

Minutes of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

Mon., July 8, 2013 at 6:00 PM, Friends Meeting House, 5 Longfellow Pk., Cambridge

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

Commission Members absent: William King, Robert Banker, *members*

Staff present: Eiliesh Tuffy

Members of the Public: See attached list

Chair Van Sickle called the meeting to order at 6:03 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.

This was a continuation of the hearing commenced at the June meeting of the Commission. 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 proposal was approved conceptually at the June hearing of the Commission, but was continued to allow the project team to reevaluate certain elements of the design that met with opposition, namely the South Elevation proposal to introduce 2 new French doors on the 1st floor that throw off the symmetry on that side, plus the addition of a 2nd-floor balcony above the 1st floor bay window. Abutters also inquired about the possibility of making the rooftop deck smaller.

The revised plans included the following changes:

- South Elevation: 2nd floor balcony above the bay was removed and the existing double-hung window retained.

- South Elevation: 1st floor French doors eliminated. Window closest to Lowell Street shifted closer to the front elevation; New single door with full glazing inserted immediately to the left of the window bay.
- South Elevation: 1st floor raised deck off the front unit's living room was removed in favor of a bluestone patio at grade level.
- Roof deck: The existing roof deck was proposed to be scaled down in size
- Mechanicals: Exterior air conditioner compressors are indicated on the revised site plan.

Questions were received from the Commissioners.

Ms. Dortz asked if the parking pad in front of the house would be extended to the right once the proposed tree removal had occurred. She also asked if the reconstructed front fence would remain in its present location. The architect, Mark Boyes-Watson, said the parking area would remain the same size and the fence would also remain in its present location. The new fence would be solid up to 4 feet from grade, and then the top 2 feet would be an open lattice topper.

Ms. Dortz asked if the new fence would be extended to the left to meet up with the southwest corner of the building. The architect said that yes that was the proposal for the reconstruction of the fence.

There was more discussion about the placement of the interior living room fireplace, and its impact on the exterior of the house when attempting to design around that one element. Mr. Smith asked whether the gas fireplace would fit between the two windows on the front elevation with possible venting to the side. The concern was maintaining the existing balance of the fenestration on the South Elevation. The architect said he was making every attempt to keep a fireplace flue off the primary elevation. Staff asked whether a corner fireplace could work in the interior layout to keep the South Elevation as-is, but the architect said a corner fireplace would not fit into the layout of the interior space.

The developer, Martin Hill, said he felt the revised drawings were a terrific improvement.

Mr. Robertson asked if the new, single door on the South Elevation would be wide enough. The architect said that it was wide enough, and chosen to complement the existing window openings in its dimensions and the additional detailing of a carved wooden hood to match the 1st floor window. He also noted that, if they construct the fence as planned, it would be relatively imperceptible that the hooded door with glazing was not another window. Mr. Robertson said he felt this new design was much better.

Ms. Masterson countered that she liked the symmetry of the existing South façade, and asked if perhaps the bay could be altered somehow to incorporate the door they desired, or perhaps to shift the windows on the 2nd and 3rd floors so they would all line up in the new design. The architect said he felt that would be even more of a change than what they are proposing.

Mr. Van Sickle said there is an obvious strength to the existing layout of the fenestration which is characteristic of this architectural style. He added that if this were the only building of its type in Cambridge he would be reluctant to allow such a change, but he felt the interior layout required to make this a livable space was OK in this case.

Ms. Masterson inquired about the location of the exterior condensers and fencing across the site plan. Both condensers would be located close to the house on the South Elevation: one just forward of the existing window bay and new door; one halfway back on that side of the property, on the east side of an interior fence that separates the yard in half for the two units. The

condensers would be Mitsubishi's or something equivalent, which are known to be quiet condensers. Trash cans for the rear unit would be located along the gangway on the north side of the property; those for the front unit would be inside the fence line, at the southwest corner of the lot. The architect said a covered trash enclosure could easily be incorporated into the lower 4-foot portion of the new fence for screening purposes. Mr. Robertson suggested placing a gate in that corner of the fence to facilitate the trash removal to the curb.

Ms. Masterson asked about the number of parking spaces. The architect said there are 3 legal spaces now and that would remain the same, with 2 spaces assigned to the front unit and 1 to the rear.

Questions and comments were received from the public.

Ms. Jane Lewis of 26 Lowell Street asked the architect to point out the condenser locations once again. She asked whether the units would be enclosed and how noisy they would be. The architect explained that they could not be enclosed due to the air circulation requirements for the units to operate. He said these are the models used throughout the city specifically because of they emit little noise. Ms. Masterson said that the neighbor could see such a unit in action at 45 Foster Street and that, as an abutter, she had found that condenser to be non-disruptive.

