

## Minutes of the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

Mon., Apr. 1, 2013 at 6:00 PM, McCusker Center, 2<sup>nd</sup> Fl., 344 Broadway, Cambridge

Commission Members present: Nancy Goodwin, *Chair*; Tony Hsiao, *Vice Chair*; Lestra Litchfield, *members*; Sue-Ellen Myers, Monika Pauli, *alternates*

Commission Members absent: Carole Perrault, Charles Redmon, *members*

Staff present: Eiliesh Tuffy

Members of the Public: See attached list.

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Nancy Goodwin, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:08 PM.  
Sue-Ellen Myers recused herself from deliberations.

### Public Hearing: Alterations to Designated Properties

**MC-4233: 24 Clinton St., by 24 Clinton Street, LLC.** Alterations to front house and construction of a new single family house at the rear.

The property under review is a Greek Revival style house originally constructed in 1855, with later Italianate modifications, most notably a 1<sup>st</sup> floor projecting window bay on the front façade. The earliest city atlas on which the building appears dates to 1873. The footprint of the building as of 1873 includes a rear ell similar in size to that of the existing structure. The building was previously used as a rooming house, which called for the addition of numerous interior partitions for sleeping quarters. It is currently zoned as a 3-family and is occupied as a rental property. The exterior of the building is currently clad in vinyl siding and the original 2-over-2 wood windows were replaced with a 1-over-1 glazing pattern.

The C-1 zoning allows for 3 dwelling units. The current proposal is to demolish the existing rear ell, restore the front building as a single family dwelling with traditional wood clapboard siding, and construct a new single family dwelling the required 10-11' behind the front structure. Both buildings as proposed conform to the required zoning requirements, are allowable "as of right" and amount to 2 total dwelling units – 1 less than the allowable 3 dwelling units for this lot under C-1 zoning.

Mark Boyes-Watson, principal architect for the project team, presented the project for the Commission and the public using a series of large-scale plans, including the required shadow studies for new construction proposals. In addition to the drawing set, the applicants prepared a 3-dimensional scale model showing the proposed redevelopment in context with the immediately surrounding buildings on Clinton Street as well as the adjacent buildings along Bigelow Street.

The architect explained that a three-townhouse design had been explored, but was decided against in favor of a two-dwelling concept using a smaller secondary structure with open space between two dwellings. While the existing building has a side yard setback that is non-conforming, the new proposal meets all setback requirements. The current proposal results in an increase in green space from what currently exists on the lot, due primarily to the reduction of paved driveway to a smaller parking area closer to Clinton Street. An existing line of trees between #22 & #24 Clinton Street would remain in place. As indicated on the plans, the proposal shows a slight reduction in total GFA as calculated under Zoning guidelines. The areas on the site plan colored blue indicate changes to the existing conditions.

For the front house, the team has proposed to remove the vinyl siding to hopefully find the historic cedar clapboards and wood trim details underneath. Those elements would be restored to a more historic appearance. The small front bay would be demolished and a new, larger bay constructed in its place.

Otherwise there are only minimal changes to the front building's fenestration. The ridge height of the existing building measures at 34'.

The grade of the lot drops towards the rear lot line, sloping down towards Bigelow Street. The rear building was designed in a style that is in keeping with the architecture of the original building. The height of the rear building measures 26' from mean grade and 28' from the lowest grade level.

Staff pointed out that the only secondary structure that currently exists on Clinton Street is a former stable building at 18 Clinton Street, which dates to the late 1880s. The applicant also made note of secondary rear structures at #8 Clinton and #37 Bigelow that are used as residences. Otherwise the pattern of development and expansion of structures along this street has historically been in the form of rear ell additions and expansions.

The scale model was used to illustrate the placement of the new structure, its agreement with required setbacks and the sightlines from neighboring lots on both Clinton and Bigelow streets.

Public comment received by the Commission regarding the project prior to the full public hearing came from the following abutting properties.

Not Supportive or Expressing Concerns:

27 Clinton expressed concerns about density of occupants  
31 Bigelow was not in favor of the proposed plan  
Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Association

Supportive (\* signed a letter of support circulated by the applicant):

23 Clinton\*  
25 Clinton\*  
21 Bigelow\*  
23 Bigelow\*  
35 Bigelow via email  
37 Bigelow\*  
7 Crescent St. (resides outside the district)  
9 Crescent St. (resides outside the district)

Questions were received from the Commission.

Ms. Goodwin noted that approximately 1,000 square feet of structure was being removed from the front building.

Ms. Pauli asked what was happening to the existing GFA in the basement. The architect explained that the height of that space would be finished to 6'11" which is not counted by Zoning towards the total GFA.

Ms. Litchfield asked the team to explain the detached buildings concept.

