

Minutes of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

Mon., June 10, 2013 at 6:00 PM, Friends Meeting House, 5 Longfellow Pk., Cambridge

Commission Members present: James Van Sickle, *Chair*; Judith Dortz, William King *members*; Deborah Masterson, Michael Robertson, Charles Smith, *alternates*

Commission Members absent: Robert Banker, *member*

Staff present: Eiliesh Tuffy

Members of the Public: See attached list

Chair Van Sickle called the meeting to order at 6:05 PM. Mr. Van Sickle introduced the Commissioners and staff present.

Public Hearing: Alterations to Designated Properties

HCM-195: 22 Lowell St., by 22 Lowell St., LLC. Full exterior renovation including: new clapboards, windows and doors, side decks & balcony, 6' fencing, basement windows and door wells.

Staff presented a summary of the historic context of Lowell Street, which was once the edge of the marsh along the Charles River. Surrounding buildings include 19 Lowell St. (1849 Greek Revival), 20 Lowell St. (1866 Italianate), 25 Lowell St. (1883 Lowell School) and two later matching cottages built by the Blaikie brothers in 1891.

The property under review is in the same style as 20 Lowell St., but was built 5 years later in 1871. The 2-1/2 story Italianate was re-clad in asbestos shingles, but the original wood windows and much of the ornamental trim remains intact, including the front porch and roofline cornice details. The house has been used as a legal 3-family. The current proposal calls for converting the front building into one dwelling with a basement in-law unit, and a separate dwelling unit in the rear ell. The front basement unit was not intended to be sold as a 3rd condo. The use would convert from a 3-family rental to a 2-owner condominium with a bonus space.

Publicly visible portions of the property, which is slated for full interior and exterior rehabilitation, include the front elevation and primarily the right (South facing) side of the Main House block. A high fence runs across the front of the property in line with the front face of the building. This fence along with the existing mature landscaping obscures much of the left side of the building as well as the rear ell on the right side of the building.

The project architect, Mark Boyes-Watson, outlined the proposal in which the Main Block of the house towards the front would be restored to its historic appearance and the rear ell of the house would be altered to create a secondary entrance to the rear unit more in keeping with the architectural character of the building. As part of the rehabilitation, the wood windows were proposed to be replaced with new true divided light, insulated glass windows. In addition to those window changes, new window wells were proposed along the basement level as well as a recessed stairwell on the left side of the building to access the in-law apartment.

The right side of the building is where the majority of changes would occur. The front house changes include replacing a single window in the front corner of the 1st floor with two sets of

French doors that open out to a raised deck. The existing projecting bay would remain, but with an added 2nd floor balcony on its roof.

The mid-section of the building's right side is recessed from the main block and not publicly visible from Lowell Street. The rooftop deck that currently exists above the rear ell is going to be modified to lower the overall height of the deck and minimize its appearance from the street. The driveway is proposed to be brick pavers. The front walk will be concrete in front and transition to bluestone. Trash containers are planned to be stored along the left (North facing) side of the building. The existing 6' fence is proposed to be replaced in kind with a new wood fence. Rather than a solid design, the applicants said they would be willing to change the style to one that is solid up to 4 or 5 feet and topped with an open lattice section.

Mr. King asked if there would be external condensers. The architect said most likely 3 Mitsubishiis would be installed at a location yet to be determined. Mr. Hill said they had not laid out the heating system yet so had not figured that out.

Ms. Masterson asked if the fence would extend all the way across from the front right corner of the house to the property line shared with the right side abutter. The project architect said that would be the plan.

Ms. Dortz asked what the width of the window wells would be. The architect said they would extend 3 feet out from the house and be at least 3 feet wide to meet code. The depth of the wells would be 4 feet deep, but 3 feet of that would be recessed below grade.

Mr. Smith asked if any trees on the property would be removed. The architect said two trees along the right lot line were coming down but the full landscape plan hadn't been fully developed. Ms. Dortz asked if there would be a replacement planting. The architect said a new dogwood was proposed for the SW corner, inside the fence.

Mr. Van Sickle asked if BZA approval was needed for the proposal. The architect said they were not adding any additional FAR and their basement heights were in compliance with codes. Mr. Van Sickle asked if they had thought about water penetration management because there are known to be lots of problems with water when grade changes are involved. The architect said they intended to remove the basement slab and install crushed stone, proper drainage and a sump pump. Insulation would be installed as well as a vapor barrier. Part of their design incorporates a gap in the wall to collect condensation. Closed-cell foam would be used for insulating. Staff pointed out that the plans also proposed newly excavated basement space. The architect said that basement space would be used for mechanicals and storage.