Ms. Lewis stated that their primary view from the second floor of their house would be looking down into the yard space which would include the trash barrels. She cited concerns about the potential for rodents and invasive odors. The architect discussed that a good solution would be to build the aforementioned box structure to fully enclose those bins so that the neighbors only saw the roof of that enclosure.

The Commission entered into deliberations.

Mr. Van Sickle said the biggest concern seemed to be the architectural appearance of the South façade and yet they had not heard anything from the neighbors to indicate the proposed architectural changes were disagreeable to them. He said the Commission appreciated the elimination of the 2nd floor balcony over the window bay, and that the upper roof deck had been decreased in size.

Ms. Dortz said that one of the goals of the district is to preserve the architectural character of the district, which the South Elevation changes would not do. She also felt the extension of the high fence all the way to the front corner of the building ran counter to the district goal of preserving through-block views and keeping fencing to a minimum. To her this fence reads as saying "Keep Out". Minus those details, she did feel the redesign was a major improvement over the initial presentation.

Ms. Masterson agreed that the board's role was to conserve the look of the district's architectural character and patterns of development. She said that she was less concerned about the fence as she was about the asymmetric window realignment. Mr. Smith seconded the sentiment about the window, saying the South Elevation is the most publicly visible. The fence, however, didn't bother him. Mr. Van Sickle said he was not bothered by the new single door. Ms. Dortz suggested perhaps dropping the sill of the existing window to create the door opening. The architect said that would not be impossible. The goal, however, was to help bring light into the living room along this south-facing elevation while also providing direct access to the owner's garden space. The architect referred to a previous Mansard building he had renovated at 122 Oxford Street where the same realignment of a window had occurred which he felt turned out successfully. That project had in fact been recently awarded a Cambridge Preservation Award.

The developer, Ms. Harder, added that the realigned window would not be terribly noticeable from the street once completed and that their role as the decision makers for the future homeowners was to create, as the architect put it, the most delightful living space. Ms. Masterson said the homes could still be delightful while maintaining the exterior symmetry. More discussion was given to the potential rearrangement of the 1st floor fenestration.

A consensus could not be met on the appropriateness of relocating the window and adding the new door on the 1st floor of the South Elevation. The project team agreed to a brief recess to consult in private about other possible options that may be agreeable to the Commission.

After a brief recess, the project team returned with a photograph of the property at 122 Oxford Street that had been cited as a successful example of altering the window location on a similar Mansard building. The photograph showed the Mansard building as viewed from the street, with the alteration located on the right side of the building which is a comparable location to the proposal for 22 Lowell Street. At the Oxford Street property, the side elevation was obscured in part by a high row of evergreen hedges.

Ms. Masterson said that, upon viewing the photo of a similar redesign, it did not look so bad. She requested that the team consider a softer barrier such as arborvitae as seen on Oxford Street rather than a fence at Lowell Street. The architect suggested they could plant a climbing vine at the base of the fence to soften its appearance with greenery.

Ms. Masterson made a motion to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the plans dated 5/22/2013 with the exception of the South Elevation, which should conform to the amended design presented at the continuation of the hearing on plans dated 6/21/2013. Mr. Smith seconded the motion, which passed 4-1, with Ms. Dortz voting against the proposal because she felt the fence extension was incongruous with the goals and objectives of the district to encourage low fences and preserve through-lot views.

Determination of Procedure: Alterations to Designated Properties

HCM-201: 140 Foster St., by Marie-Pierre Dillenseger and Reza Mahdavi. Create new door opening on rear elevation and build a new rear deck and entrance stairs.

The property under review is a 2-story brick Colonial Revival style residence on a generous lot located at the corner of Foster and Gibson streets. The architect of record was A. Pelleriti, who is not credited as designing any other buildings in Cambridge. Because of the corner lot location, the proposed alterations to the rear elevation would be publicly visible from Gibson Street.

A wing on the west side of the house, which was originally constructed as a one-car garage, was later converted into a home office by a previous owner. The new owners wish to make the former office space into additional living space and create a new door in the exterior wall that would access a back deck. The existing rear staircase into the house was constructed of brick and Portland cement, but is visibly deteriorated and in need of repair. The proposal calls for removal of the existing stair to construct a new wood deck along the back of the house that would access both the existing rear door as well as the newly proposed door on the west wing. The height of the new deck would be 3'-4" from grade.

The applicant said that it appeared that there had been little maintenance to the property since 1975. Their desire was to rehabilitate the entire residence. The slate roof was being repaired in-kind and the wood windows were all being restored.