The architect further explained that the left side of the existing building, which lies only 2.5' from the lot line shared with #26 Clinton St., does not conform with existing setback requirements. The separate structure allows for a greater side yard distance which meets the current standards.

The property owner, Mahmood Firouzbakht, said that since he had purchased the property in 2003 he had always wanted to fix up the property. When undertaking this project he hoped to design an appropriate redevelopment scheme. Both he and his wife felt that breaking up the buildings seemed like a more aesthetically appealing configuration.

Mr. Hsiao asked about the Open Space calculations.

The architect said 30% Open Space is required by Zoning. The current proposal exceeds that requirement, amounting to 45% Open Space on the lot. The owner added that the goal of demolishing the concrete block garage a number of years ago was to help increase the open space.

Questions were received from the public.

Pat White of 20 Clinton St. asked for clarification of the “lower scale” of the rear house. The architect said the roof ridge of the rear house is 8 feet lower than the height of the front house.

Nirmal Danielle of 18 Clinton St. asked how many units would be in the new development, how many people would be living there, and whether the property would be owner occupied. The owner said he did not plan to live in the new units, but rather would look to establish the structures as two freestanding condominiums with the hope of attracting single-family buyers. Staff responded that the lot is zoned for 3 dwelling units, but this proposal only calls for 2 dwelling units. It was also mentioned that the Mid Cambridge commission does not regulate the use of a property, which is handled by Inspectional Services and Zoning.

Comments were received by the public.

Dan Fisher of 25 Bigelow Street commented that the plans show a reduction in the rear yard setback from approximately 30’ down to 20’, which did not include the projecting bay windows on the rear elevation of the new structure. He also asked about the height of the existing rear ell on the front building. Staff stated that the 20’ rear yard setback complies with Zoning requirements and that bays which do not touch the ground or have foundations are considered acceptable intrusions into setbacks. The height of the existing rear ell measures to 24’.

Paula Lovejoy of 9 Clinton Street commented that her house was constructed in 1856 and is one of the oldest on the street. Since #24 was completed a year before her it could be the oldest on the street. Staff confirmed that #24 is the oldest house on Clinton Street. Ms. Lovejoy also noted that the plans call for bedrooms in the basement and pointed out the window wells at the basement level. Staff stated that Inspectional Services had been consulted with regard to the building code requirements for basement egress, particularly with regard to the necessity for a large window well on the primary elevation of the front house, facing Clinton Street. The city inspector confirmed that, while a 3’x3’ minimum egress well was required in basement bedroom locations, there was no requirement for an egress well off of a Media Room, as those spaces are indicated in the redevelopment plans.

Frankie Lieberman of 24 Ellsworth Ave, and a representative of the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Association, noted that excavation would be required to pour a second foundation which would be a costly element of the proposal and could affect the water table. Staff pointed out an existing drain on the plot survey in the location of the proposed new foundation. Mr. Firouzbakht said the new development would include drywells for each of the two structures.

Margaret McLallen of 31 Bigelow Street said she looked at the plans at it appeared to her that the roof was being raised on the front building. The architect confirmed that the roof was not being raised and would remain at the existing height of 34’.

With the discussion of building heights, the architect took the opportunity to thoroughly review the details of the shadow study that were submitted with the application and where both Summer and Winter shadows would fall in the new proposal.

Ms. McLallen returned to the issue of drainage, stating that she believed there was a recurring problem in this area due to what she had heard was an underground creek in the area of Clinton and Bigelow streets. She said that owners on Bigelow often had problems with water in their basements.

The architect reiterated that the permeable Open Space in the proposal would be increasing from the existing 38% lot coverage up to 45% lot coverage, which helps alleviate issues of water runoff. Both the

owner and the architect also noted that the city's Department of Public Works has their own requirements for storm water management that must be met to address any flooding concerns.

Pat Hollenbeck of 31 Bigelow Street raised several concerns: the potential for flooding of Bigelow Street properties, the Commission's notification process leading up to the public hearing, the property owner's status as a member of the city's Board of Zoning Appeals, and the lack of posted signage on the street of the public hearing date and location. Mr. Hollenbeck mentioned that the owners of the even-numbered properties on Bigelow Street had not been notified of the hearing and that tenants were not addressed in the mailing. Staff explained that the legal requirement is to notify abutters and abutters-to-abutters of the property under review. Those parameters do not extend across Bigelow to the even-numbered side of the street. The mailing lists are generated based on taxpayer information in the City Assessor's database, which does not include tenants who are not property owners. When Mr. Hollenbeck pointed out the language in Section 9d of the district order pertaining to notification as including occupants, Ms. Tuffy stated that the common practice was the use of the Assessor's data, but that it would be looked into to verify this as an acceptable procedure.