Mr. Smith asked about the square footage of the property, which is listed at 5,982 sq. ft. The applicants said the existing square footage over 5,000 sq ft was grandfathered in.

Mr. Van Sickle said the right side (South elevation) was very prominent and it would be good to restore the historic appearance. He said he was less concerned about the rear ell of the building and that overall the proposal would be a dramatic improvement. Items of concern included alterations to the front right corner of the building, where the proposed French doors were not on center with the rest of the fenestration. French doors to the balcony above the 1st floor bay were also thought to have a negative effect on the character of the building. One of the goals of the district is to conserve the architectural character of the district. More characteristic designs include 2 bay windows on the 1st floor or even 2-story vertical bays. The question was posed what could be done instead that would look ok.

Mr. Van Sickle said he was less concerned about the balcony over the bay because at least it lines up vertically. He was, however, put off by the French doors and thought that the design in this area of the property could be improved.

Ms. Dortz said that front corner is a major draw for the eye. She also thought the business of the design on the South elevation detracted from the actual front of the house. She felt the balconies threw everything off visually, given that this is at its core still a 19th century house. She asked about the square footage of the rear roof deck. The architect said the square footage would remain the same, it would just be slightly reconfigured.

Mr. King agreed with the comments about the south side of the building. The rest of the design seemed very practical and that reducing the perceived height of the roofline and rear deck height would improve an existing incongruity. He was very concerned, however, about the 2nd floor deck proposed above the 1st floor bay window on the south elevation, stating that these bays historically would not have had decks above or French doors to access them, therefore he would want to see that balcony disappear. He also felt the 2 sets of French doors on the 1st floor were a bit much. While he wasn't sure what was behind those doors he felt this could be redesigned. Staff stated that the space behind was intended to have a gas fireplace on center between the 2 sets of French doors.

Ms. Dortz said she was reluctant to approve a tall fence and that maybe they could create the screening they wanted with shrubbery.

Mr. Smith agreed that the 2nd floor balcony should be denied and perhaps only 1 set of French doors on the 1st floor would be better.

Ms. Masterson, for the sake of uniformity, suggested that the once window on the rear elevation be retained either in full or by keeping the exterior window trim intact. It was noted that this window was not publicly visible however and would be a voluntary design choice on the part of the applicant.

Staff inquired about the proposed replacement windows. The applicants said they would be Jeld Wen windows with a 7/8" muntin that included spacer bars. Staff asked about the condition of the existing wood windows. The architect said they were not the worst windows but they would still like to replace them. Mr. Van Sickle asked if the applicants were familiar with the Commission's Window Guidelines, which were adopted for the Half Crown-Marsh district as well. Ms. Harder said they were very familiar with the guidelines but were concerned that installing storms creates condensation that can be detrimental to the wood windows and that she felt the performance of replacement windows were improving over the years.

Mr. Van Sickle asked if the raised deck off the front right corner of the building could instead be designed with steps down to an at-grade paved terrace. He also suggested the double hung window could be left where it is and a door added between it and the projecting bay to access this lower terrace. He felt that maintaining the vertical alignment of the existing fenestration was very important. The architect said having larger glazed opening would bring in much nicer light to the interior space on this south-facing elevation.

Questions were received from the public.

Gerard Michael of 18 Gibson Street said he lives immediately to the southeast of 22 Lowell Street. In response to the proposal he had some requests:

1. The roof deck above the rear ell looks over the entire neighborhood to the east, where the Gibson Street properties are located. If that deck could go away altogether he said that would be a good thing.
2. The southeast corner of the lot has 2 stone walls that abut their rear patio at 18 Gibson St. He asked that those walls remain in place. (staff noted that there was once a 1920s garage in that location and they were most likely remnants of that structure)

Susan Coolidge of 20 Lowell Street said she had the same concerns about the upper roof deck and felt it was intrusive on her privacy. She noted that 22 Lowell sits just 4 feet from her property, which raises concerns about any removal of asbestos in such close proximity to her living space. She also wanted further information about the walkway along the north property line and any potential landscaping in that location. The architect said they would be happy to work with her to find the right landscaping solution like perhaps a low hedge. Ms. Coolidge also said that, if the roof deck is to stay, any rooftop placement of air handlers would also be a concern. Ms. Harder said that in past redevelopment projects her team has avoided placing air handlers on roof decks.