Ms. Masterson said that the changes made sense for the use of the property and that she was in favor of the proposed alterations to the rear elevation.

Historic photographs of the house showed that there was once a simple ornamental detail in the roof railing, which the applicant asked the Commission if they would recommend returning that detail to the house. Mr. Van Sickle said that, while the owners were not required to bring back that detail, it could add visual interest to an otherwise modest design and that they could add it back if it seemed to work with the proportions of the new code-compliant railing height.

There were no questions or comments from the public.

Ms. Masterson made a motion to approve the application as submitted. Mr. Smith seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

Informational Item

245 Mt. Auburn St., by Aaron Kemp. Informal discussion about proposed rear roof alteration.

The owner of the property, Mr. Kemp, wished to approach the Commission with an idea for a rear addition in order to receive some initial feedback prior to submitting a formal application for review. Mr. Kemp did an extensive renovation of the ca. 1858 cottage (which had already been extensively remodeled in the 1930s) in 2009, at which time a 2nd floor rear addition had been contemplated but never executed. After living in the property for several years, space needs have prompted him to explore an addition to the second story of the house to accommodate a master bedroom with an en suite bath. The expansion would be accomplished through a combination gable- and shed-roof dormer off of the back slope of the existing roof.

Ms. Masterson asked what the addition would look like as viewed from Mt. Auburn Street. Mr. Kemp presented a series of 3-dimensional rendering of the proposed addition, which showed the dormer from various angles around the entire property. The west end of the dormer would be visible from Mt. Auburn, because the house is located on a corner lot with Camden Place to the west. The east end of the dormer would have minimal visibility from Mt. Auburn Street.

Mr. Van Sickle asked if the project would require BZA approval, to which Mr. Kemp replied that it would because it just barely exceeds the allowable 1,266 sq. ft. F.A.R. for the lot. Although the house is modest in size, the basement is over 7-feet in height, which is counted towards the allowable living space under Zoning. The proposed addition amounted to 250 square feet.

Ms. Van Sickle asked if the owner had prepared a shadow study to determine the reduction of light and air, if any, to the abutters. Mr. Kemp said he had calculated the shadows for various times throughout the day at different times of year in 3-D renderings. Mr. Van Sickle mentioned that the shadow study is traditionally viewed in a 2-dimensional format in plan view for the formal application submittal.

Mr. Kemp closed his presentation by adding that he had presented the plans for the addition to his neighbors and most of his Camden Place abutters had offered to write letters in support of the project.

Questions and comments were accepted from the public.

Paul Yager of 6 Camden Place said he had some objections to the rear gable addition, specifically any construction that would block his existing views. He also stated that he did not want large bamboo trees to be planted along the south property line shared with Mr. Kemp for the same reasons, but he would be willing to consider a quid pro quo that abandoned the proposed bamboo plantings to garner his approval of a non-intrusive rear dormer addition. Mr. Yager said he actually likes the look of the existing rear roof at 245 Mt. Auburn, which is simply asphalt shingles. He added that Mr. Kemp had done amazing things with the improvements on the house that involved lots of good work. He did, however, view the shed-roof section of the proposed dormer addition as problematic, feeling the overall mass of the addition could reduce his view of sky and the trees beyond and encroach on the enjoyment of his own property.

When asked by the Commission how much area the shed-roof portion would account for, Mr. Kemp said it was roughly 50 square feet of the total 250 square foot addition. Mr. Van Sickle commented that Mr. Kemp could encounter some trouble with the BZA by asking to exceed the allowable F.A.R. and that he would always have a better chance of expanding his property through a conforming addition.

Mr. Smith said he thought Mr. Kemp had done a marvelous job. He asked Mr. Kemp if he had considered designing the entire rear dormer with the lower shed-roof design, but was told that was not considered because of the low interior head height it would create in the master bedroom.

The Commission was generally in favor of the rear dormer concept and encouraged Mr. Kemp to further develop a 2-dimensional sun and shadow study before submitting his proposal for a formal public hearing before the Commission.

Minutes

Ms. Masterson made a motion to approve the minutes of the June meeting with corrections, which was seconded by Mr. Smith. The motion passed 5-0.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10pm

Respectfully submitted,

Eiliesh Tuffy
Preservation Administrator

Members of the Public who signed the attendance sheet, July 8, 2013

Marie Pierre Dillenseger	140 Foster Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Jane Lewis	26 Lowell Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Frank Duehay	26 Lowell Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Aaron Kemp	245 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138
Paul Yager	6 Camden Pl., Cambridge, MA 02138