Staff confirmed with Zoning officials that the project was designed "as of right", which meant that there was no need for the Board of Zoning Appeals – the regulatory body on which the owner sits – to review the project for any type of variances or special permits.

With regard to street signage for upcoming public hearings, staff noted that while that is required in other districts in Cambridge, it has never been a requirement of the Mid Cambridge NCD District Order.

Mr. Firouzbakht summarized that the initial hearing date had been scheduled for March 4<sup>th</sup>, and an abutter mailing was sent out at that time. Subsequently he had elected to defer the review of his application until the April 1 meeting to allow for additional time to reach out to the neighbors and discuss the project as well as any of their concerns. The mailing in advance of the April 1 hearing was a second notification to the abutters about the project, which was another opportunity for the public to hear about the proposal and contact him with any potential concerns.

Mr. Hollenbeck asked how many kitchens would be in the new buildings. The architect replied that there would be two kitchens, one for each building.

Pat White of 20 Clinton Street presented a mock up of the proposed new building as it would appear from the windows of her residence next door. She felt that her view of open space would be adversely compromised by the construction of a secondary structure closer to her residence.

Dan Fisher of 25 Bigelow Street said that the large backyard at 24 Clinton that he currently looks out onto from his property would be greatly affected by the new infill proposal. He said he counted 50 windows that already have vantage points facing towards his property and this would increase that number. He said he hoped there was another way to improve the property without adding a second building.

Francis Spinks of 17 Bigelow Street spoke in opposition to the proposal, stating a loss of the existing open viewshed. He recommended revisions to the proposal that would reduce the intrusion into the back yard.

Margaret McMahon of 14 Highland Ave. said that a large building in such a small space affects many people. She also thought approval of a secondary structure meant a precedent would be set and it was a serious matter. She was also puzzled about the front entrance and thought it was a major change.

Frankie Lieberman of 24 Ellsworth Ave. said she had a problem with two separate structures and suggested perhaps the design could be shifted over to attach to the front house. She felt the conforming distance of 11' between the two buildings was ridiculous and could not feasibly be considered a true yard

for the front building. While she felt the team made a good presentation, she felt this proposal to be a mistake.

The owners said they had thought out one structure versus two and the two separated structures made the development feel much better. A similar development at Oxford St. & Forest has a similar setup that they viewed as a positive end result.

Steve Nil of 26 Clinton Street spoke in support of the proposal. Mr. Nil said he had lived in the house next door for 27 years and observed what he felt was an eyesore of a building at 24 Clinton all that time. He felt the owners were improving the property first by demolishing the dilapidated concrete block garage years ago and by putting forth the current proposal for improvement of the building. He pointed out that the shadow study shows that their property would be the most impacted by development on the lot because it lies to the south, but he and his wife are satisfied with the application. He said he was delighted to see something positive happening on the site and believed the design was in keeping with what is in the neighborhood. He was happy the house was being brought back to historic materials, being decreased from 3 dwelling units to 2, increasing green space and allowing parking for only 2 cars.

Janice Davis of 20 Clinton Street said she lives right next door and her porch looks right out onto the proposed location of the new building. She spoke in favor of the proposal, stating she will be pleased to see an improvement. She inquired about protecting the vehicles in the driveway of 20 Clinton, to which the owner said they would use tarps to prevent any debris from crossing over to the adjacent driveway.

Ms. Goodwin closed comments from the public in order for the Commission to comment and deliberate on the application.

Ms. Litchfield said it pains her to have to see another infill project and that she agreed with the comments of Ms. Lieberman. While the applicants may have seen a successful 2-structure development on Oxford Street, that is not the Mid Cambridge district. She also noted that the yard between the buildings would appear to be in shadow much of the time. Her first thought was to question why the additional space was not attached to the front house. Sharing a larger rear yard with the other owner was not thought to be a problematic scenario. She felt the applicant should revisit joining these two pieces of the project, which would be more in keeping with the original massing of the house. She pointed out the recent redevelopment of 14 Dana Street, stating that it works because the units are attached. Several other proposals such as this have been reviewed by the Commission in the past and she felt that while they seem so reasonable in model form, they seem much larger as built on site.

Mr. Hsiao thanked the public for their attendance and their comments as well as the project team for a very thorough presentation. He reminded everyone that the Commission's purview is to matters related to the project's appropriateness, scale and context. He said the Site Plan overlay showing the existing structure and the new structure in a dotted red line was perhaps the most telling. The existing conditions show adjacent properties framing a larger back yard. When proposed as an infill condition, the submitted design creates a singular situation within the larger context of the area. He suggested reexamining the separation into two structures.

Mr. Hsiao also recognized the desire of the applicant to improve the property and his efforts to communicate with and respect the neighbors. The reduction from a 3-family to a 2-family was viewed as very positive as well as the substantial increase in green space.