Jane Lewis of 26 Lowell Street said she felt the clump of hemlocks along their shared property line to be a problem, but that perhaps they could talk about landscaping solutions in that area as well. She too had a problem with the 2nd floor balcony over the 1st floor bay windows and the raised deck off the front corner of the house. She said her house is only 11 feet from where those additional outdoor spaces would be located and wondered if there was any way to moderate the potential noise. The architect mentioned that the raised deck off the rear ell was already existing.

Ms. Lewis hoped that the trash would be kept away from the south lot line. She also asked if the driveway would be 3 cars wide and, if so, mentioned it might be difficult for people to get out of their cars if they're parked 3 across. Otherwise she said she was thrilled to see the property being improved.

Frank Duehay of 26 Lowell Street said he had lived in the neighborhood since 1947. At one point in the property's history the garage at 22 Lowell Street had been used as a furniture maker's shop. Over the years he felt the property was left to rack & ruin and that this rehabilitation project would be good for them and the surrounding neighbors. He said he had met with the project team and was impressed with their previous projects such as the one on Brattle Circle. He felt he had a good working relationship with the team to further discuss details such as the number of windows and doors facing south onto their house. Overall he felt very positive about the improvements to the property.

Mary Canner of 12 Gibson Street said she too was thrilled to see the property improved. Her concerns were as follows:

- The grade drops considerably lower toward the rear of the lot where the Gibson Street properties are located, making the properties on Lowell Street sit up higher than their houses
- Noise was of particular concern since it seems that noise from Lowell Street properties have a great impact on the Gibson Street owners at a lower grade. She echoed Ms. Coolidge that she did not want to see any condensers placed up high
- She agreed with the Commission about eliminating the balcony and raised deck on the south elevation

- The number of windows in the rear unit was felt to be excessive and could create a tremendous impact on her as a rear abutter

Chair Van Sickle commented that it was a goal of the Commission to conserve through-lot views while also respecting the privacy of individuals. He asked the project team whether there might be some flexibility in their plans on some of these issues raised by abutters that are outside the purview of the Commission.

Ms. Dortz said she had a conflict that forced her to leave the meeting, but offered her comments before departing. She would not approve the 2 French doors. She could perhaps consider 1 French door where the 1st floor window currently is and steps down to a patio instead of a raised deck. She also would not like to see the front fence extended any further than it currently is. She thought the project team should defer to the neighbors regarding items like balconies and roof decks. In closing she said this is a gorgeous house.

Ms. Harder said that she and Mr. Hill have to make certain decisions with the future homeowners in mind but that if there are things they can change throughout the property to address the stated concerns they will do their best to please the owners and neighbors. The architect said he understood one of those concessions would be the removal of the 2nd floor balcony above the projecting bay. With that, the need for a French door in that location would no longer be necessary. The team was also flexible about bringing the height of the front corner deck down to grade. They wanted to maintain the fence design for privacy reasons and carry it across to the front right corner of the house. The French doors out to the patio would be much preferred as well.

Mr. King said he would be OK with a lattice-topped fence and that a grade-level patio was better than a raised deck. He also said he would be open to seeing a single door opening created forward of the existing bay to gain access to that outdoor space.

Mr. Robertson raised the possibility of relocating the 2nd floor window to align with the fenestration change on the 1st floor to line them up vertically.

Mr. Van Sickle said he felt they could approve the proposal in concept with the condition that the applicant return with a further developed plan for the south elevation.

Discussions about the rear roof deck resulted in the project team volunteering to restrict the dimensions of the rebuilt deck to a size no greater than 14' x 16'.

Mr. King suggested approving portions of the application. He said he was delighted to see the rear roof deck lowered and minimized in square footage, adding that the intended buyers would probably make a big difference in the use of that space that did not involve continuous noise.

Mr. King made a motion to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the project as proposed with the exception of the south façade on the front, main block of the house and the later submission of further developed landscape plan. He added the recommendation that the one window on the rear elevation could be blocked up but retained on the exterior either completely or just the exterior trim as an aesthetic improvement.

Ms. Masterson seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

Minutes

Ms. Masterson made a motion to approve the minutes of the May meeting, which was seconded by Mr. King. The motion passed 5-0.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30pm

Respectfully submitted,

Eiliesh Tuffy
Preservation Administrator

Members of the Public who signed the attendance sheet, June 10, 2013

Mary Canner	12 Gibson St., Cambridge, MA 02138
Jane Lewis	26 Lowell Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Frank Duehay	26 Lowell Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Lauren Harder	28 Bigelow Street, Cambridge, MA 02139
Martin Hill	10 Samoset Rd., Winchester, MA 01890
Philip Walton	28 Lowell St., Cambridge, MA 02138