was given the address 300 Franklin Street) until he retired in 1995. The property was later occupied by Windowbook Software.



18 Pleasant Street, Planning Department photograph, 1968.



Franklin Street fence after installation by Eduardo Catalano, image courtesy of Adrian Catalano.

Eduardo Catalano (1917-2010)

Eduardo Fernando Catalano was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1917 and came to the United States on scholarships to both the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard. At Harvard's Graduate School of Design, he was a student of Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, both masters of Modernist architecture.

In 1945, after earning his second master's degree in architecture, he returned to Argentina, where he taught at the University of Buenos Aires and ran a private practice. He taught at the Architectural Association in London from 1950 to 1951, when he came back to the United States to serve as a Professor of Architecture at the School of Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

In 1956, Catalano accepted a professorship position at MIT after Pietro Belluschi, then Dean of Architecture requested that he join the growing program in Cambridge. During his time Catalano ran his architecture practice in Central Square at the converted house at 18 Pleasant Street. Catalano was said to have run a tight ship at his design offices in Cambridge, requiring his staff to use both sides of paper - even thin tracing paper - to save money.

During his lifetime Catalano was recognized as an important practitioner of Modernist architecture. His major commissions (alone or in association with other architects) included the Juilliard School of Music in New York City (1958), the Julius Stratton Student Center at MIT and Tech Square (both 1961), the Hermann Building and Eastgate at MIT (1963 and 1965), Central Plaza on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge (1967), and additions to CRLS in 1977. Catalano also designed several buildings at the University of Buenos Aires and embassies for the United States in Buenos Aires and Pretoria, South Africa (1970 and 1982, respectively).

Catalano retired from teaching in 1977 and received a certificate of recognition from MIT for his more than twenty years of service. In addition to holding emeritus status at MIT Catalano was also named an honorary professor at his alma mater, the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Catalano closed his architecture firm in 1995 but continued working in retirement. Catalano passed away on January 28, 2010, in Cambridge and was buried in his native Argentina.

Significance

The Blackman House/Eduardo Catalano Office at 18 Pleasant Street is significant as a transitional Greek Revival-Italianate residence with attached stable, modernized and enlarged to fit office use by world-renowned architect Eduardo Catalano.

Relationship to Criteria

The Blackman House/Eduardo Catalano Office meets criterion (1) for its associations with the architectural and economic history of Cambridge, and criterion (2) as “architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures.”

Staff Recommendations

I recommend that the house at 18 Pleasant Street be found significant for its associations with the residential development of Central Square, its associations with the broad architectural, economic and social history of the city, and for its use as the professional office of Modernist architect Eduardo Catalano. The Commission should hear testimony from the applicants and neighbors and review the plans for demolition and new construction before making a further determination.

cc: Ryan Wittig, Kinvarra Capital
Thomas Miller, Esq.
Khalsa Design