Ms. Pauli thought the existing ell could be improved and maybe even enlarged. She was very much in favor of the front house restoration proposal and felt there could be ways to play with the concept of the ell.

Ms. Goodwin said her first reaction was to contemplate why the design did not take the ell and make it work. The architects have done a beautiful job with the front house restoration plan, but agreed with

others that the rear building seems like a strange smaller building. She felt it would be more natural to have a townhouse scenario off the back, which could possibly be treated as a contemporary addition.

Mr. Hsiao noted that this is a very good architecture firm with the ability to work with the comments presented at the hearing. He also noted that he would not be opposed to a “non-ell” design.

The owner said in order to do a good job preserving the front building, from an economic standpoint he had to add more massing to the overall project. If the economics don’t work then they don’t work. This project must be worth the risk of investing.

The architect mentioned that the project at 14 Dana which the Commission supported actually needed Zoning relief and had higher density than this project proposes. He argued that this design touches the land quite lightly and, if pushed back to attach to the front building that might not be the case. The existing separate structures maximizes the value and appeal for family buyers.

Mr. Hsiao said it is not the Mid Cambridge Commission’s purview to review a project with regard to market forces. Mr. Firouzbakht commented that it is one of the directives of the Commission to preserve existing housing stock and that what he is proposing is within set limits.

Members of the public pointed out that a house of similar square footage and footprint at 12 Clinton had just sold for \$1.3 million as a single family residence.

Henry Irving of 23 Bigelow Street spoke in support of the proposal, primarily because it did not look like 20 Clinton Street, which he felt was an oversized rear addition. He thought the two structure approach would help this project.

Ms. Lieberman brought up the Commission’s ability to reduce a project by 1/3 the additional square footage and/or total number of dwelling units. She said that, at this point, no one is recommending that.

Ms. Goodwin suggested the hearing could be continued to allow the applicant to respond to the comments of the public and the Commission. Mr. Firouzbakht agreed to a continuation.

The hearing was continued until a future public hearing, pending the submittal of any desired revisions on behalf of the applicant.

**MC-4246: 17 West St., by Kathleen and John Carlisle.** Enclose front porch and extend second story at rear.

The property under review is the left half of a mirror image structure. The building was initially constructed in 1844 as 4 units (#11-17). It is currently divided down the center and occupies two lots. The portion of the property to be altered is the smaller 1-1/2 story gable roof section at the far left end of the building.

The roofline is currently a gable roof punctuated by two symmetrical dormers on the front slope of the roof and one dormer off the rear slope of the roof. The proposal calls for altering the rear roofline to create greater headroom on the interior of the second floor. To accomplish this, the applicant wishes to build a Garrison-style second story addition off the rear that has a slight overhang. The new roof for this addition would spring off 1 foot below the existing ridge of the gable roof.

The other element of the proposal is to enclose the front porch to create more of an entryway. Currently the door swings in to a shallow space that directly abuts the stairwell to the second floor.

The applicants said that they would be re-using 3 of the existing wood windows in the new construction.

No comments or questions were received from the public.

The Commission offered the following comments regarding the design of the second floor addition:

- It was suggested that the floor joists for the second story addition – rather than tying into the structure at the level of the angled roof – might spring from the existing fascia board of the 1<sup>st</sup> floor rear ell.
- Because the addition, as currently illustrated, creates a large blank façade on the end wall facing 27 West Street the owners might want to entertain the idea of adding a window on

Ms. Litchfield made a motion to approve the application as submitted with the added recommendations of the Commission. Ms. Pauli seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

### Minutes

Mr. Hsiao made a motion to approve the minutes of the March 2013 meeting. Ms. Myers seconded the motion, which passed 3-0 by Commission members who were present at the March meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Eiliesh Tuffy  
Preservation Administrator

**Members of the Public who signed the attendance sheet, April 1, 2013**

Pat White	20 Clinton St., #5, Cambridge, MA 02139
Jon Carlisle	17 West St., Cambridge, MA 02139
John and Kathleen Carlisle	15 West St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Frankie Lieberman	24 Ellsworth Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139
Margaret McMahon	14 Highland Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139
Daniel Fisher	25 Bigelow St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Francis Fox Spinks	17B Bigelow St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Alex Steinbergh	3 Clinton St, #3, Cambridge, MA 02139
Nirmal Danielle	18 Clinton St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Margaret McLallen	31 Bigelow St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Patrick Hollenbeck	31 Bigelow St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Stephen Nill	26 Clinton St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Marie Woolf	26 Clinton St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Paula Lovejoy	9 Clinton St., Cambridge, MA 02139
Henry Irving	23 Bigelow St., Cambridge, MA 02139